

Lesson Two: Westward Expansion

Introduction

In the early 19th century, the United States experienced significant growth in both power and territory. The acquisition of the Louisiana Purchase in 1803 doubled the nation's size and opened up new opportunities for exploration and settlement. Explorers returned with tales of beautiful and fertile lands, enticing Americans to venture westward. However, the nation was preoccupied with maintaining neutrality amidst threats from Britain and France. The War of 1812 resolved this issue, allowing the United States to focus on its North American aspirations.

The concept of manifest destiny, rooted in the ideology that the United States had a divine mission to expand its territory, played a central role in driving westward expansion. This movement was fueled by factors such as the gold rush, the Oregon Trail, and the belief in the country's destiny to extend across the entire continent. Laws and rhetoric were employed to promote and facilitate the settlement of western territories, reflecting the deep-rooted desire to fulfill the vision of the founding fathers and create a nation that defended freedom and encompassed the vast expanse of North America.

1. The Idea of Manifest Destiny

Manifest Destiny was a 19th-century belief that the United States had a natural and divine right to expand westward across North America. Americans believed their nation was special and had a mission to spread freedom, democracy, and their way of life.

The term “Manifest Destiny” means a destiny that is obvious and certain (“manifest” = clear or evident, “destiny” = fate). Americans chose this name because they believed their expansion was guided by God and therefore inevitable and justified.

This idea encouraged major events such as the annexation of Texas and the Mexican-American War, which helped the U.S. gain large territories. However, Manifest Destiny had serious consequences. It led to the displacement of Native Americans, conflicts with other countries, and increased tensions over slavery in new territories.

Even today, the idea still influences how some people view the United States’ role in the world—especially the belief that it should promote its values globally.

2. Major Territorial Expansion Events

A. Louisiana Purchase (1803)

Thanks to a high birth rate and brisk immigration, the U.S. population exploded in the first half of the 19th century, from around 5 million people in 1800 to more than 23 million by 1850.

Such rapid growth—as well as two economic depressions in 1819 and 1839—would drive millions of Americans westward in search of new land and new opportunities.

President Thomas Jefferson kicked off the country’s westward expansion in 1803 with the Louisiana Purchase, which at some 828,000 square miles nearly doubled the size of the United States and stretched from the Mississippi River to the Rocky Mountains. In addition to sponsoring the western expedition of Lewis and Clark of 1805-07, Jefferson also set his sights on Spanish Florida, a process that was finally concluded in 1819 under President James Monroe.

But critics of that treaty faulted Monroe and his secretary of state, John Quincy Adams, for yielding to Spain what they considered legitimate claims on Texas, where many Americans continued to settle.

In 1823, Monroe invoked Manifest Destiny when he spoke before Congress to warn European nations not to interfere with America’s Westward expansion, threatening that any attempt by Europeans to colonize the “American continents” would be seen as an act of war. This policy of an American sphere of influence and of non-intervention in European affairs became known as the “Monroe Doctrine.” After 1870, it would be used as a rationale for U.S. intervention in Latin America.

B. Lewis and Clark Expedition (1804–1806)

The Lewis and Clark Expedition was a major exploration of the western United States from 1804 to 1806, led by Meriwether Lewis and William Clark under the direction of President Thomas Jefferson after the Louisiana Purchase. Their journey began in St. Louis and followed the Missouri River westward, where they built forts, kept detailed journals, and made maps of the land. Along the way, they met many Native American tribes and depended on their help for food, directions, and survival. A key member of the expedition was Sacagawea, who guided them, helped communicate with tribes, and made the group appear peaceful, while York also played an important role in hunting and supporting the team. The expedition continued across the difficult Rocky Mountains, facing cold weather, hunger, and rough terrain, before finally reaching the Pacific Ocean near the Columbia River in 1805, where they built a winter camp called Fort Clatsop. They returned safely in 1806, bringing back valuable information about the region’s geography, rivers, plants, and animals, including species previously unknown to Americans. Overall, the expedition was important because it improved maps, strengthened U.S. claims to the western lands, encouraged trade and settlement, and opened the way for future westward expansion.

C. Mexican–American War (1846–1848)

The Mexican–American War was caused by the United States’ desire to expand its territory, known as Manifest Destiny, and rising tensions with Mexico. After the United States annexed Texas in 1845, a dispute over the border—whether it was the Rio Grande or the Nueces River—led to conflict. President James K. Polk, who

strongly supported expansion, sent U.S. troops into the disputed area, which triggered fighting in 1846.

During the war, U.S. forces were more successful in most battles. Armies led by Zachary Taylor won important victories in northern Mexico, while General Winfield Scott led a major campaign by landing troops at Veracruz and marching inland to capture Mexico City in 1847. At the same time, American settlers and soldiers in California carried out the Bear Flag Revolt, helping bring California under U.S. control.

The war ended in 1848 with the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo. In this treaty, Mexico recognized Texas as part of the United States and accepted the Rio Grande as the official border. Mexico also gave up a huge area of land, known as the Mexican Cession, which included present-day California, Nevada, Utah, Arizona, and New Mexico, as well as parts of other western states. In return, the United States paid \$15 million and agreed to take on certain debts.

The results of the war were very important. The United States greatly increased its size and power, but the new lands caused serious arguments over slavery, which later helped lead to the American Civil War. For Mexico, the war was a major loss, as it gave up nearly half of its territory and faced long-term political and economic problems. Overall, the war changed the map of North America and had lasting effects on both countries.

3. Migration to the West

Migration to the West was a major movement in 19th-century United States history, as thousands of people traveled west in search of land, wealth, and new opportunities. Many settlers followed important routes known as **westward trails**, such as the Oregon Trail, the California Trail, and the Santa Fe Trail. These trails were long and difficult, and travelers faced many dangers, including harsh weather, disease, food shortages, and attacks. Despite these challenges, people continued moving west, encouraged by the idea of expansion and the chance for a better life.

One of the biggest reasons for westward migration was the California Gold Rush. It began in 1848 when gold was discovered at Sutter's Mill in California. News of the discovery quickly spread, and by 1849 thousands of people, known as "Forty-Niners," rushed to California hoping to find gold and become rich. This caused a rapid population increase and led to the growth of towns and cities, especially San Francisco.

Although a few people became wealthy, most miners did not find much gold. However, the Gold Rush had lasting effects: it helped California become a state in 1850, boosted the U.S. economy, and increased migration to the West. It also led to the displacement of Native Americans and environmental damage. Overall, migration to the West played a key role in shaping the expansion and development of the United States.

3. Effects of Westward Expansion on Native Americans

The expedition of Lewis and Clark Expedition had significant and lasting effects on Native American tribes. While it was seen as a success for the United States, it marked the beginning of major changes that negatively impacted Indigenous peoples.

One of the main effects was the spread of knowledge about the western territories. The expedition gathered valuable information about the land, rivers, natural resources, and Native American tribes living in the region. This information made it much easier for future explorers, traders, and settlers to travel west and settle there.

As a result, the United States began to expand more rapidly. The expedition helped support ideas like Manifest Destiny, which encouraged Americans to move west and take control of new lands. It also contributed to the development of transportation routes and later projects such as the Transcontinental Railroad, which increased migration even more.

However, this expansion had serious consequences for Native Americans. As settlers moved into these lands, Native tribes were gradually pushed off their territories. The U.S. government passed laws like the Indian Removal Act and the Indian Appropriations Act, which forced Native Americans to leave their homelands and move to reservations. These lands were often smaller, less fertile, and far from their traditional territories.

In addition to losing their land, Native Americans also experienced loss of independence and cultural identity. On reservations, their movements were controlled, and they depended heavily on the U.S. government. Native children were often sent to boarding schools where they were forbidden to speak their languages or practice their traditions, leading to a decline in cultural heritage over time.

The expedition also marked the beginning of increased contact with outsiders, which brought new problems. Trade increased, but so did conflicts, misunderstandings, and diseases that Native populations had little resistance to. Over time, these factors contributed to a significant decline in Native American populations and ways of life.

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