
John O’Sullivan Coins the Phrase “Manifest Destiny” 1845

Excerpted from “Annexation,” *The United States Magazine and Democratic Review* 17 (July 1845): 5–10.

John L. O’Sullivan (1813–1895), founder and editor of the United States Magazine and Democratic Review and avid Democrat casually coined the phrase “manifest destiny” in this 1845 editorial in which he commended the addition of Texas to the United States and hopefully looked further west to California as a site for future expansion. Texas had won independence from Mexico in 1836, but President Andrew Jackson opposed admitting Texas to the Union for fear of provoking political conflict over the slavery issue. By 1844, however, James Polk won the presidency in part because of his pro-annexation position. Polk’s aggressive expansionism soon provoked war with Mexico. O’Sullivan also continued to advocate American expansion by supporting the filibuster movement that sought to conquer Cuba, among other Latin American lands. Not included below is a fairly neutral discussion of the problem of slavery, in which O’Sullivan suggested that manumitted slaves might be sent to Central and South America, by way of Texas, thus allowing the U.S. to “slough . . . off” the African race. Although O’Sullivan denied that the Texas issue had anything to do with the expansion of slavery, the westward expansion of slavery fueled the sectional tensions that led to Civil War. —D. Voelker

[1] It is time now for opposition to the Annexation of Texas to cease It is time for the common duty of Patriotism to the Country to succeed;—or if this claim will not be recognized, it is at least time for common sense to acquiesce with decent grace in the inevitable and irrevocable.

[2] Texas is now ours. Already, before these words are written, her Convention has undoubtedly ratified the acceptance, by her Congress, of our proffered invitation into the Union. . . . It is time then that all should cease to treat her as alien . . .

[3] Why, were other reasoning wanting, in favor of now elevating this question of the reception of Texas into the Union, out of the lower region of our past party dissensions, up to its proper level of a high and broad nationality, it surely is to be found, found abundantly, in the manner in which other nations have undertaken to intrude themselves into it, between us and the proper parties to the case, in a spirit of hostile interference against us, for the avowed object of thwarting our policy and hampering our power, limiting our greatness and checking the fulfillment of our manifest destiny to overspread the continent allotted by Providence for the free development of our yearly multiplying millions. This we have seen done by England, our old rival and enemy; and by France, strangely coupled with her against us, under the influence of the Anglicism strongly tinging the policy of her present prime minister, Guizot. . . .

[4] It is wholly untrue, and unjust to ourselves, the pretence that the Annexation has been a measure of spoliation, unrightful and unrighteous—of military conquest under forms of peace and law—of territorial aggrandizement at the expense of justice due by a double sanctity to the weak. . . . The independence of Texas was complete and absolute. It was an independence, not only in fact but of right. . . .

[5] Texas has been absorbed into the Union in the inevitable fulfillment of the general law which is rolling our population westward; the connexion of which with that ratio of growth of population which is destined within a hundred years to swell our numbers to the enormous population of *two hundred and fifty millions* (if not more), is too evident to leave us in doubt of the manifest design of Providence in regard to the occupation of this continent.

[6] California will, probably, next fall away from the loose adhesion which, in such a country as Mexico, holds a remote province in a slight equivocal kind of dependence on the metropolis. Imbecile and distracted, Mexico never can exert any real government authority over such a country. . . . The Anglo-Saxon foot is already on [California's] borders. Already the advance guard of the irresistible army of Anglo-Saxon emigration has begun to pour down upon it, armed with the plough and the rifle, and marking its trail with schools and colleges, courts and representative halls, mills and meeting-houses. A population will soon be in actual occupation of California, over which it will be idle for Mexico to dream of dominion. They will necessarily become independent. All this without the agency of our government, without responsibility of our people—in the natural flow of events And they will have a right to independence—to self-government—to the possession of the homes conquered from the wilderness by their own labors and dangers, sufferings and sacrifices. . . . Whether they will then attach themselves to our Union or not, is not to be predicted with certainty. Unless the projected rail-road across the continent to the Pacific be carried into effect, perhaps they may not; though even in that case, the day is not distant when the Empires of the Atlantic and the Pacific would again flow together . . .

Discussion Questions:

1. What did O'Sullivan mean by "manifest destiny"?
2. What reasons did O'Sullivan give to support his argument that Texas (and probably California) should be annexed by the United States?
3. What role did race play in O'Sullivan's understanding of "manifest destiny"?
4. In this editorial, O'Sullivan ignored the presence of Native Americans on the lands that he believed should be added to the United States. How or why was he able to do so?



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