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HIST 442

Paper #4: *Manifest Destiny and American Territorial Expansion* Prompt

During the first half of the 19th century, the United States was rapidly expanding its territory to build an empire that we see today as the contiguous United States. Using an ideology called Manifest Destiny, Americans emphasized their right to colonization and territorial expansion by explaining that it was bestowed on them by God. Using documents included in Greenberg's *Manifest Destiny and American Territorial Expansion* book, it's clear that factors such as Christian theology, racist perceptions of superiority, and national security concerns contributed to the development and utilization of this Manifest Destiny ideology as a way to justify the United States' expansionist actions in the 1800s.

Appeals to Christian theology played a key role in the development of the idea of "Manifest Destiny". At its core, Manifest Destiny presents the belief that God has destined the United States to expand its territory, and thus its democracy, as a justification for the U.S.'s expansionist actions throughout the North American continent. In fact, this appeal to Christianity to justify Americans' actions exists since the first English colonialists arrived and settled in the New World. As John Winthrop noted in his 1630 sermon, America's exceptionalism was linked to God's will. The American settlement in the New World was designed by divinely means to be "a city upon a hill", according to Winthrop.¹ This phrase emphasized the belief that God had bestowed such fortune on this community so that it could be a unique example of a Protestant society for the world. It was further bolstered by the astounding triumph during the

¹ John Winthrop, "A Modell of Christian Charity," In Amy S. Greenberg, ed., *Manifest Destiny and American Territorial Expansion*, 2nd ed. (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2017), 60.

Revolutionary War as such a relatively weak alliance of states could have only been as successful as it was over the powerful British empire because God had specifically destined it to be so.

This idea of exceptionalism that drove the concept of Manifest Destiny was also tied to Americans' belief that they were superior to the populations of the territory they wished to expand their territorial control over, especially in terms of racial superiority. This was especially the case when it came to some American opinions about Native Americans as they tried to expand the government's territory into the American West. These white American expansionists categorized the native peoples as "savages" in need of being civilized, as addressed in Andrew Jackson's 1830 address.² For example, Jackson explained that allowing white Americans to occupy and settle on land that had previously belonged to Indian tribes would have allowed the growing American population to spread beyond the nation's traditional colonial boundaries. This would not only elevate concerns related to how a rapidly growing population would affect American society, but it also would allow white Americans to expand their civilization onto more people of inferior race. This link between racial superiority and Manifest Destiny can also be seen over twenty years later in the Ostend Manifesto where the authors argued that allowing Cuba to remain in the hands of Spain or become "Africanized" would end up being treason against white American prosperity as a race and as a country.³

American claims of superiority over the native peoples that would add to the development of the Manifest Destiny concept were also bound to the idea of what constituted a civilized society at this time. As Jedidiah Morse argued, this included certain etiquettes and

² Andrew Jackson, "State of the Union Address", in Amy S. Greenberg, ed., *Manifest Destiny and American Territorial Expansion*, 2nd ed. (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2017), 82.

³ James Buchanan, Pierre Soule, and John Y. Mason, "The Ostend Manifesto", in Amy S. Greenberg, ed., *Manifest Destiny and American Territorial Expansion*, 2nd ed. (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2017), 169.

customs that defined American society, as well as the American style of government, religion, and education practices he categorized as “American habits”.⁴ For people like President Jefferson, civilized society at this time was also defined by industrial practices like land cultivation. Jefferson argued that the American people needed to teach modern agricultural and domestic practices to the native peoples to enlighten their way of life so that their communities had a chance of continuing to exist within the changing times.⁵ The Indian tribes needed to be enlightened within the American mindset because Americans were under the illusion that all native peoples were hunter-gathers, choosing to live a nomadic lifestyle that would no longer be supported as the United States came to occupy much of the tribes original hunting grounds.

Even though this was a mistaken account as several Indian tribes had transitioned into a sedentary lifestyle, the idea that native peoples were nomadic added to the Americans’ belief that their use of land to hunt was inferior to the farming practices that defined American society. For example, Jackson defined the Native American individual as a “wandering savage”, pushing the idea that the Indian tribes could not have any responsible claims over the land they hadn’t used to build a sedentary lifestyle.⁶ Therefore, American control of this land would have ensured it would be efficiently used as settlers would begin farming the fertile land as soon as they established their settlements in the westward territories.

Obtaining this land would also ease some national security concerns of this period, showing security incentives to be additional factors that contributed to the desire to develop and employ the Manifest Destiny concept. As Jackson noted in 1830, expanding the United States’

⁴ Jedidiah Morse, “The American Geography,” in Amy S. Greenberg, ed., *Manifest Destiny and American Territorial Expansion*, 2nd ed. (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin’s, 2017), 69.

⁵ Thomas Jefferson, “Second Inaugural Address”, in Amy S. Greenberg, ed., *Manifest Destiny and American Territorial Expansion*, 2nd ed. (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin’s, 2017), 73.

⁶ Jackson, “State of the Union Address”, 83.

territory would have helped the government strengthen national security efforts. When specifically referencing how expanding the United States' territorial control as far west as Tennessee and as far south as Louisiana would benefit the country, Jackson argued that the newly claimed territory would act almost like a buffer to the neighboring states in these regions. Rather than succumb to Indian and potential foreign attacks, "the adjacent States" would be "strong enough to repel future invasions without remote aid" from the federal government.⁷ The sort of buffer zone that developed with the expansion of U.S. territory to Tennessee and Louisiana would slow down and possibly thwart future attacks because of the time and effort it took to transverse these territories to get to the adjacent states of the Union during this period.

As the evidence above suggests, the Manifest Destiny ideology developed within the United States because of factors like Christian theology, racist perceptions of superiority, and national security incentives. Appeals to Christianity became the basis of this ideology as Americans' rationale for being such a successful society was due to their country's destiny as ordained by God's own will. However, American exceptionalism was also rooted in racist perceptions of superiority over the populations in the territories the U.S. would come to seize during this period. Additionally, national security incentives contributed to the development and implementation of the Manifest Destiny ideology by continuing to paint the country's territorial expansion as a positive event.

⁷ Jackson, "State of the Union Address", 81.