
The Influence of the Manifest Destiny on 19th Century Americans

According to the Oxford English Dictionary, “Manifest Destiny” is defined as “the 19th-century doctrine or belief that the expansion of the US throughout the American continents was both justified and inevitable” (Manifest). It’s easy to see how this thinking influenced people and events of this era, and it’s hard to find another time (despite the fact that manifest destiny is a 19th century occurrence) that more exhibits a similar thinking. In our reading this week, manifest destiny was evident in many of the events that occurred.

First off and probably most obviously, the 19th century Americans were influenced by manifest destiny thinking in their endeavors against the Native Americans. Conflicts, at their core, were since the Native Americans, according to our textbook, occupied “the very same land white Americans wanted” (Ripper 170). Because, as the manifest destiny doctrine spelled out, at least in their minds, Americans felt that the land rightfully was theirs and the Native Americans were bothersome obstacles to their deserved fate; Men and women colloquially known as “Long Knives” “believed Indians were a nuisance best moved out of the way” (Ripper 173). In fact, 19th century white Americans were willing to do anything to get that land including signing questionable treaties giving them the “legal right” to their land (Ripper 171).

In addition to being inevitable in the Americans eyes, they justified it in many ways. Hypocritically, as evidenced by Jackson’s thought processes, Americans believed that they were doing this for the Native Americans own benefit and that “no one can indulge a more friendly feeling than myself [Jackson],” but truly the thinking was more along the lines of what Jackson said in our textbook, “Cherokees [and all Indian tribes by extension] ‘have neither the intelligence, the industry, the moral habits, nor the desire of improvement which are essential to any favorable change in their condition” (Ripper 192, 193) which really was the thinking behind the Indian Removal Act. Since expansion across North America was inevitable, to the white Americans, Native Americans had no right to be there and could justly be removed by any means necessary.

And finally, although it didn’t involve land conquests, the thinking behind the manifest destiny doctrine also influenced slavery in the 19th century. In the case of Harriet Jacobs, her owner, James Norcom viewed her as property and that he needed to control every aspect of her life. Manifest destiny states that it was fate for the Americans to take over the continent including all the property there, which to them meant slaves. In our textbook it says Norcom “viewed her as uncooperative property, as someone who should do anything he demanded” (Ripper 224).

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According to the article “Manifest Destiny and the Pacific” by Dan E. Clark, a historian, noted that manifest destiny included a heavenly mandate as if God himself had designated whites as the masters of the land. So, the thinking goes that they were superior to all other races living there, so slaves that disobeyed their masters were by extension also disobeying a heavenly command. In his quest to control all aspects of Jacobs’ life, Norcom also took it upon himself to own her children and use them as bargaining chips to manipulate her (Ripper 225).

Furthermore, in the case of Solomon Northup, he was kidnapped and sold by slave traders which furthers the idea that slaves were merely part of what was destined to be conquered by the newfound Americans (Ripper 233). If God himself, in their minds, had given them the duty to colonize this new land (including the slaves) then what right did slaves have to be free? They didn’t view his freedom as legitimate and took it away. Northup was also given a new slave name, Platt (Ripper 234). This name served to separate him from his free identity, further dehumanize him, and was just another way that they exerted control over him in their “destiny” to conquer the continent. This act had been deeply justified in their minds and in their minds, they had the mandate and right to exert this control.

Manifest destiny was a very common way of thinking and heavily permeated and flavored the culture back then, leading to many events, such as clashes with the Indians, the Indian Removal Act and the deplorable treatment of many slaves and free African-Americans like Harriet Jacobs and Solomon Northup. In the white Americans mind these were all both inevitable and justified. So, after all that, my question is, what do you think shaped and caused this way of thinking to develop in the white settlers and not in the other racial groups?

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