

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

The Crisis of the Union

1844–1860

Manifest Destiny

For a quarter century after the annexation of Florida in 1819, the boundaries of the United States remained the same. Although the extension of slavery into new territories had become a bone of contention between North and South in the Missouri Controversy of 1819–1821, the settlement of that crisis by the Missouri Compromise had been accepted by all. Moreover, with the rise of mass party politics, both major parties courted support from both sections and were therefore eager to keep slavery out of public debate.

But the land hunger of white North Americans continued unabated. To the southwest, American settlers had pressed beyond national borders into the newly independent nation of Mexico, where they came to dominate the northeastern province of Texas. When the Mexican central government attempted to bring the Americans under closer central rule, they rebelled and successfully established their independence. Their request for annexation to the United States, however, was initially rebuffed; Texas was a slaveholding republic, and Martin Van Buren was fearful that his party would split over the issue.

Texas was not the only territory attracting the attention of Americans, however. In the early 1840s large numbers of settlers began traveling overland to the Oregon Territory; to its south, California, with its fertile valleys and great harbors, attracted both settlers and strategic interest. Back East, the heady optimism resulting from explosive economic growth and American pride in the creation of a new society fed an expansionist ideology that took the label “Manifest Destiny” (Documents 13-1 and 13-2).

With sentiment for territorial expansion rising in both North and South, southern Democrats, fearing that an independent Texas might abandon slavery and pose a threat to the security of the institution, began a new push for annexation. Whigs and many northern Democrats were virulently opposed, but the Democratic Party’s 1844 convention united the party behind an expansionist candidate, James K. Polk, and a promise to pursue expansion in both Texas and Oregon. Although the antislavery Liberty Party complicated the election, Democrats took their victory as an endorsement of vigorous pursuit of what they deemed America’s Manifest Destiny.

13-1 Texas, California, and Manifest Destiny (1845)

John L. O'Sullivan

John L. O'Sullivan (1813–1895) came from a line of Irish-American adventurers, and he carried his family's love of grand gestures into journalism, politics, and diplomacy. In 1837, at the age of twenty-three, O'Sullivan, a lawyer and Democratic Party activist, founded *The United States Magazine and Democratic Review*, which he made into a mouthpiece for Democratic Party propaganda; a vehicle for his own expansive, romantic views on the future of American democracy; and an outlet for such emerging American writers as Emerson, Hawthorne, Thoreau, and Whitman. O'Sullivan was especially obsessed with the notion that the mission of the United States was to spread the gospel of democracy across the continent; it was he who coined the term *Manifest Destiny* (used for the first time in the following article) to justify American expansion.

O'Sullivan later sought to practice what he preached; he became involved in efforts by private adventurers to seize Cuba and annex it to the United States, a project that ruined him financially and nearly threw him into prison. He later moved back to Europe, where he promoted the Confederate cause during the Civil War. He returned to the United States in the 1870s, broken by years spent promoting grand schemes; but his bumptious, continental vision of his country's promise fundamentally shaped the ways in which Americans understood their relationship to their neighbor countries and, later, the world.

Source: John L. O'Sullivan, "Annexation," *The United States Magazine and Democratic Review* 17 (July and August 1845): 5–10.

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 fulfilment 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. . . .

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, and justice due by a double sanctity to the weak. . . . If Texas became peopled with an American population, it was by no contrivance of our government, but on the express invitation of that of Mexico herself; accompanied with such guaranties of State independence, and the maintenance of a federal system analogous to our own, as constituted a compact fully justifying the strongest measures of redress on the part of those afterwards deceived in this guaranty, and sought to be enslaved under the yoke imposed by its violation. She was released, rightfully and absolutely released, from all Mexican allegiance, or duty of cohesion to the Mexican political body, by the acts and fault of Mexico herself, and Mexico alone. There never was a clearer

case. It was not revolution; it was resistance to revolution; and resistance under such circumstances as left independence the necessary resulting state, caused by the abandonment of those with whom her former federal association had existed. What then can be more preposterous than all this clamor by Mexico and the Mexican interest, against Annexation, as a violation of any rights of hers, any duties of ours? . . .

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 governmental authority over such a country. The impotence of the one and the distance of the other, must make the relation one of virtual independence; unless, by stunting the province of all natural growth, and forbidding that immigration which can alone develop its capabilities and fulfil the purposes of its creation, tyranny may retain a military dominion which is no government in the legitimate sense of the term. In the case of California this is now impossible. The Anglo-Saxon foot is already on its 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 agency of our government, without responsibility of our people—in the natural

flow of events, the spontaneous working of principles, and the adaptation of the tendencies and wants of the human race to the elemental circumstances in the midst of which they find themselves placed. 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—a better and a truer right than the artificial title of sovereignty in Mexico a thousand miles distant, inheriting from Spain a title good only against those who have none better. Their right to independence will be the natural right of self-government belonging to any community strong enough to maintain it—distinct in position, origin and character, and free from any mutual obligations of membership of a common political body, binding it to others by the duty of loyalty and compact of public faith. This will be their title to independence; and by this title, there can be no doubt that the

population now fast streaming down upon California will both assert and maintain that independence. . . .

Away, then, with all idle French talk of *balances of power* on the American Continent. There is no growth in Spanish America! Whatever progress of population there may be in the British Canadas, is only for their own early severance of their present colonial relation to the little island three thousand miles across the Atlantic; soon to be followed by Annexation, and destined to swell the still accumulating momentum of our progress. And whosoever may hold the balance, though they should cast into the opposite scale all the bayonets and cannon, not only of France and England, but of Europe entire, how would it kick the beam against the simple solid weight of the two hundred and fifty, or three hundred millions—and American millions—destined to gather beneath the flutter of the stripes and stars, in the fast hastening year of the Lord 1945!

Questions

1. Explain what John L. O'Sullivan means by the phrase "Manifest Destiny." By what right does O'Sullivan believe that the United States must annex Texas? Do you agree with his argument?
2. According to O'Sullivan, who is responsible for Texas's declaration of independence?
3. Why does O'Sullivan believe that California will "fall" next? For what reasons does he argue that California will inevitably declare its independence from Mexico? Why does O'Sullivan consider Mexico's title of sovereignty over California to be "artificial"?

13-2 The Importance of California (1845)

Thomas Oliver Larkin

Born in 1802, Thomas O. Larkin grew up in Lynn, Massachusetts, where his stepfather was a wealthy leather merchant. After failing at several enterprises in the East, Larkin in 1832 followed a relative to Monterey, California, where he became the leading merchant of that town, the capital of Mexico's northwestern state. Remote from central authority, its "Californio" inhabitants restive and sometimes rebellious, the region's natural wealth and strategic importance made it a center of intrigue among major powers as well as an attractive destination for American immigrants. In 1843 Larkin, who had never taken Mexican citizenship, became American consul. Eager to see California shake off Mexican rule, and fearful that it might become prey to British or French ambitions, he became an advocate of peaceful annexation, and in 1845 became a confidential agent of the U.S. government seeking to effect it. In the meantime, Larkin became the leading source of news about California to readers of the eastern press. If John L. O'Sullivan spoke romantically of "destiny," Larkin, the man in the field, spoke roughly and practically, as the following sample shows.

Source: Thomas Oliver Larkin to *Journal of Commerce*, July 1845, in George P. Hammond, ed., *The Larkin Papers: Personal, Business, and Official Correspondence of Thomas Oliver Larkin, Merchant and United States Consul in California* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1952), 3:292–296. (Note: Spelling original to the document.)

California July 1845

By almost every newspaper from the United States and many from England we find extracts and surmises respecting the sale of this country. One month England is the purchaser the next month the U. States. In the meantime the progress of California is onward, and would still be more so if Mexico would not send every few years a band of thieving soldiers and rapacious officers.

Should the supreme Government allow the Californians to rule their own Country they would have peace and prosperity. . . . We have now news that Mexico is fitting out an expedition of troops in Acapulco for California the expenses to be paid by two or three English houses in Mexico who it is said are responsible for the pay for eighteen months. . . .

The British Government have appointed one of her subjects (he formerly resided in N York where he owns property) Vice Consul of California with a salary of 1000\$ per annum. This salary is small but as he can live on his own Rancho he has no expense in entertaining company etc. nor does he attend to any distressed English seamen who may apply to him. In fact as he is much at his Country house they can not visit him unless under a heavy personal expense for horse hire.

The French Consul lives in Mont. with a salary of over 4000\$. There is not one English or French vessel doing business on this Coast nor has been for years. Their Consul therefore have nothing to do *apparently*. Why they are in Service there Govt best know and Uncle Sam will know to his cost.

The whole foreign trade of C. is in the hands of Americans. There is now seven Boston Ships & Barks hire. The American Consul has a jurisdiction of 1000 miles of Sea Coast, while the nature of the trade is such that he has barely any fees. Government allows no salary. The fees of this Consul are under 200\$ a year, the Stationery bill about the same which is not allowed by the Dept of State.

There are many owners of large tracts of land in C. who hold them under the idea of the Country changing owners, having no present use for them, as the Indians tame & wild steal several thousand head of Horses yearly from the Rancho. Most of these horses are stolen for food. The Indians cut up the meat in strips and dry it in the sun. While this continues grazing of Cattle can not be profitably conducted. There is no expectation that this Govt. will find a preventive—nothing but the fear of the Indian for the American Settlers will prevent it. They steal but a few horses from foreigners as there is too much danger of being followed. Mexico may fret and treat as much as she pleases but all her Cal Gov & Gen. give Cal land to all who apply for them and from the nature of things will continue to do so. Foreigners arriving here expect to live & die in the Country, Mexican officers to remain 2 or 3 years & be shipped off by force unless they choose to marry a Native and become a Californian, Body & Soul. These Ports in C. with the exception of Mazatlan are the only Mexican Pacific Ports that are flourishing. All others are falling & falling fast. Here there is much advance in every thing and the Country presents each year a bolder front to the world. It must change

owners. It is of no use to Mexico. To hire it but a eye sore a shame and bone of Contentin. Here are many fine Ports, the land produces wheat over 100 fold. Cotton & hemp will grow here and every kind of fruit there is in New England—grapes in abundance of the first quality. Wine of many kinds are made, yet there is no facility of making. Much of it will pass for Port. The Bays are full of fish, the Woods of game. Bears, and Whales can be seen from one view. The latter are often in the way of the Boats near the Beach. Finally there is San Francisco with its rivers. This Bay will hold all the ships in the U. S. The entrance is very narrow between two mountains easily defended and perhaps the most magnificent Harbour in the World and at present of as much use to the civilized world as if it did not exist. Some day or other this will belong to some Naval power. This every Native is prepared for. . . . Letters nor words can not express the advantage and importance of San F. to a Naval power. There is 500 to 1000 American Whalers with 20000 American Seamen in the Pacific. Half of them will be within 20 day sail of San F. While the port belongs to Mex. it is a safe place for a whale ship in a war with England France or Russian. Should one of these Nations own the port and at some future day declare war against the U.S. what the results. It requires not the disruption from the writer nor from anyone. If Congress wishes the extension of the Navy, our Naval power or our commerce St F. must be obtained, or the Oregon & Cali must become a Nation with themselves. Time is continually bringing this into notice, and one of the two must soon be consummated or if the Oregon dispute continues let E. take 8 degrees N of the Columbia and purchase 8 Degrees S. of 42 of Mex. and exchange.

The Oregon will never be a benefit to the U. S. if England owns St. F. Vessels sometimes lay within the bar of the Columbia 30 to 40 days waiting an opportunity to go out. When once out they can reach St. F. in 4 days, a Steam Boat in less than two days. The time will soon arrive when by steam a person will go from the Columbia to Mont. & back in less in 4 days. For navigation of the Columbia is of little use. A few English Vessels could prevent any vessels going in—even if the wind allowed them. Whalers now from the N. W. pass the place for C.

The Settlers of the Oregon anticipate the supplying of California. Under present circumstances they may. A California will not work if he can avoid it. The time will come, must come, when this Country is peopled by another race. This is as fully expected here as any other natural course of events. Many children have been sent to the Oahu English School to learn the English language to prepare them for the coming events, be the visit from John Bull or Uncle Sam. One of the two will have the Country. When once this is accomplished, the place will team with a busy race. As I before observed all fruits will grow here. Hemp, Cotton every variety of grain, timber from the tender Willow to Trees 17 feet in diameter. The Natives now expecting Troops from Acapulco to reconquer the Country are drilling many young men in preparation intended to surround the first port the Mexicans arrive at, drive away the Cattle, prevent all intercourse with the Ranchos, and by this

mean drive them out of C. If they can not succeed in this manner take to the mountans and worry them out.

There is no doubt but these soldiers are sent by Mexico under the instigatin of the English under the pretext that the Am are settlng in the C too fast and will one day obtain possessin. In the time the C do not believe this story but give land to all that come, be they from what nation they may be.

These letter contans many facts well known to the writer and should be know to his Countrymen. Each paragraph contans matter sufficent for much thought & reflectin and are sent to you because from your paper the writer has read many subjects respectng C. and give you his informa-tion in return.

Questions

1. Why does Larkin believe that the British and French are positioning themselves to seize California? What evidence does Larkin give to support his suspicion?
2. How does Larkin view the Indians in California? According to Larkin, what challenges do the Indians pose to the settlement and development of California, and what does he view as their inevitable fate?
3. How does Larkin's assessment of California compare with John L. O'Sullivan's? What economic and political potential does Larkin believe California possesses? Why is San Francisco so important?

Questions for Further Thought

1. Is it fair to say that Manifest Destiny was a fancy way for Americans to rationalize the conquest of the West? Or, do you think that many Americans really believed they had a God-given mission to "civilize" the West? What features of American culture might have contributed to this sense of mission?
2. In your opinion, was it inevitable that the United States would expand its control westward to the Pacific Ocean? Was Manifest Destiny a foregone conclusion? Based on your knowledge of the text, what rights and territories did the British, French, Russians, and Mexicans claim in the West, and why did the United States eventually get its way?
3. From your reading of Documents 13-1 and 13-2 as well as your reading of the text, what was Mexico's internal political situation in the 1830s and 1840s? How did the Americans exploit Mexico's weaknesses to their own advantage? What place did westward expansion have in domestic politics in the United States—specifically, the party rivalry between the Democrats and the Whigs?

War, Expansion, and Slavery, 1846–1850

Following his victory in the election of 1844, President James K. Polk pursued an aggressively expansionist policy. To the northwest, he ended joint American-British control of the Oregon Territory, though he agreed to dividing control along the forty-ninth parallel rather than insisting on seizing the entire territory south of the "Fifty-Four Forty or Fight" line. Polk proved far more aggressive in the southwest against a weaker opponent, Mexico (Document 13-3). Goading the Mexicans into providing him a pretext, Polk got Congress to declare war in May 1846. The war proved both popular (despite significant opposition from "Conscience" Whigs) and successful, resulting not only in the annexation of an enlarged Texas but in the seizure of California and New Mexico.

However, Polk's very success in pursuing the United States' Manifest Destiny immediately sharpened intersectional conflict over slavery. Mexico had abolished slavery, and many northerners were averse to seeing American power used to extend the "peculiar