

Polk and Manifest Destiny: Justifiable Policy or National Disgrace?

Part A. Below are five statements commenting on the concept of manifest destiny or the Mexican War. Read them carefully, and answer the questions that follow each one.

Quote A

Less than a year before he became President, Lincoln wrote that "the act of sending an armed force among the Mexicans was unnecessary, inasmuch as Mexico was in no way molesting or menacing the United States or the people thereof; and that it was unconstitutional, because the power of levying war is vested in Congress, and not in the President" (June 1, 1860).¹

—Abraham Lincoln

1. Why did Lincoln believe the Mexican War was unnecessary?
2. Why did he also view the war as unconstitutional?

Quote B

John L. O'Sullivan, the influential Democratic editor who gave the movement its name, wrote in 1845 that the American claim to new territory . . . is by the right of our manifest destiny to overspread and to possess the whole of the continent which Providence has given us for the development of the great experiment of liberty and federative self government entrusted to us. It is a right such as that of the tree to the space of air and earth suitable for the full expansion of its principle and destiny of growth.²

1. According to O'Sullivan, why would God want the United States to possess all of America?

Quote C

Texas has been absorbed into the Union in the inevitable fulfilment of the general law which is rolling our population westward. It was disintegrated from Mexico in the natural course of events, by a process perfectly legitimate on its own part, blameless on ours. . . . [Its] incorporation into the Union was not only inevitable, but the most natural, right and proper thing in the world. . . .

California will, probably, next fall away from . . . Mexico. . . . Imbecile and distracted, Mexico never can exert any real governmental authority over such a country. . . . The

¹Abraham Lincoln quoted in *The American Pageant* by Thomas A. Bailey and David M. Kennedy (Lexington, Mass.: D.C. Heath Company, 1983), 268.

²Richard N. Current et al., *A Survey of American History*, Vol. I, 6th ed. (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1983), 375.

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. . . . 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.³

Democratic Review, July 1845.

1. How did the author justify the absorption of Texas into the Union?
2. What was the author's opinion of Mexicans and their government?

Quote D

However superior the Anglo-American race may be to that of Mexico, this gives the Americans no right to infringe upon the rights of the inferior race. The people of the United States may rightfully, and will, if they use the proper means, exercise a most beneficial moral influence over the Mexicans and other less enlightened nations of America. Beyond this they have no right to go.⁴

—Albert Gallatin

1. How did Gallatin view the concept of manifest destiny?
2. What shows that Gallatin had some respect for the Mexicans?

Quote E

We love to indulge in thoughts of the future extent and power of this Republic—because with its increase is the increase of human happiness and liberty. . . . What has miserable, inefficient Mexico—with her superstition, her burlesque upon freedom, her actual tyranny by the few over the many—what has she to do with the great mission of peopling the New World with a noble race? Be it ours, to achieve that mission! Be it ours to roll down all of the upstart leaven of old despotism, that comes our way!⁵

—Walt Whitman

1. Why did Whitman hope to see America expand?

³*Democratic Review*, July 1845 quoted in John Blum et. al., *The National Experience* (Harcourt, Brace Jovanovich, 1981), 277.

⁴Albert Gallatin, "The Mission of the United States," in *Selected Readings in Great Issues in American History 1620–1968* from *Annals of America* (Chicago, Ill.: Encyclopaedia Britannica Educational Corporation, 1969), D-25.

⁵Walt Whitman, Editorial, *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, July 7, 1846.

2. What in the excerpt proves that Whitman might be considered a racist?

Part B. Below is a cartoon that although drawn after Polk's election, expresses well what he campaigned for during the 1844 election. Polk is confronted by a demon hiding behind the mask of Polk's hero, Andrew Jackson. Three cabinet members are awakened by Polk's nightmare. At the left is George Bancroft, an expansionist; in the middle is Secretary of State James Buchanan who is carrying some letters from British Ambassador Richard Packenham; on the right is James Walker who is calling the president a patriot even as he sleeps.

Using the cartoon and the material in the previous paragraph, answer the questions at the end.

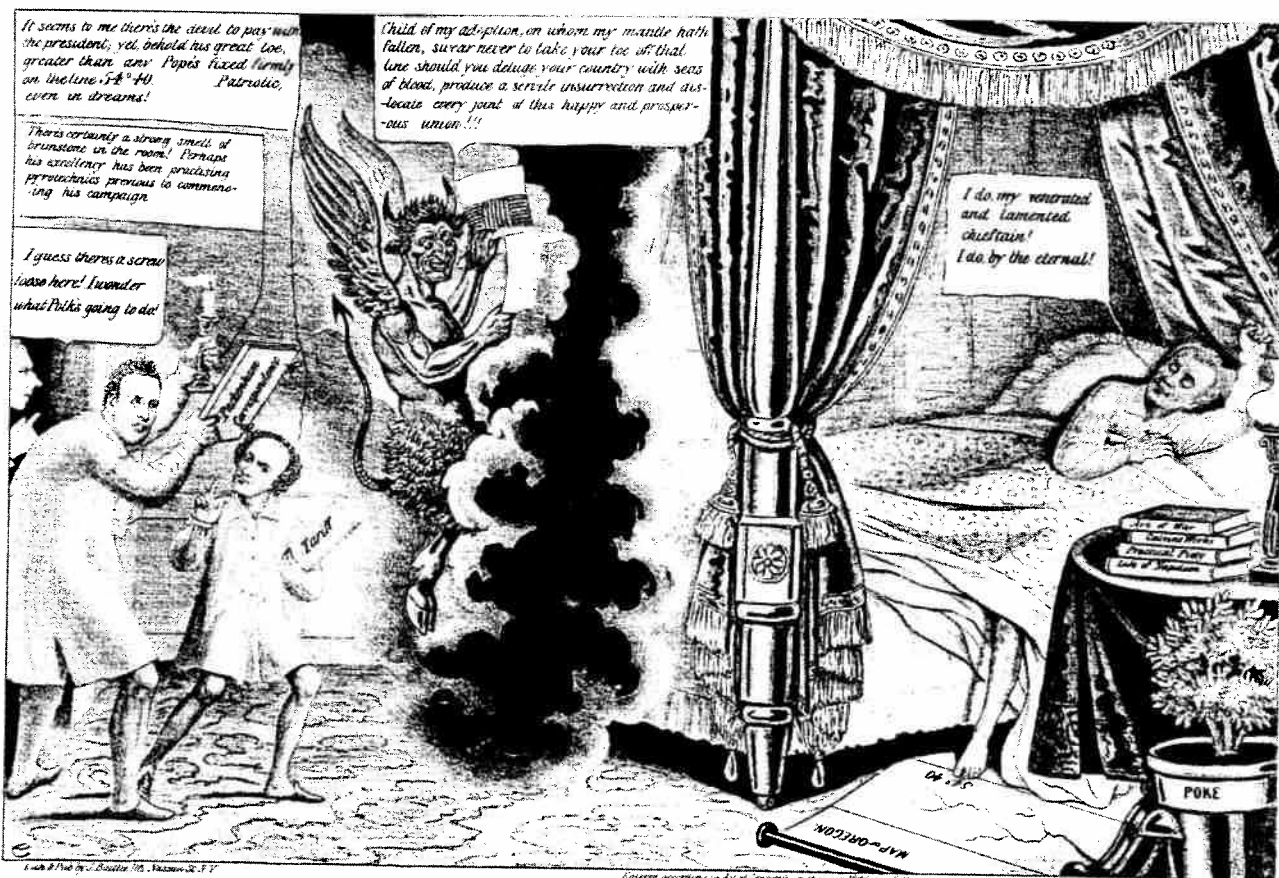


Figure 31.1 Edward Williams Clay. "Polk's Dream." (1846). Lithograph. Collection Library of Congress. Published by James Baille, April 1846. Thomas C. Blaisdell, Jr., Peter Selz and Seminar, *The American Presidency in Political Cartoons: 1776–1976* (Berkeley, Calif.: Berkeley Art Museum, 1976), 77.

Name _____

Date _____

1. Name at least three issues Polk considered to be major objectives of his presidency.
2. What in the cartoon proves that Polk is totally dedicated to his program?
3. Why does the demon take the form of Andrew Jackson?
4. Why is Polk's toe on the map at $54^{\circ}40'$?
5. What does Polk's reading material tell you about his values?

Part C. President Polk called for a declaration of war on Mexico after hearing that the Mexican army crossed the Rio Grande on April 25, 1846. Earlier, in July, 1845, Polk had ordered the army of General Zachary Taylor to cross the Nueces River in Texas. Both Mexico and the United States claimed the land between the two rivers. Some Whigs in particular were bothered by the following questions: Who invaded whom? Who really provoked the bloodshed? And did Polk manufacture an incident for the sake of personal gain?

Using what you know about the Mexican War and the two documents that follow, your group will discuss the issues of the war and write a speech either justifying Polk's actions or criticizing them. Your paragraph must contain at least five pieces of evidence supporting your statement.