CHAPTER 13

A House Divided, 1840–1861

80. John L. O'Sullivan, Manifest Destiny (1845)

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

The expansionist spirit of the 1840s was captured in the phrase "manifest destiny," coined by John L. O'Sullivan, a New York journalist. O'Sullivan employed it to suggest that the United States had a divinely appointed mission to occupy all of North America. This right to the continent was provided by the nation's mission to extend the area of freedom. In the excerpt that follows, O'Sullivan defends the annexation of Texas, and suggests that California, then a province of Mexico, would be the next area to be absorbed into the United States, linked to the rest of the country by a new transcontinental railroad. O'Sullivan foresees the day when one government will control the entire North American continent. The spirit of manifest destiny would soon help to justify the Mexican War and, half a century later, the annexation of Puerto Rico and the Philippines as a result of the Spanish-American War.

IT IS TIME now for all opposition to annexation of Texas to cease.... Texas is now ours. Already, before these records are written, her convention has undoubtedly ratified the acceptance, by her congress, of our proffered invitation into the Union; and made the requisite changes in her already republican form of constitution to

adapt it to its future federal relations. Her star and stripe may already be said to have taken their place in the glorious blazon of our common nationality; and the sweep of our eagle's wing already includes within its circuit the wide extent of her fair and fertile land.

She is no longer to us a mere geographical space—a certain combination of coast, plain, mountain, valley, forest, and stream. She is no longer to us a mere country on the map.... It is time when all should cease to treat her as alien, and even adverse ... and cease ... 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.

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It is wholly untrue, and unjust to ourselves, the pretense 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....

The independence of Texas was complete and absolute. It was an independence, not only in fact, but of right.... 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.... She was released, rightfully and absolutely released, from all Mexican allegiance, or duty of cohesion to the Mexican political body, by acts and fault of Mexico herself, and Mexico alone. There was never 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.

Nor is there any just foundation for the charge that annexation is a great pro-slavery measure calculated to increase and perpetuate that institution. Slavery had nothing to do with it. Opinions were

and are greatly divided, both at the North and South, as to the influence to be exerted by it on slavery and the slave states....

Every new slave state in Texas will make at least one free state from among those in which that institution now exists—to say nothing of those portions of Texas on which slavery cannot spring and grow—to say nothing of the far more rapid growth of new states in the free West and Northwest, as these fine regions are overspread by the emigration fast flowing over them from Europe, as well as from the Northern and Eastern states of the Union as it exists....

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....

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 meetinghouses. 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....

And they will have a right to independence—to self-government—to the possession of the homes conquered from the wildness of 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.... 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.

Whether they will attach themselves to our Union or not is not to be predicted with any certainty. Unless the projected railroad across the continent to the Pacific be carried into effect, perhaps they may not; though even in that case, the day when the empires of the Atlantic and Pacific would again flow together into one, as soon as their inland border should approach each other. But that great work, colossal as appears the plan on its first suggestion, cannot remain long unbuilt.

Its [the transcontinental railroad] necessity for this very purpose of binding and holding together in its iron clasp our fast settling Pacific region with that of the Mississippi Valley, the natural facility of the route, the ease with which any amount of labor for the construction can be drawn in from the overcrowded populations of Europe, to be paid in the lands made valuable by the progress of the work itself and its immense utility, to the whole commerce of the world with the whole eastern coast of Asia, alone almost sufficient for the support of such a road—these considerations give assurance that the day cannot be distant which shall witness the conveyance of representatives from Oregon and California to Washington [D.C.] within less time than a few years ago was devoted to a similar journey by those from Ohio; while the magnetic telegraph will enable the editors of the *San Francisco Union*, the *Astoria Evening Post*, or the *Nootka Morning News*, to set up in type the first half of the President's inaugural before the echoes of the latter half shall have died away beneath the lofty porch of the Capitol, as spoken from his lips.

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 may be in British Canada, is only for their own early severance of their present colonial relation to the little island 3,000 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 250, or 300 million, and American millions destined to gather beneath the flutter of the stars and stripes, in the fast hastening year of the Lords 1845!

Questions

1. What connection does O'Sullivan see between manifest destiny and the idea of American freedom?

2. What does O'Sullivan mean when he describes America's destiny to rule the entire continent as "manifest"?