Manifest Destiny
and American
Territorial Expansion
A Brief History with Documents

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President Polk was exceedingly secretive. Although gaining California was one of the main goals of his presidency from the outset, he withheld this information from the American public. After provoking war with Mexico, Polk blamed the conflict on Mexican aggression and claimed that the United States was fighting to restore its honor. Polk remained silent about his desire for Mexican territory in the declaration of war he presented to Congress on May 11, 1846. Nor did he say anything publicly on the subject in the coming months.

Polk kept his territorial ambitions from his cabinet as well. As the following entry in his personal diary makes clear, more than a month into the war, Secretary of State James Buchanan wanted to know “what the objects of the war were.” It was only after Buchanan and Secretary of the Treasury Robert J. Walker (see Document 21) argued about how much of Mexico’s territory to annex that Polk revealed his ambitions. Buchanan’s suggestion was close to the current boundary between Mexico and the United States. Walker’s was more expansionist: A boundary at 26° north latitude would have made the northern third of modern-day Mexico part of the United States. Most of Sonora, Chihuahua, Durango, and Baja California, along with a good portion of Nuevo León and Tamaulipas, would have been U.S. territory. Walker’s intransigent response to the European view of this acquisition was typical of southern Democrats and exactly the kind of bluster that Robert Winthrop critiqued in his January 1846 speech to Congress (Document 26).

Note how prominent the issue of slavery is in this excerpt and how Buchanan thought the matter of slavery in territories gained from Mexico would be resolved. Note also what those assembled believed about the United States’ ability to take Mexican territory at the close of hostilities.

TUESDAY, 30th June, 1846.—This was the Regular day of meeting of the Cabinet. . . A discussion arose between Mr. Buchanan and Mr. Walker in regard to the objects of the War against Mexico, in the course of which Mr. Buchanan expressed himself in favour of acquiring the Rio Grande as our Western boundary as high up as the Passo in about latitude 32° of North Latitude & thence West to the Pacific. He expressed himself as being opposed to acquiring any territory by Treaty with Mexico South of 32° of North Latitude. He spoke of the unwillingness of the North to acquire so large a Country that would probably become a slave-holding country if attached to the U.S. Mr. Walker warmly resisted Mr. B.’s views, and insisted that we should if practicable acquire by Treaty, all the country North of a line drawn from the mouth of the Rio Grande in Latitude about 26° West to the Pacific. Mr. Buchanan said it was necessary to know what the objects of the war were, that it might be conducted accordingly; that if it was the object of the President to acquire all the country North of 26°, the line indicated by Mr. Walker, including all of the Department of Tamaulipas, it should be known, and added that if we attempted to acquire all this territory the opinion of the world would be against [us], and especially as it would become a slave-holding country, whereas while it was in possession of Mexico slavery did not exist in it. Mr. Walker remarked that he would be willing to fight the whole world sooner than suffer other Powers to interfere in the matter. I remained silent until the discussion had proceeded to a considerable length, when I spoke, and said in substance that the causes and objects of the war were as I supposed well understood, and that when we came to make peace the terms of the peace would be a subject for consideration. As to the boundary which we should establish by a Treaty of Peace, I remarked that I preferred the 26° to any boundary North of it, but that if it was found that that boundary could not be obtained I was willing to take 32°, but that in any event we must obtain Upper California and New Mexico in any Treaty of Peace we would make. The other members of the Cabinet expressed no opinions, not being called upon to do so. The discussion between Mr. Buchanan and Mr. Walker was an animated one.
But another and better omen of prosperity is the attention paid to education. It is this feature of life in Texas that gives it a resemblance to the New England character. As soon as Texas acquired her independence, she made noble appropriations of land for this object... It seems that the citizens have now provided free schools for the education of all the children of Galveston, and this event was one of great rejoicing. They had a procession, oration, poem, and an evening party, in which parents and children seem to have been as "happy as happy could be."... Men may enjoy the nomadic life, but for woman the lot is hard. And to show how highly the influence of the sex is valued in this new state of Texas, we will quote a few sentences from the eloquent address of General H. McLeod, delivered at Galveston on the opening of their public schools, to which we have adverted.

"The civilization of every age has been the reflection of female influence. In the early dispensation she was the handmaid and the hireling, and 'when the sound of the grinding was low,' woman still toiled at the mill. Under the grotesque chivalry of the middle ages, she rose from servile servitude to queenly power; from having been man's slave, she became his divinity — she was not loved, but worshiped. The ladye-love of the warrior of the cross was as far from woman's true sphere as were the purchased beauties that filled the harem of his Moslem enemy. Modern enlightenment, with its fearless spirit of investigation, has opened the dawn of a new day, and woman's release from her ancient captivity, has disenthralled mankind.

"Remember then, mothers, that the destiny of your daughters is in your own hands; upon them depend the purity and the virtues of the coming generation. Liberty is ever degenerating into license, and man is prone to abandon his sentiments and follow his passions. It is woman's high mission, her prerogative and duty, to counsel, to sustain — ay, to control him..."

Such are the sentiments of a Texan. If acted upon, and the system of popular education now begun is carried out, that state (or states) will soon be among the brightest lights in our galaxy of stars.