

*Manifest
Destiny and
Mission in
American
History*

FREDERICK MERK

*With a New Foreword by
John Mack Faragher*

MANIFEST DESTINY

AND MISSION IN

AMERICAN HISTORY

A REINTERPRETATION

Frederick Merk

WITH THE COLLABORATION OF
LOIS BANNISTER MERK

WITH A NEW FOREWORD BY
JOHN MACK FARAGHER

*Harvard University Press
Cambridge, Massachusetts*

Copyright © 1963 by Frederick Merk
Foreword copyright © 1995 by the President and Fellows of Harvard College
All rights reserved
Printed in the United States of America

This book has been digitally reprinted. The content remains identical
to that of previous printings.

This book is published by arrangement with Alfred A. Knopf, Inc.

First Harvard University Press paperback edition, 1995

L.C. catalog card number: 63-8204
ISBN 0-674-54805-1

Foreword

by John Mack Faragher

BEFORE THIS BOOK first appeared in 1963, most historians wrote as if the continental expansion of the United States were inevitable. "What is most impressive," Henry Steele Commager and Richard Morris declared in 1956, "is the ease, the simplicity, and the seeming inevitability of the whole process." The notion of inevitability, however, is perhaps only a secular variation on the theme of the expansionist editor John L. O'Sullivan, who in 1845 coined one of the most famous phrases in American history when he wrote of "our manifest destiny to overspread the continent allotted by Providence for the free development of our yearly multiplying millions." Frederick Merk rejected inevitability in favor of a more contingent interpretation of American expansionism in the 1840s. As his student Henry May later recalled, Merk "loved to get the facts straight."¹

In this book Merk uncovers a great many facts that fit uncomfortably with notions of destiny or inevitability. Consider a few examples. In 1844, after languishing for nearly a decade, the question of the annexation of Texas, at the top of the expansionists' agenda, finally reached the Senate floor; it was defeated by a vote of 16 to 35. In the presidential election later that year the Democrats asked the electorate to endorse their expansionist program. Democratic candidate James K. Polk won the election but failed to marshal a popular majority for expansionism. Following the election, Texas annexation finally passed Congress, but only after Democrats manipulated the rules to avoid the two-thirds majority constitutionally required of treaties; in the Senate the winning margin was only 27 to 25. The next year, despite spread-eagle rhetoric of "Fifty-four Forty or Fight," only fourteen senators declared themselves willing to confront Great

¹ Henry Steele Commager and Richard Morris, Introduction to Ray Allen Billington, *The Far Western Frontier, 1830–1860* (New York, 1956), xiii; Henry May, *Coming to Terms: A Study in Memory and History* (Berkeley, 1987), 226–227.

Britain over a far-northern boundary. And in 1848, after one of the most bitterly protested wars in American history, only eleven senators went on record in favor of seizing even more territory from a defeated Mexico. “A thesis that continentalist and imperialist goals were sought by the nation regardless of party or section, won’t do,” concludes Merk. “It is not substantiated by good evidence.”²

What the facts presented here point to is the central importance of sectionalism in the politics of expansion. The inevitability thesis assumes that the United States was indeed united in a nationalist strategy of continentalism, but Merk’s research details division rather than unity. North and South were divided by fears over the future expansion of slavery into the territories and doubts about the wisdom of incorporating the mixed-race peoples of Mexico into a “white man’s democracy.” Moreover, many Americans worried that the nation was becoming too large to govern. At the time of the Louisiana Purchase, Jeffersonians and Federalists alike believed that the western territories should develop as separate republics, and as late as 1846 the old Jeffersonian Albert Gallatin felt that Oregon would do best to become an independent state. Merk argues that it was to overcome these divisions and gather support for expansionist policies that Democratic editors and propagandists invented the idea of “manifest destiny.”

The common sense of *Manifest Destiny and Mission in American History* has garnered high praise from American historians. It should come as no surprise that Merk learned his history from a master, Frederick Jackson Turner, the man who began the professional study of the history of the American West. Born in Milwaukee in 1887, Merk attended college at the University of Wisconsin, where he came under Turner’s sway, then spent five years on the editorial staff of the State Historical Society of Wisconsin before following his mentor east to Harvard to begin graduate work in 1916. Turner was something of a father figure for the young man. “I used to glory in the thought that I was in a kind of secret communion with you,” Merk once wrote to Turner, “that you were giving out something that only a few were privileged to see, and this spurred me on.” Turner seems

² *Manifest Destiny and Mission*, 261.

to have reciprocated this attachment. In 1921 he invited Merk to join him in teaching "History of the Westward Movement," and upon his retirement in 1924 he supported Merk's appointment as his successor. Merk taught at Harvard for a total of thirty-five years, directing the graduate work of several dozen students while continuing to teach the undergraduate course on the West. Affectionately known around Harvard Yard as "Wagon Wheels," Merk's course adhered closely to Turner's original syllabus and echoed his interpretations. Years later, at the end of his long career, Merk's lectures for "Wagon Wheels" were finally published by Alfred Knopf as *History of the Westward Movement* (1978).³

Merk "shared with Turner a perfectionism that made him a slow, careful and reflective writer," his former student Rodman Paul remembered, "never quite satisfied that he had all the evidence, never ready to call the job done." Yet Merk had managed to publish two impressive historical studies before going to Harvard, and during his years on the Harvard faculty he produced a number of influential journal articles. It was only after he retired in 1956, however, that he was able to devote his full attention to writing, launching what amounted to a second stage of his career. With the collaboration of his wife, Lois Bannister Merk (one of his many Ph.D. students), he published six important books on American expansion during the 1840s.⁴

The most important and lasting of these was *Manifest Destiny and Mission in American History*. The careful distinction Merk made here between propaganda and policy has influenced the best historical work on American expansionism. As the historian Norman Graebner argues, "Manifest destiny doctrines—a body of sentiment and nothing else, avoided completely the essential question of *means* . . . Manifest destiny created the sentiment that would underwrite governmental

³ Merk to Turner, July 4, 1927, quoted in Wilbur R. Jacobs, *On Turner's Trail: One Hundred Years of Writing Western History* (Lawrence, Kansas, 1994), 180. For Merk's career see Rodman W. Paul, "Frederick Merk, Teacher and Scholar: A Tribute," *Western Historical Quarterly* 9 (1978):141–48; Richard W. Leopold, "Frederick Merk," *American Historical Review* 83 (1978):1152–1153; and Thomas C. McClintock, "Frederick Merk," in *Historians of the American Frontier: A Bio-Bibliographical Source Book*, ed. John R. Wunder (New York, 1988), 426–439.

⁴ Paul, "Frederick Merk," 144. For a complete bibliography of Merk's works see Thomas McClintock.

policies of expansion; it could not and did not create the policies themselves.” The diplomatic historians Lloyd C. Gardner, Walter F. LaFeber, and Thomas J. McCormick elaborate on this point in their survey of American foreign relations: “What is singularly striking about this wave of imperialism is its conscious and purposeful character. It was not simply the product of some quixotic, irrational faith in manifest destiny, or merely the mechanical process of population on the move. On the contrary, to a very considerable extent it was the consequence of a deliberate foreign policy that used calculated means to achieve specific, concrete ends.” Richard White also echoes Merk in his recent history of the American West: “Historians would have an easy time of it if everything written in newspapers or delivered in political speeches could be presumed to have met with the approval of its audience. People who read papers or listen to speeches, however, do not always agree with them. O’Sullivan clearly believed in manifest destiny, and so did other propagandists for expansion, but did most Americans?”⁵

White leaves us with a very good question, one that Merk does not address directly in this book. David Pletcher, in his history of expansionism in the 1840s, while agreeing with Merk that expansionist propaganda was designed to whip up support among the public, nevertheless argues that the majority of Americans believed in the right of the nation to expand unimpeded across the continent. This argument had been made many years before by the historian George Garrison, who suggested that a popular “expansion impulse” among Americans resulted from the several centuries of pioneering that accompanied the European colonization of North America. Later, Albert Weinberg provided an extended analysis of the persistent American belief in expansion in his study entitled *Manifest Destiny*. But the historian most associated with the thesis that expansionism has been one of America’s central defining traits is William Appleman Williams. In his many works, Williams noted the ways in which expec-

⁵ Norman Graebner, *Manifest Destiny* (Indianapolis, 1968), xxii, lxviii; Lloyd C. Gardner, Walter F. LaFeber, and Thomas J. McCormick, *Creation of the American Empire: U.S. Diplomatic History* (Chicago, 1973), 139; Richard White, “It’s Your Misfortune and None of My Own”: A History of the American West (Norman, Oklahoma, 1991), 73–74.

tations of expansion animated the thinking not only of leaders and political propagandists but also of ordinary Americans. "The combination of surplus resources plus surplus space," Williams noted in *Empire as a Way of Life*, "does give many people a greater opportunity to vote their cussedness, claim more land, and move on after a failure to try again and again. The majority of whites naturally concluded that there was no better definition of freedom, liberty, and The Truth."⁶

Although these perspectives qualify Merk's findings, they do not detract from the solid contributions of this book. "Ideas are spread by propaganda," Merk concludes. "The greater the resistance to an idea, the greater the need for propaganda," and thus the omnipresence of expansionist discourse in the mid-1840s. But this very ubiquity, he argues, has fooled historians into thinking that this ideological justification for expansion was a simple reflection of popular thinking: "An idea, even a fanciful idea, looms larger to politicians than it does to humble citizens at the grass roots. It does so naturally. Politicians gather harvests from fancies. And historians, who make a business of gathering fancies, philosophies, and ideologies from orations, speeches, and newspaper editorials, and setting them forth in neat order without reference to hard facts such as votes, sectionalism, partisanship, and the ambitions of politicians, are likely to overemphasize the 'idea' in history."⁷

Today's historians would do well to heed Merk's words carefully. The so-called linguistic turn of historical studies has many scholars focusing exclusively on ideologies and representations, neglecting the kind of hard facts that Merk employs to complicate our understanding of American expansion in this classic of the historian's craft.

⁶David Pletcher, *The Diplomacy of Annexation: Texas, Oregon, and the Mexican War* (Columbia, Missouri, 1973); George Garrison, *Westward Extension, 1841–1850* (New York, 1906), 332; Albert K. Weinberg, *Manifest Destiny* (Baltimore, 1935); William Appleman Williams, *Empire as a Way of Life* (New York, 1980), 81.

⁷*Manifest Destiny and Mission*, 225.

Preface

THIS BOOK is a study in public opinion. It appraises American opinion regarding expansionist projects in the United States in the nineteenth century. It has for one of its themes the desire of some imaginative elements in American society to see the boundaries of the nation coincide with the rim of the North American continent. A loud expression of that desire was heard during the Polk administration. It was accompanied by an unprecedented growth in the territorial possessions of the nation. In those years the annexation of Texas was completed, the Oregon Country up to the 49th parallel was acquired, and the vast Mexican cession was obtained. When Polk entered office the national domain had not been enlarged in a quarter century; its area had remained fixed at 1,788,000 square miles. During Polk's term it was increased by 1,204,000 square miles. Those years were the era of the surge to the Pacific. The relationship between the agitation for expansion and this surge is one of the subjects of this study.

In the Polk era expansionist agitation at two levels can be discerned. One was the level of acquisition of the entire continent. The other was acquisition merely to the shore of the Pacific. The two are differentiated here perhaps more sharply than the agitators of the 1840's would have approved. The agitators found a lack of differentiation advantageous, and may have relied on it. It won votes among those who, though attracted by Oregon and California, might have been scared off by vistas more remote.

Agitation for expansion occurred again a half century after Polk. This time it was directed to insular objectives and culminated in a new prize—an overseas empire. That episode and its ultimate outcome are described here partly for their own sake and partly to offer the reader helpful comparisons.

Throughout history expansionism has varied in intensity from individual to individual, from nation to nation, and from period to period. In antiquity it was an obsession of some rulers; it did not interest others at all. In oligarchic and democratic societies it has had a like history. Indeed, in some societies, alternations of expansionism and retreat from it have been distinct phenomena.

Alternations of this kind can be studied to special advantage in a democratic society such as the United States. In this type of society the forces producing expansionism are more visible than in a closed society. Data for studying them are abundant—embarrassingly so. There is a plenitude of newspapers and these represent wide divergences of interest. They represent sections of the nation far apart in desires; also, metropolitan communities as against rural; and political parties in clash, internally and with each other. Subterranean pressures which erupt into expansionism are detectable and measurable in the United States. They may be social or economic, generated by inventions or by the emergence of new classes or sections to political power. They may be emotional or intellectual, drawn to the surface by winds of world sentiment or enlightenment. Where governments resort to creation of sentiment under cover as the Polk government did, this is sooner or later ascertained in a free society. The locating and measuring by the historian of underground sources of expansionism is especially facilitated where newspapers are free, where diaries and private correspondence have become open to examination on a large scale, and where masses of public archives and court cases are made accessible by guides and indexes and microfilming. In America expansionism is examinable as under a microscope or seismometer. A process—world-wide and age-old—may be seen repeating itself in varying forms as in a test tube.

Expansionism is usually associated with crusading ideologies. In the case of Arab expansionism it was Islam; in Spanish expansionism, Catholicism; in Napoleonic expansionism, revolutionary liberalism; in Russian and Chinese expansionism, Marxian communism. The equivalent of these ideologies in the case of the United States was "Manifest Destiny." This was a mixture of republicanism,

democracy, freedom of religion, Anglo-Saxonism, and a number of other ingredients. It was harnessed to the cause of continentalism in the 1840's and, strangely enough, to insular expansionism a half century later, which is one of the curiosities of history.

Ideas are spread by propaganda. This has always been so, and, with improvement in the means of communication, has become increasingly so. The manufacture and dissemination of propaganda has been a major industry throughout history, and it looms large in this study. Propaganda becomes ammunition in politics. It is fired in barrages to win the public mind. In turn, it meets barrages of counter propaganda. In these battles the outcome, whether of victory or defeat, is registered on such public-opinion indicators as party platforms, results of national elections, and votes cast on measures in Congress and in state legislatures. These are recordings of a climate of opinion produced by propaganda, and the historian cannot ignore them except at his peril.

To a greater degree than normal, this study makes use of quotations from editorials of the press, speeches in Congress, and orations on the hustings. Language found there is more indicative of public opinion and is fresher than any generalized phrases of a historian of a later day could be. These raw materials are set before the reader for reasons of prudence also. They contain views which even by the present generation may not be read with equanimity. If they should unhappily lead to high feeling, better by far that the clash be among politicians and editors of a bygone age than among the living in an epoch sufficiently disturbed.

Expansionism is an exciting study. It does not, however, always leave the spirit of the reader uplifted. It involves elbowing owners of property rudely to one side and making away with their possessions. This aspect of the study may prove at times oppressive. If so, let the reader recall an observation made by George Santayana in his *Life of Reason*: "Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it."

In preparing this book I have had generous help from many persons and institutions. I wish I could express my thanks by name to each of the friends who assisted me. But space does not

permit it. I must express my gratitude to them as a group. I have had more than ordinary courtesy from the staff of the following libraries: the British Museum, the Public Records Office in Chancery Lane, London, the Library of Congress, the National Archives, the New York Public Library, the New York Genealogical and Biographical Society, the New York State Library, the Boston Public Library, the Massachusetts State Library, the Massachusetts Historical Society, the Boston Athenaeum, the Congregational Library of Boston, the American Antiquarian Society, the New Hampshire Historical Society, the Pennsylvania Historical Society, the Wisconsin State Historical Society, the Indiana State Historical Society, the Historical and Philosophical Society of Ohio, and the libraries of Harvard, Yale, Columbia, Duke, Chicago, and California at Berkeley. I am indebted to my publisher, Alfred A. Knopf, and to his staff, for saving me from many an inadequacy and infelicity of writing. More than to any other person or group I am indebted to my wife, Dr. Lois Bannister Merk, collaborator in this research, constant contributor to my thought and clarifier of it, and a penetrating critic of my English.

F. M.

Cambridge, Massachusetts
May 1962

Contents

	<i>Foreword by John Mack Faragher</i>	<i>ix</i>
	<i>Preface</i>	<i>xv</i>
I •	<i>Prologue</i>	<i>3</i>
II •	<i>Manifest Destiny</i>	<i>24</i>
III •	<i>Polk</i>	<i>61</i>
IV •	<i>War and the Opposition</i>	<i>89</i>
V •	<i>“All Mexico”</i>	<i>107</i>
VI •	<i>Sectional and Party Attitudes</i>	<i>144</i>
VII •	<i>Problems</i>	<i>157</i>
VIII •	<i>The Demise of All Mexico</i>	<i>180</i>
IX •	<i>A Caribbeanized Manifest Destiny</i>	<i>202</i>
X •	<i>The Demise of Continentalism</i>	<i>215</i>
XI •	<i>The Rise and Fall of Insular Imperialism</i>	<i>228</i>
XII •	<i>Mission</i>	<i>261</i>
	<i>Index</i>	<i>267</i>

*Manifest Destiny and
Mission in American History*

Chapter I

Prologue

A SENSE OF MISSION to redeem the Old World by high example was generated in pioneers of idealistic spirit on their arrival in the New World. It was generated by the potentialities of a new earth for building a new heaven. It appeared thereafter in successive generations of Americans, with changes in the type of mission, but with the sense of mission unaltered. At Plymouth and at Boston the type was religious liberty, the right to worship in a church that was pure and free of heresies, in covenant with God, and organized on a congregational basis. By 1776 mission had come to cover a principle of government—government independent, based on the consent of the governed, republican in character, and free of the excrescences of a hereditary aristocracy. By the time of the Constitutional Convention and the first Congress, it included a federal type of government, careful balances of powers, and, presently, a Bill of Rights protecting the individual against congressional intrusion upon equality of religion, freedom of speech, of the press, and of assembly, and all the other basic rights brought by Englishmen to America. By the time of the Jeffersonian revolution it was protection against federal encroachment on rights reserved to the states, and safety for the freedoms guaranteed in the Bill of Rights. By the time of Andrew Jackson it included a concept of democracy greatly widened. By the time of Lincoln it embraced freedom for the slaves and a determination that government of the people, by the people, for the people should not perish from the earth. By Woodrow Wilson's day it meant

Manifest Destiny and Mission

the Fourteen Points, and by the time of the second Roosevelt, the Four Freedoms. In all these enlargements of mission the Goddess of Liberty holding aloft her light to the world seemed to Americans to be, in reality, themselves.

The Goddess of Liberty faced eastward. But America faced westward. In the wilderness new societies were constantly arising as population flowed to the interior. These societies formed governments by means of compacts, as Frederick Jackson Turner pointed out in one of the greatest of his early essays, "Western State-Making in the Revolutionary Era."¹ The compacts were the agreements of men entering unsurveyed, often uncharted land, who found themselves outside recognized legal limits and undertook to abide by the common will. In the realm of government, compacts meant what covenants with God meant in the realm of the spirit. Their prototype was the Mayflower Compact entered into by the Pilgrims off the shores of Plymouth in 1620. Within a century and a half, by 1772, the compacts had made their way to "Western waters," where, on the upper courses of the Tennessee, frontiersmen from North Carolina, on learning that they were beyond the line drawn by the Indian treaties of 1768, protected themselves against eviction by forming the Watauga Compact, once characterized by the historian Theodore Roosevelt, somewhat grandiloquently, as the first written constitution adopted west of the Appalachian Mountains.² The same procedure was carried to the region of West Virginia, where pioneers, in 1776, sent a petition to Congress asking to be organized as the state of Westsylvania. It was used again in 1780, in the Cumberland Compact of the Nashville basin; and in 1784, in the attempt of settlers in what is now eastern Tennessee to win recognition as the state of Franklin. In these western proceedings south of the Ohio, pioneers resorted to concepts of social covenant—agreements to abide by the common will—for their self-preservation.

In the area north of the Ohio the concepts employed in setting up

¹ Frederick J. Turner: "Western State-Making in the Revolutionary Era," *American Historical Review*, I (1895-6), 70, 251.

² Theodore Roosevelt: *The Winning of the West in Works of Theodore Roosevelt* (New York, 1926), X, 171.