Chapter 14: The Territorial Expansion of the United States, 1830s–1850s

Chapter Review

1. EXPLORING THE WEST

American settlement seemed to be unstoppable. By 1840, settlers had occupied all of the land east of the Mississippi River and had organized most of the area into states. This rapid expansion was caused by the market revolution and the extraordinary expansion of transportation and commerce that accompanied the market revolution. The speed and success of the expansion was a source of great pride for Americans and encouraged further settlement. By 1848, the United States had become a continental nation.

a. The Fur Trade

The fur trade, which flourished from the 1670s to the 1840s, was an important spur to exploration in the North American continent. In 1824, William Henry Ashley instituted the rendezvous system, a yearly trade fair to which trappers brought their catch of furs which was modeled on traditional Indian trade gatherings. The event was a many-day affair characterized by trading, drinking, and gambling. The American fur trade was short lived. By the 1840s the population of beaver in the west was virtually destroyed.

b. Government-Sponsored Exploration

The federal government played an important role in the exploration and development of the West. The Lewis and Clark expedition had set a precedent for government funded expeditions. Several missions followed. In 1806–07 Lieutenant Zebulon Pike led an expedition to the Rocky Mountains and in 1819–20 Major Stephen Long explored and mapped the Great Plains. In 1843–44, John C. Fremont mapped overland trails to Oregon and California. The results of these surveys were published by the government complete with maps and illustrations. These images of the American West made a powerful contribution to the emerging American self-image. After explorers came settlers as the federal government sold western public lands at low prices.

c. Expansion and Indian Policy

To make way for American settlers, eastern Indian tribes were being removed from their homelands to Indian Territory, a region west of Arkansas, Missouri, and Iowa on the eastern Great Plains, which was popularly known as the Great American Desert. The government officials who negotiated these removals failed to take into account how quickly western settlement would progress. As a result, encroachment of Indian Territory was not long in coming. In 1854, the government abolished the northern half of the Indian Territory and opened these areas to immediate white settlement. Despite these setbacks, those members of the southern tribes who had survived the traumas of forcible removal quickly created impressive new communities.

1. THE POLITICS OF EXPANSION

America’s rapid expansion had many consequences. The most significant was that it reinforced the American notion that they were pioneers. The repeated experience of settling new frontiers across the continent had shaped Americans into uniquely optimistic, adventurous, and democratic people.

a. Manifest Destiny, an Expansionist Ideology

Americans justified their endless quest for westward expansion through the argument of manifest destiny, a term coined by newspaperman John O’Sullivan. Manifest destiny argued that Americans had a God-given right to bring the benefits of American democracy to other people, by force if necessary. After the Panic of 1837, many politicians also became convinced that the nation’s prosperity depended on continued westward expansion. Expansionism was deeply tied to national politics. Most Democrats supported westward expansion while most Whigs opposed it, in part because they feared it would raise the divisive issue of slavery’s extension into the western territories.

b. The Overland Trails

The 2,000 mile trip on the Overland Trails from the Missouri River to Oregon and California usually took seven months. Pioneers often arrived at their destinations with little food and few personal belongings. Despite the risks, settlers continued to move west. They had many motives for making the trip, including a sense of adventure, economic opportunity, and the desire to experience the unknown. Few pioneers traveled alone because they needed help crossing rivers and mountains in heavy wagons. All pioneers were part of a new, westward-moving community in which they had to accept the advantages and disadvantages of community membership. In addition to exhaustion and boredom, wagon trains were often beset by illness and accident. Despite these risks, by 1860 almost 300,000 people had traveled the Overland Trails to Oregon and California. In 1869, the completion of the transcontinental railroad ended the era of the wagon train.

c. Oregon

The American settlement of Oregon provides an example of the stages of frontier development. The first contacts between the region’s Indian peoples and Europeans were commercial. These contacts and other initial contacts can be characterized as the “frontier of inclusion.” In the settlement of Oregon this occurred with the 1824 consolidation of the British fur trade at Fort Vancouver. The effect of the fur trade on native peoples was disastrous and they were decimated by European disease. The second stage of settlement, the “frontier of exclusion” occurred gradually as white settlers to the territory began to outnumber the original native population. This occurrence signaled the arrival of the “frontier of exclusion.” Americans and British maintained a joint occupation of Oregon until 1846. In June of that year America and Canada signed a treaty that placed the U.S.-Canada border at the 49th parallel. White American settlement to the area continued unimpeded.

d. The Santa Fé Trade

Commerce with Santa Fe had long been a goal of American traders. Spain had forcefully resisted American penetration into their territories but when Mexico gained its independence from Spain in 1821, this exclusionary policy changed and American traders were now welcome in Santa Fe. Settlements and trading posts soon grew up along the Santa Fe Trail. The three small communities of Pueblo, Hardscrabble, and Greenhorn were populated by men of all nationalities and their Mexican and Indian wives. This racially- and ethnically-mixed existence was characteristic of all early trading fronters.

e. Mexican Texas

When Mexico gained its independence in 1821, society was divided into two classes: the ricos, who claimed Spanish descent, and the mixed-blood pobres. Most Tejanos were neither ricos nor vaqueros, mixed blood people renowned for their horsemanship skills. Tejanos tended to be small farmers or common laborers. A final group living in the Texas region was the nomadic Comanche Indians who followed the buffalo herds on which they depended for survival.

f. Americans in Texas

The American settlement of Texas differed markedly from that of other frontiers. The Texas settlement was fully legal and land ownership was permitted through formal contracts with the Mexican government. Stephen F. Austin encouraged prosperous southern slave owners to move to the territory to expand their land holdings devoted to the cultivation of cotton. Soon, Americans outnumbered Tejanos two to one. The Austin settlement was followed by others, eventually twenty-six in all. These large settlements were highly organized farming enterprises based on the cultivation of cotton grown by African American slaves and sold in the international market. Austin’s settlers were predominantly Southerners who viewed Texas as a natural extension of the cotton frontier in Mississippi and Louisiana. The Americans in Texas were immigrants to another country and were thus prevented from setting up American-style governments in their settlements. As the Mexican government restricted American immigration and outlawed slavery, American settlers discussed rebellion. In fall 1835, war broke out and by May 14, 1836, Santa Anna signed a treaty recognizing the independence of the Republic of Texas. The Mexican Congress, however, refused to recognize Texas independence.

g. The Republic of Texas

The United States Congress refused to grant the Republic of Texas statehood when it applied for admission to the Union in 1837. Members, led by John Quincy Adams, protested the admission of a fourteenth slave state. Texans continued to push for annexation to the United States and the matter soon became an urgent matter of national politics. James K. Polk won the presidential election of 1844 in part due to his campaign promise to annex Texas. His election was interpreted as a popular mandate for expansion and in response John Tyler, in one of his last acts as president, pushed a joint resolution through Congress for the annexation of Texas. Texas entered the Union in December 1845.

1. THE MEXICAN–AMERICAN WAR

President James K. Polk added Oregon to the United States in 1846 and in 1848 he acquired Mexico’s northern provinces of California and New Mexico as well. With the annexation in Texas, the United States, in three short years, increased its land by nearly 70 percent.

a. Origins of the War

In June 1845, Polk sent Zachary Taylor to Texas and by October a force of 3,500 Americans were on the Nueces River with orders to defend Texas in the event of a Mexican invasion. Polk also secretly instructed the Pacific naval squadron to seize the California ports in Mexico and declared war. In November 1845, Polk sent secret envoy John Slidell to Mexico with an offer of $30 million or more for the Rio Grande border in Texas and Mexico’s provinces of New Mexico and California. The attempt was unsuccessful and in April 1846, after a brief skirmish between Mexican and American soldiers, Polk sent a war message to Congress. On May 13, 1846, Congress declared war on Mexico.

b. Mr. Polk’s War

From the start, the Mexican-American War was divisive. Whig critics in Congress questioned Polk’s account of the border incident that sparked the war. They accused the president of misleading Congress and of maneuvering the country into an unnecessary war. Whigs termed the war with Mexico “Mr. Polk’s War” while Polk used the war as an opportunity to expand and redefine the role of the president as commander-in-chief during times of war. In the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, signed February 2, 1848, Mexico ceded its northern provinces of California and New Mexico and accepted the Rio Grande as the boundary of Texas. The United States agreed to pay Mexico $15 million in return for the land. Polk reluctantly accepted the treaty.

c. The Press and Popular War Enthusiasm

The Mexican-American War was the first war to be extensively covered by the news media and presented to the American public on a near daily basis. This was due in large part to the invention of the telegraph, which sped up the time it took to send information from one area to another. For the first time in American history, accounts by journalists, not the opinions of politicians, became the major shapers of popular attitudes toward the war. Reports united Americans, although briefly, in a common cause and concern and war news continued to have a deep hold on the popular imagination.

1. CALIFORNIA AND THE GOLD RUSH

In the early 1840s, California was inhabited by many semi-nomadic Indian tribes and Californios, descendants of the Spanish Mexican pioneers who began settling there in 1769. Then came the Gold Rush of 1849 and California was permanently changed.

a. Russian-Californio Trade

The first outsiders to penetrate the isolation of Spanish California were the Russians. Californios, evading the prohibition of former trade imposed by Spanish Mexico, traded with the Russian American Fur Company in Sitka, Alaska. When Mexico became independent in 1821, the California trade was opened to ships from all nations but Californios continued their special economic relationship with the Russians. When agricultural productivity in the region declined, the Russians turned to the rich farms of the Hudson Bay Company for trade. In 1841, with the sale of Fort Ross, the Russian-Californio connection came to an end.

b. Early American Settlement

Johann Agustus Sutter, a Swiss who had settled in California in 1839 and became a Mexican citizen, would serve as a focal point of American settlement in the 1840s. The 1840s immigrants made no efforts to intermarry with the Californios or to conform to Spanish ways. They aspired to take over the territory. In June 1846, these Americans staged the Bear Flag revolt, declaring independence from Mexico. However, the American takeover of California did not become formal until the signing of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo in 1848.

c. Gold!

In January 1848, James Marshall discovered gold flakes at Sutter’s Mill. The east coast did not hear about the discovery of gold in California until the autumn of 1848. Thousands of people left their jobs and headed west, by land and by sea, to make their fortune. Known as “forty-niners,” they transformed what has been a quiet ranching paradise into a tumultuous community in search of wealth. Eighty percent of forty-niners were Americans. Chinese also immigrated to the California in the hopes of finding riches. The distinctive appearance of the Chinese and their perceived economic threat aroused American hostility. By the 1870s Chinese immigration to the United States had been sharply curtailed. The gold rush caused explosive population growth in parts of California and in 1850, California was admitted to the Union as a state.

d. Mining Camps

Most mining camps boomed instantly to life but were empty again within a few short years. The crowded conditions of mining camps and their rapid proliferation meant that miners living there led cheerless, uncomfortable, and unhealthy existences. Most miners were young, unmarried, and unsuccessful in their search for riches. A more successful route to wealth was to supply the miners and the mine towns with the goods and services they wanted and needed. Violence, especially racially motivated violence, was endemic in mining camps. By the mid-1850s the gold rush had passed but California was left with a large population, thriving agriculture, and a corporate mining industry. It was much more multicultural than the rest of the nation because many immigrants from other countries remained in California after the gold rush ended. Tragic consequences of the gold rush included the virtual extermination of the California Indian peoples, the dispossession of many Californios from their lands, and the increasing racial animosity towards the Chinese in America.

1. THE POLITICS OF MANIFEST DESTINY

From 1845 to 1848, the territory of the United States grew by an astounding 70 percent. This expansion, pushed by economic desires and feelings of American cultural superiority, led directly to the emergence of slavery as the dominant issue in national politics.

a. The Wilmot Proviso

In 1846, almost all Whigs opposed President Polk’s expansionism on the basis of their anti-slavery sentiments. However it was Democratic congressman David Wilmot who opened the door to sectional controversy over expansion with his proposal of an addition to a military appropriations bill, that slavery be banned in all the territories acquired from Mexico. Southern Whigs joined with Southern Democrats to vote against the measure while Northerners of both parties supported it. Wilmot’s proviso triggered the first breakdown of the national party system based on sectional interests.

b. The Free-Soil Movement

The dramatic rise of the Liberty Party, founded in 1840 by abolitionists, threatened to take votes away from both the Whigs and the Democrats. The Liberty Party took an uncompromising stance against slavery and proposed to prohibit the admission of slave states to the Union. Although the Liberty Party’s stance was too uncompromising for most Northerners, from this movement the Free Soil Party, a more moderate party opposed to slavery, was born. The free-soil argument focused on how slavery posed a threat to northern expansion and established a direct link between expansion and sectional politics. Free-soilers were willing to allow slavery to continue in the states where it already existed but they refused to allow the extension of slavery into the western territories.

c. The Election of 1848

Lewis Cass of Michigan was the Democratic nominee for president in the 1848 presidential election. Cass proposed applying the doctrine of popular sovereignty to the slave-free issue. The doctrine of sovereignty simply shifted the issue from the national level to the state level and was deliberately vague about when and how a territory would determine its status as a free or slave territory. The Whigs supported war hero Zachary Taylor as their candidate in the 1848 election. Taylor, a Louisiana slave owner, was deliberately vague about the issue of slavery and instead focused on his appeal as a national candidate above sectional disputes. Martin Van Buren ran as a spoiler in the election as the Free Soil Party nominee. Zachary Taylor won the election with less than a majority of the popular vote because Van Buren’s candidacy effectively drew voters away from Cass and the Democratic Party.

***Answer the following questions after reading Chapter 14 from your textbook:***

**1. The Fur Trade:** What was the importance of the fur trade to exploration?

**2. Government-Sponsored Exploration:** What was the role of the federal government in the exploration and development of the West?

**3. Manifest Destiny, an Expansionist Ideology:** What was the justification of manifest destiny for Americans? What was John O’Sullivan’s meaning for this famous phrase? What things promoted expansionist sentiment? How was it connected to economics, religion, and politics?

**4. The Overland Trails:** What were the Overland trails and what type of a trip was it for pioneers? What were the major dangers?

**5. Oregon:** What events encouraged Oregon fever? What was the early presence of Americans in the region? How did the career of Narcissa Whitman demonstrate the best and worst of missionary efforts? What happened to U.S. claims and what was the eventual result? What types of governmental and personal bonds of community did the Oregon settlers develop?

**6. The Santa Fe Trade:** Why was the United States able to become involved in the Santa Fe trade? What effect did this have for American traders? When did Mexico gain independence and what problems developed? How did these problems encourage American expansionists?

**7. Mexican Texas:** Why did the Spanish set up a frontier post in Texas?

**8. Americans in Texas:** Why did Mexico invite Americans? Who was Stephen Austin and what did he contribute to Texas immigration? How did expansion connect to cotton and large land grants? How was Texas settlement different from the other settlement patterns of the U.S.? What policy shift of the Mexican government happened in 1830? How well did the cultures blend? What happened in 1830 to break the balance between the populations? How did the Revolt in Texas develop? What were the major events of the revolt? What was the outcome? Identify: Santa Anna, Alamo, Sam Houston.

**9. The Republic of Texas:** What problems did Texas have despite its military victory? What was the issue in the U.S. and U.S. response? What happened to the balance between the Anglo-Tejano communities? What happened with Indian residents?

**10. Texas Annexation and the Election of 1844:** What connection was there between the annexation of Texas and the 1844 election? How did Tyler and Calhoun complicate the issue? Who were the presidential candidates in 1844 and what were their positions on new territory? What was the significance of the Liberty Party? How did Texas enter the Union?

**11. Origins of the War:** How did the war begin? What larger goals did Polk have and how did he ensure reaching them?

**12. Mr. Polk’s War:** What groups called the war Mr. Polk’s and why did they question the president? How did the term also connect to Polk’s role as commander in chief? What territories did the U.S. gain? Why did Polk decide to invade Veracruz? What were the terms of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo and what was Polk’s view of the treaty? Who and where were the opposition groups to the war?

**13. The Press and Popular War Enthusiasm:** Why was this America’s first popular war? What was the role of the press?

**14. Gold!:** What effect did the gold discovery at Sutter’s Mill have on California? Who were the “forty-niners” and what groups made up the numbers? Where was the real money to be made as evidenced by Levi Strauss and Jerusha Marshall?

**15. The “Young America” Movement:** What was the Young America movement and what were their goals? How did the Mexican War continue to be divisive? What was Calhoun’s view on continued expansion into Mexico? What worldwide effects did the American successes have?

**16. The Wilmot Proviso:** Who was Wilmot and what was the issue expressed in his proviso? What happened to the proviso itself? How was the debate over the proviso ominous and what effect did it have on the political parties?

**17. The Free-Soil Movement:** Why had Wilmot brought up the proviso and what actually resulted? What were the programs of the Liberty Party and the Free-Soil Party? What views did most Free-Soilers have of blacks and of the South? How did their platform repudiate the Missouri Compromise?

**18. The Election of 1848:** What emotions were riding high in the election of 1848? How did these affect the campaign? What was the popular sovereignty doctrine proposed by candidate Lewis Cass? What were the parties and presidential candidates and their platforms? What happened in the election?