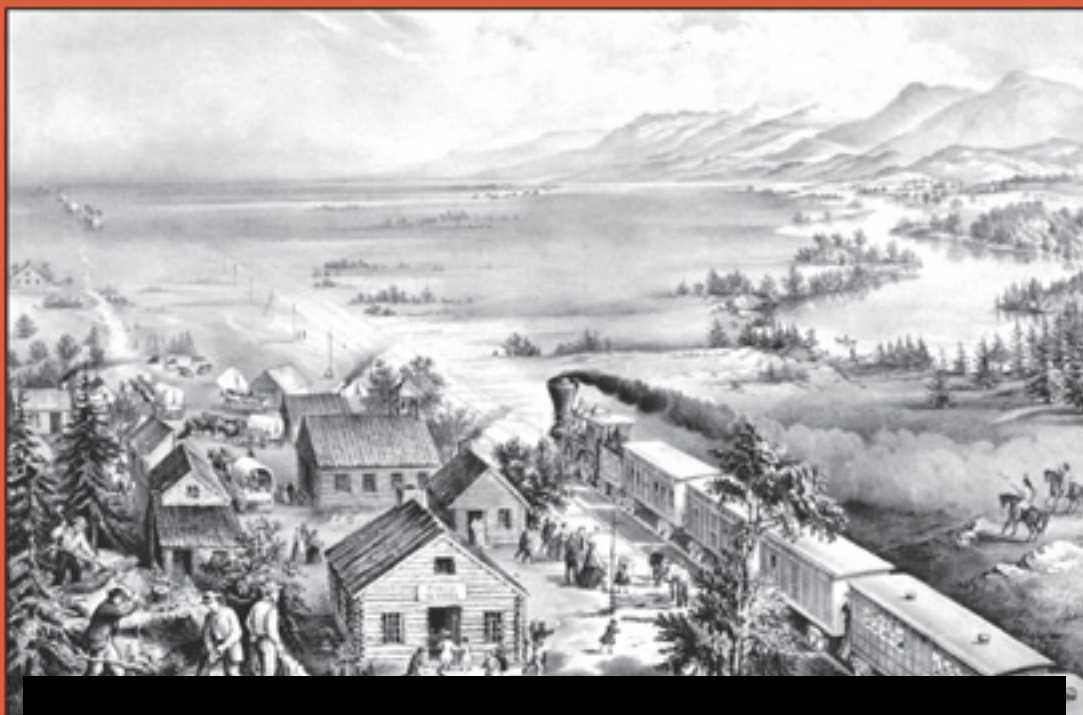


*History*  
UNFOLDING

# MANIFEST DESTINY

## IMAGES OF AN AMERICAN IDEA



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# Introduction

## Manifest Destiny: An American Idea

The American Revolution may have succeeded in forming a new nation. Yet it still left the United States of America hemmed in on all sides, with Great Britain, Spain and France in control of territory to the north, west and south of the young republic. It would take the Louisiana Purchase of 1803 and, a few years after that, another military confrontation with the British to give Americans a heady feeling of being the masters of the continent.

Several streams fed this sense of patriotic pride and confidence. The early stages of industrial development were setting in. Reports from explorers stirred interest in the western lands. Political democracy was expanding. The Second Great Awakening fostered a new spirit of social reform. These trends helped generate a missionary zeal and sense of perfectibility, and they convinced many Americans of the unique role they were destined to play on the stage of history. Out of this mix arose the concept of “manifest destiny,” the notion that the United States was ordained by God or fate to spread across the continent bringing the fruits of civilization with it everywhere.

The concept of manifest destiny today is more often seen negatively as a justification for ruthless conquest and empire. That is surely one aspect of it. Yet in this collection of images, we also call attention to its links with the idealism and romantic individualism of mid-1800s America. To fully understand and critically evaluate the concept, students need to see it in its full complexity. The 12 visual displays in this set focus on key aspects of the concept of manifest destiny and its history. The illustrations are presented in four lessons. Each lesson uses three visual displays to explore one broad topic in the overall story. Briefly, the four lessons are as follows:

### **A Young Nation Looks West**

The illustrations here focus on the western lands and the growing sense Americans had in the early 1800s that these lands were theirs for the taking.

### **The “Go-Ahead Nation”**

In general, a can-do spirit of limitless possibilities took shape in many forms in the United States during the early decades of the nineteenth century. This spirit contributed to a confident faith in the worthiness of westward expansion.

### **The Mexican War**

The war and the years of the Polk presidency in general were the high tide of faith in manifest destiny.

### **Manifest Destiny: Ideal or Justification**

The concept of manifest destiny has been seen as a justification for empire and conquest. Yet it also arose out of and expressed the nation’s highest ideals of democracy and civilization. The images here will give students a basis on which to debate the pros and cons of the concept.

## Using Photos, Cartoons, and Other Visuals to Teach History

Many textbooks are full of colorful visuals. However, all too often these visuals function primarily as window dressing. They make the text more entertaining, or at least more palatable. Only occasionally do the visuals in textbooks do more than offer simple pictorial reinforcement of ideas already presented in the text. In many cases, they pander to the visual orientation of the young while doing little to help young people master the challenges of the visual media that dominate their lives.

By way of contrast, our approach to using visual materials emphasizes their unique strengths as historical documents. The lessons in this booklet focus students on the visual symbols and metaphors in editorial cartoons, the dramatic qualities of certain photographs, the potential of many images to make abstract ideas more specific and concrete, the implicit biases and stereotypes in certain images, their emotional power, and their ability to invoke the spirit of a time and place. In the process, we make every effort to strengthen students' visual literacy skills in general, as well as their ability to think critically and engage in spirited but disciplined discussions.

## How to Use This Booklet

The booklet is divided into four lessons, with three illustrations per lesson. Each lesson consists of the following:

**A BACKGROUND INFORMATION SHEET** This page provides brief summaries explaining the three illustrations on which the lesson is based and their relevance to the lesson's objectives.

**DIGITAL IMAGES** The booklet's PDF allows you to project the images for use in your class discussions.

### **DISCUSSION-ACTIVITY SHEETS**

Each sheet displays one illustration. It includes a sequence of questions to help you plan an all-class discussion while using the projected images. The questions take students step by step through an analysis of the illustration. If you wish, you may reproduce these pages and hand them out. In addition to the discussion questions on the illustration itself, one or two follow-up activities are suggested. Some of these can be made into individual assignments. Others will work best as small-group or all-class activities.

*Manifest Destiny: Images of an American Idea***OBJECTIVES**

1. Students will understand why Americans attitudes about the West changed in the early 1800s.
2. Students will understand how a growing sense of patriotic pride in the early 1800s contributed to interest in westward expansion.

# A Young Nation Looks West

*Use the background information on this page to help your students better understand the three illustrations making up this lesson. The questions and activities presented in the rest of the lesson can be used to help students clarify meanings and debate important issues.*

**BACKGROUND INFORMATION****Illustration 1**

In 1812 the young United States went to war with Great Britain, the nation from which it had won its independence just 31 years earlier. One of the war's memorable moments was the burning of Washington D.C. by the British in 1814, as depicted here. Despite setbacks such as this, the U.S. held out against Great Britain, proving to Americans once again that they could beat Europe's best soldiers. So, in spite of the limitations suggested by the humiliating attack on Washington, American national pride soared. With his famous song, Francis Scott Key captured the national euphoria while he watched the British fail to bomb Baltimore's Fort McHenry into submission.

**Illustration 2**

These feelings of optimism and patriotic pride were not new. They went back as far as the Revolution. But by the early 1800s, the European presence on the North American continent had largely vanished. This was especially so after the Louisiana Purchase in 1803 doubled the size of the young United States overnight. Lewis and Clark soon explored this vast territory. In 1806 and 1807, Zebulon Pike did the same in a large of portion of the Southwest, some of which belonged to Mexico. Interest in western lands soared as a result of the reports of these expeditions, both of which are traced on this map. Some Americans were already beginning to claim that the United States had a God-given right to all of this western land.

**Illustration 3**

This famous painting can be found in the U.S. Capitol building in Washington, D.C. It is titled "Westward the Course of Empire Takes Its Way." It is a symbolic painting rather than a depiction of an actual event. The painting captures the feeling of expansiveness and freedom characteristic of the vast westward movement that began in the mid-1800s. By 1820 most of the land east of the Mississippi River had been settled. As the population of the U.S. continued to soar, more and more Americans decided to make a new life for themselves in the west. In the minds of many Americans, hope, freedom and national power were becoming linked above all to images of land and the inevitable westward movement of a nation.



## Lesson 1—A Young Nation Looks West

# Illustration 1



Courtesy of the Library of Congress



Courtesy of the Library of Congress

### Discussing the Illustrations

1. This engraving shows a scene from the War of 1812. What nation did the United States fight in the War of 1812?
2. The engraving actually shows an important event from the War of 1812—the burning by British soldiers of a very important city. What city is it?
3. The words on the left were written during the war of 1812. They are the words to the U.S national anthem. What do these words have to do with the War of 1812? How do they help convey the general feeling or spirit of many Americans during and after this war?
4. In the War of 1812, the U.S. not only defeated Great Britain, it also won important victories over several Native American tribes in the East who had joined with the British in the fight. How do you suppose the defeat of these groups helped spur the movement west that took place in the years following the end of the War of 1812?

### Follow-up Activities

1. **Small-group activity:** Read a detailed account of the War of 1812, including the burning of Washington, D.C. Now imagine it is late August 1814, and you and the other members of your group work for a New York City newspaper. Elect one member of the group to serve as editor of the paper. Then, as a group, write the articles for and design the front page for your paper for the day after the burning of Washington, D.C. Use this engraving as part of your design layout. You may also want to find other images to include – such as other war scenes, maps or portraits. Be sure to include an account of how Dolly Madison rescued the portrait of George Washington from the burning White House. Finally, write a front-page editorial about what the war and the burning of Washington mean to the young nation.
2. Imagine you are a relative of Francis Scott Key. He has just sent you his copy of “The Star Spangled Banner.” He says some friends want him to put it to music. Write him back with your suggestions.

# The “Go-Ahead Nation” Illustration 2



Courtesy of the Library of Congress



Courtesy of the Library of Congress