



CHAPTER 15 | MANIFEST DESTINY

In this chapter, I will show you the big picture of American history from the mid-1830's to 1850 or so. I will also lightly cover the events that occurred during three presidencies—those of Martin Van Buren, William Henry Harrison, and John Tyler—and the ways in which America expanded during this period through the doctrine of Manifest Destiny. You will also learn about abolitionists and the Trail of Tears.

In future chapters, I will show you some of these events again in more detail. For example, you will learn about the everyday lives of pioneers as they trekked across the American plains, and I will also tell of the Plains Indian Wars that resulted from Native and white American cultures clashed in the West. Upcoming chapters will also cover the Mexican American War that followed the annexation of Texas, the installation and effects of the telegraph, and the California Gold Rush.

MANIFEST DESTINY

The Democratic-Republican party was, you will recall, inaugurated by Thomas Jefferson and James Madison in the 1790s. You will also recall how the parties changed under the leadership of Martin Van Buren, Andrew Jackson, and their friends, in the 1820s. Under Jackson, the party now known simply as the Democrats represented the farmers. To farm, you need land, so the Democrat party usually wanted to expand America's territory. They looked at all that land across the Mississippi River—the Great Plains, the Southwest, the Rockies, and the West Coast regions: California and the Oregon Territory—and they wanted it.

Some people thought it was best to just conquer these lands, to fight whatever wars were needed to take them by force. Others wanted to settle them and set up new republics, like the Texans had done, and then annex (add on) those new republics to the United States. Most believed that however it happened, it had to happen, because Americans were the best people to rule the whole continent.

The years between 1830 and 1850 saw a huge westward push among white Americans as they sought to settle the continent from sea to shining sea. In 1845, a journalist named John O'Sullivan captured the expansionist, can-do spirit of the age that mingled with a religious sense of both duty and purpose in his now-famous phrase "Manifest Destiny," an idea that echoed throughout the presidential terms of Van Buren, Harrison, and Tyler.

The term "Manifest Destiny" strictly means that it is the inevitable (in secular terms) and manifest (in religious terms) will of destiny or God (depending on the person using the term) that white Americans should control the whole of the North American continent. Some Americans therefore saw themselves as having a responsibility to fulfill God's plan, spreading white American people across the entire continent of North America.

Added to this over time was the belief that America embodied all that was good and great, and American democracy was the pinnacle of mankind's socio-political endeavors to that point. Much talked of was the idea that Providence had ordained the spread of American ideals such as democracy, freedom, and equality, from coast to coast. Ultimately, in some people's minds, these ideas should in fact be spread further, from the North Pole to the South Pole and even the entire world.

(Ironically, many who preached Manifest Destiny did not feel that voting rights, freedom, and equality should be spread to the American women, black Americans, and Native Americans already residing in the United States.)



O'Sullivan (he of the journalistic pen) articulated three arguments that were widely used to support Manifest Destiny. The first was the idea that occupation equals moral right. If a people actually occupy a country, O'Sullivan argued, they have more right to it than those foreign powers who "own" it on paper. O'Sullivan also presented this argument for the annexation of Texas, California, and other western lands.

In his 1845 essay concerning the Manifest Destiny of America, O'Sullivan gives arguments for the justice of America's then-recent annexation of Texas. He pointed out that Texas became peopled with Americans at Mexico's invitation, and that Mexican tyranny and errors of government were faults that removed her claims on Texas. O'Sullivan also claimed that Texians, having enjoyed self-government, did not foment a revolution against Mexico—rather it was Mexico that attempted a revolution by attempting to overpower Texan Americans in defiance of law and established usage.

Again, O'Sullivan emphasized Texas was, in the last analysis, colonized by people with common ties with America, not Mexico. Her annexation to the United States was therefore the right and natural course (and in line with the "manifest design of Providence in regard to the occupation of this continent."¹ (This all sounds very well, but I highly doubt that O'Sullivan and his contemporaries would have accepted their own arguments if a neighboring power tried to pry away United States territory—do you?)

To O'Sullivan, occupation equals moral right. At the time of his essay's publication in 1845, America did not yet own Oregon, California, or much of the land north of Texas. However, O'Sullivan was certain that America both ought to and would control the whole North American continent. According to his views, a people who occupy a country in fact have more right to it than those foreign powers who "own" it on paper. It was, O'Sullivan felt, simply the "natural flow of events."

Thus, according to O'Sullivan's argument, the Anglo-Saxon (white) Americans who were colonizing Mexican territory in California should have the natural right to independence from Mexico and to self-government that belongs "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."²

This argument is bad logic; it assumes that Americans would and should control North America because they had begun to occupy it. As you will see, Americans were not impressed by similar reasoning when Hitler tried to justify his attacks on Austria and Poland during World War II.

1. William Dudley, *Antebellum America: 1784-1850* (San Diego: Greenhaven Press, 2003), p. 240-241.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 242.

Interestingly, O'Sullivan's objection to interference from other nations is similar to the warning issued by Monroe about foreign meddling in the Western Hemisphere at the end of the Napoleonic era. Both of these principles reflect a sense of ownership and right to protect American soil (or potential American soil). However, it is noteworthy that Americans, while they were eager to claim their own right to lands they settled, were equally eager to ignore the rights of certain people already living there: the Native Americans.



A second argument was that America ought to spread across the continent and control it entirely because they were already in the process of doing so. It is the natural flow of events, therefore it must be destiny. Such an argument can create a sense of purpose, but it does not actually make the action right. Indeed, it rests on the faulty assumption that just because something is happening, it is right. To agree with this assumption, we would have to agree that any evil act is actually right, because it happened (in contrast with the biblical view that God can and does bring good out of evil for those who love Him and are called according to His purpose).

O'Sullivan's third argument was that any community strong enough to maintain independence has the natural right to it, by virtue of its distinct position, origin, and character. While this is in line with the arguments made on behalf of Texan and Californian independence, it is a far different argument than the first Americans made for their independence from Great Britain. Indeed, when O'Sullivan's argument is boiled down, it is difficult to distinguish it from the argument that might makes right (which from both a biblical and a legal standpoint is simply not true).

Various beliefs ungirded Manifest Destiny. There was a belief that God had specifically chosen the United States (above all other nations) to rule over the entire continent—the New Testament version of Israel. Many Americans saw themselves as better than their European neighbors. They made a moral judgment about the types of governments in existence, and believed that the democratic ideals of America were better than any other type of government.

As the democratic and “civilized” men, Americans saw others who did not share their ideals as uncivilized and needing instruction. Native Americans, Mexicans, and slaves particularly fell into this category. The idea of duty and responsibility to spread American “blessings” led to a blatant disregard of the cultures and beliefs of those already living in North America. Many Americans used this supposed mandate to civilize other people as an excuse or justification of their treatment of the Native Americans, Mexicans, and slaves.

By elevating their democratic ideals to a standard of godliness, logic insisted that other nations must not be as godly. Thus, it became the duty and destiny of Americans to promote democracy and “godliness” throughout the continent, even by force. There was also an idea that there would not be enough land for every American. This fear probably reinforced and fueled the other aspects of Manifest Destiny.

Synonyms for the feeling or agenda that O'Sullivan called Manifest Destiny are nationalism and expansionism, and possibly patriotism and optimism (can-doism) about the future of America. A nation of people motivated by the notion of Manifest Destiny might be expected to make both good and bad decisions as a result.

For example, positively, they would be willing to exert themselves to cultivate unsettled wildernesses and join hands in common struggles. They would work to solve problems for many people at once and enjoy feelings of unity and common purpose. Finally, they would be willing to undertake risks and adventures not otherwise likely to appeal to them.



On the negative side, however, those same people motivated by the lure of Manifest Destiny might act without regard for the rights or feelings of “others” (e.g., Mexicans, Native Americans, buffalo, beaver), exclude those found on “their” new lands who were not of the same nationality or creed (e.g., “The Know-Nothings” were white Americans who did not want America to accept more immigrants), enforce their expanding nationalism through violence due to their own strong feelings, and indeed be tempted to fight aggressive wars. Finally, they might even rise up and rebel against established authorities.

PROBLEMS WITH MANIFEST DESTINY

Manifest Destiny did not have America's wholehearted support by any means. Abraham Lincoln, then a younger man, argued against it because he believed America should settle the problems it already had within the Union before attempting to expand. New York Representative Charles Goodyear went further. He declared, “I regretted to hear the sentiment [of Manifest Destiny] avowed in an American Congress ... because it has ever been used to justify every act of wholesale violence and rapine that ever disgraced the history of the world.”¹

Goodyear's statement made clear the concern that Manifest Destiny was simply an excuse to overrun and destroy anyone who stood in the way of America's desire for land. They did not think that this was a good idea at all. In addition, many Northerners were afraid that further expansion in the Southwest would lead to more states being accepted as slave states and thus disrupting the fragile balance in Congress. The tensions over slavery were growing stronger and stronger.

So, while Manifest Destiny was an important idea culturally and politically, it wasn't as if everyone in America believed in it or supported it. Those who did pushed for America to expand westwards, while those who didn't wanted America to focus on making life better for the citizens who were living in the land they already owned.

ABOLITIONISTS

Jackson's emphasis on the dignity of labor and the value of the common man was hard to square with continued slavery for black Americans. It was during the Age of Jackson the abolitionists really began to hit their stride. William Wilberforce and his friends in Britain had outlawed the slave trade in 1807, and they abolished slavery throughout the British Empire by 1833. In America, however, abolitionism only began to gain strength and force in the 1830s, at which point it became organized and took on a definite shape.

Abolitionists rightly saw that slavery would only end without violence if slaveholders agreed that black Americans were equal to their white counterparts in the eyes of God. Southerners had to believe that freeing the slaves was their Christian duty. The abolitionists saw that their work, therefore, must be to change a complacent society.

To convince Southern whites of racial equality, abolitionists worked to create a living model of it in the free states of the North. In this they were largely unsuccessful, but the task was not easy: though there was not legal slavery in the North, there was racial prejudice and black Americans were purposefully marginalized in the North.

Taking their cues from the political parties of their day, abolitionists used bold, stark language to break through through the national apathy towards slavery. They used “public rallies, revivalistic exhortations,

1. Sheila Nelson, *From Sea to Shining Sea* (Philadelphia: Mason Crest Publishers, 2005, p. 18.



speakers' series, bureaucratic agencies, and, above all, the printing press" which churned out in 1835 over a million pieces of literature after steam was harnessed to the printing press, a ten-fold increase from 1834.¹

Women were the abolitionist movement's grassroots organizers. They often joined the movement after involvement with church aid societies. They were largely responsible for huge signature drives on multiple petitions to Congress. Women seemed especially drawn to the abolitionist cause, though not all for the same reasons.

Some white American women had no desire either to vote themselves or to see black Americans as social equals and potential voters, but they still believed that slavery was wrong and contrabiblical. Others saw black Americans as their social equals and wanted them to have the dignities of American citizenship that they also desired for themselves.

For example, I am about to describe Harriet Beecher Stowe, a famous white American woman abolitionist. Stowe is a good example of a woman who opposed slavery and supported votes for women, but wanted to emancipate slaves and send them back to Africa, not make them American voters and social equals. Similar attitudes can be found among many white American men and women of this period, including abolitionists. Given what they thought they knew about the intelligence, abilities, and character of black Americans, their ideas make sense. However, their perceptions of black Americans were inaccurate.

Famous Abolitionists

Abraham Lincoln admiringly said that Harriet Beecher Stowe was "the little woman who wrote the book that started this great war [the Civil War fought partly to end slavery]." As a young girl, Harriet's love for books and writing was preparing her for her future as an influential American writer. When her family moved from Connecticut to Cincinnati, Ohio (just across the river from the slave-holding state of Kentucky), she had a personal view of the struggle of slaves for their freedom.

Stowe used what she learned in Cincinnati to gather material for the book that would later become *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Her book focused on the evils of slavery and told the story of the life and death of a Christian slave—Uncle Tom—who was sold, separating him from his family, and eventually beaten to death by a cruel master. This book was hugely popular. In the first year alone, 300,000 copies were sold, and the book made many people—especially in the North—aware of the sufferings of the slaves.

Frederick Douglass was one of America's first black leaders. Born a slave in Maryland, the boy Frederick taught himself to read and then taught other slaves to read the New Testament. In 1838, he ran away to New York City to obtain his freedom. His talent as a speaker was discovered at a meeting in 1841, and he began to speak at anti-slavery events, which was dangerous in America since he might be caught as a runaway slave.

Douglass's name soon became well-known as he spoke out against slavery. His friends sent him to Ireland and England where he continued to speak to large crowds. People really wanted to hear him speak, and he soon became famous on both sides of the Atlantic for his speeches. When he came back to America in 1847, he used the money he had raised to start an abolitionist newspaper—the North Star.

William Lloyd Garrison was the head of the main abolitionist movement in the United States. He was a fiercely independent newspaper writer and publisher who wrote hundreds of articles in his newspaper—*The Liberator*—against slavery for over thirty years. Many in the South wanted him silenced, and they offered rewards, dead or alive, for his capture.

1. William Dudley, *Antebellum America: 1784-1850* (San Diego: Greenhaven Press, 2003), p. 192-193.



Even among the abolitionists Garrison was not always popular. For example, he argued sometimes with Frederick Douglass over the Constitution. However, he was determined to see slavery abolished no matter what the cost. His bold, tireless, uncompromising efforts made a big difference over the years.

Goals and Methods

Each of these abolitionists shared the same goal—the complete end of slavery. They wanted individual Americans to commit themselves to that goal, even if it might take years to achieve it. However, various abolitionists used varying methods. For instance, Garrison used newspapers, Harriet Beecher Stowe wrote a novel, and others like Frederick Douglass used mass meetings that rivaled the revivalists of the Great Awakenings. The seeds they planted in the Age of Jackson would later help to ignite a Civil War.

Various abolitionists also adopted different points of view about how long abolitionism should be expected to take. For instance, "Gradualism" was the view that slaves should be gradually freed over time while "Immediatism" was the view that abolitionists should immediately commit themselves wholeheartedly to beginning to work for the total emancipation of slaves in America. To be clear, Immediatists did not necessarily believe that slaves should be immediately freed. On the other hand, they were not willing to wait for events to resolve themselves naturally.

Gradualism had been popular among abolitionists in the 1820s, but it had been rejected by the South and would not serve the movement in the present. William Dudley, author of *Antebellum America*, notes that, "As a practical alternative, it had failed; as an ideological goal, it reinforced pre-existing prejudice and complacency and made it all too easy to postpone any action; and, as a moral statement, it was flawed by its suggestion that the establishment of Christian freedom for all could be delayed. Gradualism also contradicted the logic of evangelical ideology."¹

Resistance to Abolition

In the North, abolitionists were often met with mob violence. In the South, where slavery was crucial to the social and economic fabric of life, abolitionist literature was censored and burned, and slave codes were tightened. Abolitionists themselves were not tolerated at all. Rather, generally speaking, abolitionists were branded by other Americans as dangerous radicals who struck at all institutions that held the (sacred) Union together. Americans generally agreed that the moral position of the unbalanced and impure abolitionists was at fault.

Many churches, the government, and both political parties condoned slavery (actively or by their permissive silence). Moreover, these bastions of American society did not often permit themselves to be questioned. In 1836, for example, Congress adopted the Gag Rule (a rule restricting discussion on any specific issue). Antislavery petitions were thus tabled without discussion. It would be 1844 before John Quincy Adams gathered enough votes to have the Gag Rule removed.

Why Not Slave Uprisings?

Unlike the white Americans of the nineteenth century, modern Americans are perfectly aware that all the "scientific data" portraying Africans as less human or less intelligent than other ethnicities was pure, poisonous, and dangerous nonsense. You know that black Americans are fully equal in abilities to any other sort of American; you might wonder, therefore, why the slaves did not simply revolt? Why were there not an abundance of large-scale slave uprisings in the American South as compared with, say, similar slave-owning cultures in Central and South America?

1. William Dudley, *Antebellum America: 1784-1850* (San Diego: Greenhaven Press, 2003), p. 191.



It is a good question, and there are a whole series of reasons to explain why the slaves in North America did not simply do as their counterparts in South America had done. First, in the Old South as a whole, whites far outnumbered slaves, and so slaves were sure of speedy punishments in that region. Also, where slaves outnumbered white Americans, slave codes were more strict.

Thus, while there was a history of successful escapes and free living in remote sections of the Caribbean and in South America, successful escapes in the United States were rare. There was no similar heritage of success to spark hope. Also, on the sugar plantations of the Caribbean and South America, conditions were far more harsh, and most owners imported young black men. The sex ratios and horrendous working conditions made slave life intolerable. Slaves were desperate enough to take dreadful risks to escape.

Also, the conditions of South American slaves also made it difficult to have stable slave families, so these young men had nothing to risk except their own lives. In North America, however, sex ratios were about even, and many men had families to protect and enjoy. These families were a deterrent to escape, since families could not hope to escape together, and runaways rightly feared that their families left behind would be punished for their escape.

Then, too, distance between individual plantations made communication for planning revolts or coordinating attacks very difficult. Indeed, in general these southern states were remote from any regions where slaves might escape and retreat, unlike for example the Brazil or the Guiana region of northeastern South America.

One might have expected Native Americans in the backwoods of frontier regions to befriend escaping slaves out of sympathy for their situation, but instead the Native Americans learned quickly that they would be well paid for the return of escaped slaves. Also, again, distance played a role: the frontier was always moving away from the Old South, ever-elongating the road to freedom for a slave hoping to escape.

Finally, short-term escapes, or escapes for family reasons, were often tolerated in the American South as “escape valves” to everyday tensions between slaves and masters. This being the case, there was less incentive for slaves to feel desperate enough to risk everything they had.

This is not to say that black Americans submitted tamely to their slaves. Not at all! Slaves practiced a number of acts that constituted low-level resistance and minor rebellion. They dawdled; they feigned illness; they purposefully broke or lost tools and farm machinery, etc. They passed these tricks, along with their music, art, and folktales, along to their children. Along with “playing dumb,” these tactics allowed slaves to keep a measure of self respect, which in turn kept them from true dehumanization and desperation.

Thus, while there were slaves like Nat Turner who fulfilled the guilty white owners’ worst nightmares, and while there were also Sambos, who fulfilled the whites’ fantasies about the slaves’ intelligence and demeanor, the vast majority of slaves were intelligent people who found a way to get along within their chains and bide their time, looking for a means of escape or ultimate emancipation through law or death.

NATIVE AMERICANS

Even as the abolitionists insisted that the Union stand up for African slaves, other Americans—native tribes in the southeast—were being cheated out of the rights that had been promised to them by solemn treaties. As I described in an earlier chapter, they were forcibly moved west, to “Indian territory” beyond the Mississippi River.



Five Civilized Tribes

The Cherokee, Seminole, Choctaw, Creek, and Chickasaw were collectively called the Five Civilized Tribes. They were called “civilized” since they chose to live the way Europeans did, accepting what Europeans understood as civilization rather than rejecting it.

Prior to the arrival of Europeans, these tribes both hunted and farmed—the men hunted, while women farmed corn, sunflowers, and squash. As their territory shrank due to white settlers taking over the land around them, hunting became very difficult. In addition, overhunting of white tail deer so that their hides could be sold as part of the fur trade nearly wiped out the deer population.

George Washington—as president—had encouraged these tribes and others to start living and farming like the white settlers. Instead of hunting deer, the men were taught to raise cattle, sheep, and pigs and to farm cotton. They still hunted, but farming became their primary source of food.

Many tribesmen in the Five Civilized Tribes had established villages in which they assimilated many of the American ways of farming. They were efficient and skilled farmers and hunters, and they had excellent medical knowledge. Thanks to Sequoyah, of whom I told you a few chapters ago, the Cherokee tribe also had a written language and newspaper of their own.

New Pressures

The European settlers in America grew in numbers—both from immigration and from having many babies. White Americans, whether born here or newly arrived immigrants, often wanted to be farmers, especially in the southeastern states like the Carolinas and Georgia. The invention of the cotton gin drove the desire for more land on which to plant cotton, and for more slaves to plant and pick the cotton crops.

In addition to wanting land for their farmers, the southern states were upset that the native tribes were basically their own little countries. Native Americans were not under federal or state laws since they were the original inhabitants. The governors of Georgia especially didn't like having native nations living within their borders. Georgians wanted the state or federal government to offer to buy the natives' lands and help them move west where there were no states (yet).

When we look back on this period, the settlers and government were clearly in the wrong. They were being greedy and covetous, desiring the land that they had promised would always belong to the native tribes. The federal government in particular had made promises, signed treaties, and then chosen to break them. Most people agree that the way American settlers and the United States government treated the Native Americans was unfair, selfish, and often cruel.

It is worth noting that cultures (including Native American cultures) have expanded at the cost of their neighbors throughout history. Saying "The Native Americans did it too; everybody does it!" will never make the actions of white Americans right, but it does put them in perspective a bit. On the other hand, the forcible removal of the tribes is particularly jarring because the American ideals were those of liberty and equality, and so their actions towards the Native Americans seem especially hypocritical. One thing is clear: it was a tough situation, and the people in it may have seen no way to satisfy, or be completely fair to, all parties involved.



Trail of Tears

When more white settlers began to pour into the regions of the Five Civilized Tribes, the initial question facing Native Americans was whether to adopt white culture or move west. Jackson decided this question for them when he signed the Indian Removal Act of 1830, a federal act passed by Congress which forced tribes to abandon their hereditary lands for reservations in what is now eastern Oklahoma.

Federal soldiers and state militia enforced the unfair agreements and new treaties that the government negotiated with tribal leaders. Many of the individual tribe members protested against these, but once they had been made, anyone who disobeyed them became a criminal in the eyes of the law. Rather than start a war, four of the five tribes allowed themselves to be taken from their lands and moved west. Historians call this time of forced migration the Trail of Tears.

The Trail of Tears is a sad tale, but worth telling. About 60,000 members of the five tribes were forced from their homes. The Choctaw Tribe, the first to go, chose to move west voluntarily. One Choctaw chief explained why in a letter he wrote to the American people:

We as Choctaws rather chose to suffer and be free, than live under the degrading influence of laws, which our voice could not be heard in their formation.

Nearly 15,000 Choctaws made the move to what is now Oklahoma, but somewhere between 2,500 and 6,000 of them died along the way because of poor planning and a lack of supplies. One out of every three to six people died. Those Choctaw who stayed in their ancestral lands were harassed, attacked, and intimidated.

The Chickasaws had a slightly easier time: they were the only tribe that was paid for its homeland.

The Creek tribe begged President John Quincy Adams to protect them, but the Governor of Georgia ignored the federal government and drove the Creek off the land anyway.

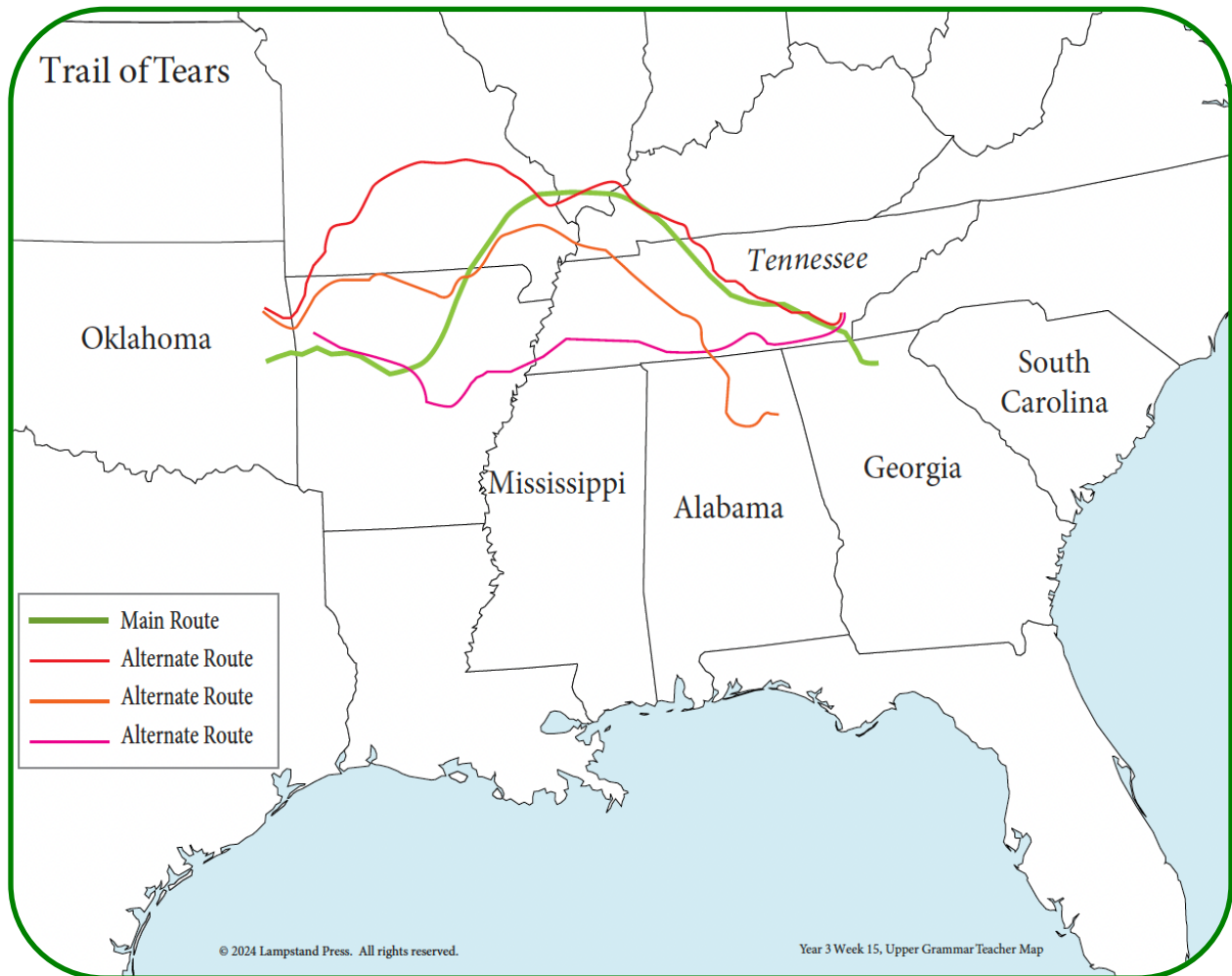
The Cherokee went to court to fight removal and won a Supreme Court victory, but President Jackson refused to enforce it. Instead, the remaining Cherokee tribe members—about 13,000 to 17,000 of them—who had not willingly moved already were rounded up by soldiers and held for several months in forts. Then, they were marched out in groups of about 1,000 during Martin Van Buren's presidency.

Because of a drought that dried up the drinking water, the Cherokee had to start their journey in the fall. They had to walk through the bitter winter months (December to March) across 1,000 miles to reach their new land. Without much in the way of food or shelter or clean water, around 4,000 died from disease, starvation, freezing, or of thirst. That is one out of every four people. It was a terrible time for them, and from the words of one of their leaders comes the name of this tragedy: "A trail of death and tears".

The Seminole tribe of Florida were the last of the Five Civilized Tribes to lose their homeland. Then-general Andrew Jackson had earned part of his fame in the First Seminole War, which was fought from 1814-1819. At that time Florida belonged to Spain, and British and American forces were fighting each other over it. The British allied themselves with the Seminoles and escaped slaves—giving them weapons and building a fort for them. General Jackson led American troops to fight—first against the British and later against the Spanish and the Seminoles. That war wrapped up in 1819 when Spain sold Florida to America.



When the Indian Removal Act demanded that the Seminoles give up their lands eleven years later in 1830, they did not go peacefully. The Second Seminole War lasted from 1832 until 1842, a whole decade. More than 40,000 soldiers and militia fought, and thousands on both sides died. It was the bloodiest war that European settlers fought with a native tribe in American history. The last Seminoles held onto their southernmost tribal lands until 1847, when at the end of the Third Seminole War they too were moved west.



MORMONS

Native Americans weren't the only people who were forced to move out West. There were white Americans who formed a religion derived partly from the Bible and partly from new revelations which their founder, Joseph Smith, claimed to have received from an angel. Smith formed the Church of Jesus Christ of the Latter-Day Saints (commonly known as the Mormons) in 1830.

The Latter-Day Saints were threatened with violence in the east because of their religious beliefs and practices. Some of these were extrabiblical, illegal, or both (polygamy is the most famous example), so the presence of Smith's community in a state was a difficult situation for all concerned. Sadly, Smith was murdered in 1844. In order to live peacefully, the Latter-Day Saints kept moving westward until they reached Utah in 1846. There, they found land where no one would bother them.



Joseph Smith Jr. (1805–1844) was the founder of the Latter Day Saint movement, which gave rise to the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS Church). Smith was born on December 23, 1805, in Sharon, Vermont, to Joseph Smith Sr. and Lucy Mack Smith. His was a farming family with a religious background influenced by various Christian denominations.

In 1820, at the age of fourteen, Joseph Smith reported having a series of visionary experiences, culminating in what is known as the First Vision. He claimed to have seen God the Father and Jesus Christ, who instructed him not to join any existing religious denominations.

In 1823, Smith asserted that an angel named Moroni revealed the location of golden plates containing a record of ancient American peoples. He claimed to have translated these plates with divine assistance, and he published the translation in 1830 as the *Book of Mormon*, presenting it as another testament of Jesus Christ. On April 6, 1830, Joseph Smith officially organized the Church of Christ in Fayette, New York, later named the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS Church). He served as the first president and prophet of the LDS Church.

Joseph Smith was often in trouble with the law throughout his adult life. From 1826 until his death in 1844, he was indicted on at least thirteen separate charges that ranged from disorderliness to sexual misconduct, banking fraud, conspiracy to murder, treason, and inciting a riot. From the Mormon perspective, these were all due to slander, lies, or misunderstandings. From the perspective of the local governments, Smith was a chronic criminal and troublemaker.

Smith's new church also faced persecution and hostility in various locations, leading to the relocation of the church members from New York to Ohio, Missouri, and Illinois. The Missouri period was marked by violent conflicts, known as the Missouri Mormon War (1838–1839).

In 1839, the Latter-day Saints settled in Nauvoo, Illinois, where Joseph Smith served as the mayor. Smith established the Nauvoo Legion, a local militia. However, Joseph Smith and his brother Hyrum were arrested and jailed in Carthage, Illinois. On June 27, 1844, a mob attacked the jail and killed both of the Smith brothers. After Joseph Smith's death, leadership of the LDS Church passed to Brigham Young, who eventually led the community to establish Salt Lake City in Utah.

THE AGE OF JACKSON

Now I will tell you about the other presidents whose terms made up what we call the Age of Jackson (1820–1845). After Jackson himself, his good friend and Vice President Martin van Buren, co-founder of the Democratic Party, won the election for president. Van Buren served one term; after him came William Harrison (who died after a month in office) and John Tyler (Harrison's vice president, who finished Harrison's term and did not seek re-election. Their three presidencies round out this "Era of the Common Man."



Pause a moment to consider with me the largely illusionary idea of the "Era of the Common Man." The phrase was one that touted American freedoms for "the people," but not, after all, for black Americans, Native Americans, or American women. Isn't that ironic?

Black people enslaved in the South starkly demonstrate that the "common man" of this era was narrowly defined. Slaves were not equally protected under the law, could not vote, and were unable to rise in social status. In addition, free black men in the North often faced discrimination and restrictions on their freedom to vote.

Many in the South promoted the idea that the black race would always be dependent children who would never grow up or be able to function without masters (you may recall my description of Phrenology and the ways in which it was used to discredit African intelligence). This idea was so blatantly contradicted by the rhetoric of the common man that abolitionists were able to use it to show the discrepancy between the two mindsets and to argue in favor of freeing the slaves.

Women, too, were not considered part of the "common man" in that they did not have the right to vote and could not do many of the things that men were able to do. In their case, they were not excluded because of skin color or ethnicity or even differences of culture (as black Americans and Native Americans were). Instead, American women were largely relegated to the home and were not allowed to vote because of their gender.

Of course, that being said, American women did have many more freedoms and a larger voice in society than black Americans or Native Americans did. They influenced through their husbands, fathers, and brothers; they influenced also through their own organizations and involvement in abolitionism, etc. Indeed, a Frenchman named Alexis de Tocqueville, who visited America in 1831-1832 and published a book about it (*Democracy in America*) in 1835, said that American women often went to hear political speeches and were the protectors of the country's morals!

Martin van Buren (1837-1841)

Van Buren was the first president born after 1776, so he was an American citizen from birth. He is also the only president yet who didn't speak English as his first language; rather, he grew up speaking Dutch. He was born in NY state to a tavern-master. Van Buren was the third of five children and worked in his father's tavern during his childhood.

Lawyers and politicians frequented the tavern, and their conversations interested the young boy. Some of the visitors included men such as Aaron Burr, of whom Van Buren became an early supporter, and Alexander Hamilton. Van Buren studied for the bar and was admitted as a lawyer in 1803. In 1807, he married Hannah Hoes.

In 1812, Van Buren was elected to the New York State Senate, where he supported the War of 1812 and opposed the Erie Canal. He then served in the United States Senate from 1821 until 1828. There, he was at first supportive of nationalistic legislation, but a year later he became opposed to it. He was also a key founder of the Democratic Party and strong advocate of a two-party system for America.



Always a firm supporter of Andrew Jackson, Van Buren was appointed Jackson's secretary of state in 1829. In 1833, Van Buren was elected vice president for Jackson's second term. Curiously, although he had been active in politics for many years, was the architect of a political party that continues to this day, and was Jackson's clear choice for the next president, Van Buren himself was not popular politically. His political enemies portrayed him as an aristocratic dandy (show-off) and back-room (secret or shady) politician.

Nevertheless, Van Buren was elected in 1836 and took office in 1837. As matters fell out, Van Buren took office five weeks before the economic Panic of 1837 took hold. This event that shut down over 900 banks in America, including some in New York City, and kicked off a five-year long depression. Many people lost their money and jobs, and banks struggled to keep their doors open. It was difficult to get loans, and often Americans could not buy the things they wanted or even needed.

As you may recall from the last chapter, Andrew Jackson's determination to destroy the national bank led to national financial instability and was a leading cause of the Panic of 1837. However, it is commonly the fate of new presidents to receive the credit or blame for their predecessors' choices, and so Van Buren was blamed for the panic resulting from Jackson's decisions. (Van Buren also unwisely chose to redecorate the White House during these hard times, which no doubt contributed to the temptation to blame him.)

Van Buren resisted calls from Whig party members to enact protective tariffs and other economic policies favored by the Whigs. He believed that such measures would not effectively address the root causes of the economic crisis. Instead, Van Buren believed that separating the federal government from the banking system could help stabilize the economy, so he proposed the Independent Treasury System, which aimed to store federal funds in government vaults rather than relying on private banks.

Van Buren's philosophy was that there should be limited government intervention in the economy. Thus, while he supported the Independent Treasury System, he was cautious about directly intervening to address economic issues, believing that government involvement could lead to inefficiencies and moral problems.

Eventually, the Independent Treasury System had its chance. The Independent Treasury Act of 1840, also known as the Sub-Treasury Act, was signed into law in 1840 after facing opposition in Congress. This Act established sub-treasuries across the country to handle federal funds directly. The Independent Treasury System did not bring about an immediate resolution to the economic difficulties facing the nation.

Perhaps the worst of economic depressions is that they tend to linger for *years*. The Panic of 1837 overshadowed Van Buren's entire presidency, which in the end would consist of only one term. Nevertheless, one must give the man credit for trying to manage the crisis. One must also appreciate that he did not put all his eggs in the Treasury System basket; Van Buren also explored international trade opportunities and made diplomatic efforts to open markets abroad, especially in Asia, with the hope that increased trade would stimulate the American economy.

During Van Buren's one presidential term, Texas asked the United States to annex it from Mexico. Van Buren refused. He feared war with Mexico, and he was wary of disputes over slavery. For one thing, the Democratic Party that he had helped to invent courted Southern favor by supporting slavery. For another, admitting Texas as either a free state or a slave state would upset the Union's delicate sectional balance.

The same fear of angering Mexico and eagerness to show support for slavery caused Van Buren to later side with the Spanish government and returned rebel slaves in the matter of the Amistad rebellion (even though the Supreme Court had ruled in favor of the slaves).



In 1839, a group of Africans from Sierra Leone, who had been kidnapped and enslaved by Portuguese slave traders. The Africans were transported to Havana, Cuba, and sold as slaves. Then, led by Sengbe Pieh (known as Joseph Cinqué), the kidnapped Africans rebelled against their captors on the Spanish ship *La Amistad*. They seized control of the ship, killed some crew members, and demanded to be returned home.

The incident had international implications and became a legal and diplomatic challenge when *La Amistad* was eventually seized off the coast of Long Island, New York, by the United States Navy. The surviving Africans were taken into custody and faced charges of mutiny and murder. The case went to trial, and the legal proceedings garnered widespread attention. Naturally, abolitionists and anti-slavery advocates supported the Africans' cause. What had been solely Spain's problem was now America's problem as well.

The case first went to a district court, where Judge Andrew Judson ruled in favor of the Spanish government, claiming that the Africans were property. The decision was appealed to the Circuit Court, where former President John Quincy Adams argued on behalf of the Africans. The case reached the U.S. Supreme Court, which in 1841, under Chief Justice Roger B. Taney, ruled in favor of the Africans (*United States v. The Amistad*). The Court held that the Africans were not property but had been illegally enslaved. They were declared free and ordered to be transported back to Africa. Van Buren's administration faced diplomatic challenges from Spain because the Supreme Court had ruled against Spanish interests in the case, and Van Buren at first aligned himself with Spain's interests in the case.

Diplomatic tensions were somewhat alleviated through negotiations, and I am happy to report that the Africans were eventually returned to Sierra Leone. However, the *Amistad* case had broader implications for the anti-slavery movement and heightened tensions over the issue of slavery in the United States.

You may recall that the Democrats courted the favor of the South by supporting slavery. Van Buren, a good Democrat, also advocated low tariffs and free trade to please Southern planters, who wanted to import high-quality goods from Europe at lower prices and trade their cotton to Europe without extra costs.

Two other items of some note took place during Van Buren's term. First, there was a boundary dispute with Canada called the Aroostook War which, fortunately, did not involve any violence and was brought to a peaceful solution. Second, and much less happily, the Cherokees' walk of the infamous Trail of Tears occurred during Van Buren's presidency. Although it was Jackson who had signed the Indian Removal Act of 1830, it was during Van Buren's watch that between 13,000 and 17,000 Cherokees were forced to march over 1,000 miles. As you know, thousands died on the long trail.

Van Buren was vilified by Americans, but not for his support of slavery or his willingness to administer the Indian Removal Act. Rather, his political enemies placed the blame for the Panic of 1837 squarely on him, calling him "Martin Van Ruin." The Democrats did choose Van Buren to run for president a second time in 1840, but he was voted out of office before he could get the economy going again. In 1848, he ran for president on a third party ticket, the Free Soil Party. He lost.

William Henry Harrison (1841)

Van Buren was beaten in 1840 by William Henry Harrison, a member of the Whig Party and a war hero from the Battle of Tippecanoe (hence his nickname: "Tippecanoe"). Harrison's father, Benjamin Harrison



V, was a famous American patriot and signer of the Declaration of Independence. William Harrison was born into this prominent political family in Virginia and the youngest of seven children. He attended Hampden-Sydney College and the University of Pennsylvania. In 1795, he married Anna Symmes. William was not a wealthy man, which perhaps helps to explain why he chose a military career.

In 1799, Harrison was elected to Congress as a delegate of the Northwest Territory, but resigned in 1800 to become the governor of the Indiana Territory. While in that office, Harrison gained national attention for leading American federal soldiers against native Chief Tecumseh's warriors in 1811. This was the Battle of Tippecanoe that you may recall from an earlier chapter. Tecumseh's Prophetstown settlement was destroyed in the conflict, and the Indian forces were decisively beaten. That battle helped start the war of 1812, in which Harrison became not only famous but also a successful general.

Harrison was elected to Congress in 1816, then to the Ohio State Senate in 1819, and became a United States senator from Ohio in 1824. In 1828, he resigned from the Senate to become a minister plenipotentiary to Colombia until 1829. There, he advised Simón Bolívar. In 1836, he was a Whig candidate for president, but lost. In the 1840 election, the Whigs used the Democratic Party's own electioneering tactics against them, and Harrison won.

What do I mean by the "electioneering tactics" of the Democratic Party? I mean the smear campaigns that they used so successfully on John Quincy Adams. Harrison decided to use the same tricks on them. In a hard-charging and victorious campaign, he successfully—but most unfairly—convinced the people that Van Buren was an aristocrat who was out of touch with common folks. Naturally, to a nation steeped in Jackson's appeal to the "common man," the charge of "aristocrat" was the kiss of death!

Eager to prove that he was a cultured Virginian and not a "common" backwoodsman, as ironically his campaign had portrayed him to be, Harrison gave the longest inaugural speech in American history. Perhaps as a result of this act of vanity, he also served the shortest term in American history. You see, it was cold and rainy on March 4, 1841, when Harrison took the oath of office. Nevertheless, he insisted on reading his entire 8,000-word speech, even though it took him nearly two hours. Then, he rode through the streets of Washington in a parade. Three weeks later, Harrison came down with pneumonia.

It may have been the long speech in the rain, or it may not have been that. Either way, Harrison hastily assembled a competent Whig cabinet from his sickbed, then died on April 4th, just thirty days after taking office. Some people suggested that he had died from the "Tecumseh Curse" which, as the legend had it, said that any president who won an election in a year ending in zero would die in office. He assembled an able Whig cabinet while ill.

John Tyler (1841-1845)

Upon Harrison's death, his vice president—John Tyler of Virginia—claimed the title of President. "Claimed" is really the right word. At that time, the Constitution said the vice president took over the president's duties if he died, but it never said he actually took the title of President. Tyler was the first vice president to succeed a president who had died in office, so he had to set a precedent one way or the other.

This constitutional question wouldn't have been significant if Tyler had been a loyal Whig—but he had been a Democrat until he accepted the Whigs' offer to be vice president. It was suggested that he become "acting president," but Tyler asserted his right to govern as president and proceeded to act accordingly. His opponents never admitted that he was really president; they referred to Tyler instead as "His Accidency," a



play on “His Excellency.”

Before becoming His Excellency, Tyler was born the second of eight children in Virginia and attended William and Mary College. He married Letitia Christian in 1813 (on his twenty-third birthday), and she bore him eight children. (After twenty-nine years of marriage, Letitia would die of a stroke in 1842. Tyler then married Julia Gardiner, a woman thirty years his junior, in 1844. Though it was the last year of his presidency, he thereby set another precedent by becoming the first president to marry while in office.)

Young Tyler had a tendency to combine marriage with major political years. Not only did he marry for a second time in the last year of his presidency, but he married for the first time in the same year that he was elected to the Virginia House of Delegates (1813). Later, he was elected as a Democratic-Republican to Congress, where he served 2½ terms. He was also elected Governor of Virginia from 1825-1827. He also served as a United States senator from 1827 to 1836, when he resigned.

Tyler first supported and then opposed Jackson in the Senate. Before becoming president, he was known to be a Democrat who was pro-slavery and against nationalist legislation. For example, he strongly disagreed with the Missouri Compromise, believing that banning slavery in any part of the country was illegal. However, Tyler was drawn into the Whig party by an offer to run as Harrison's vice president.

Tyler accepted the Whig Party's offer and ran with Harrison, but his views were at wide variance with Whigs, and that did not help him when he suddenly found himself in charge of a Whig presidential administration with an all-Whig cabinet chosen by his dead predecessor!

Most presidents have a certain amount of political power—what we often call political capital—because they were elected by the people. Tyler had no political capital of his own and he made things worse when he refused to support the Whig agenda. Tyler vetoed virtually every Whig bill, especially those that Whig leader Henry Clay sponsored. In short order, Tyler was formally kicked out of the Whig Party.

By September 1841, every man in the Whig cabinet that Tyler had inherited from Harrison resigned (except Secretary of State Daniel Webster). Both Democrats and Whigs now disliked Tyler and opposed anything he tried to do. Tyler had become a “man without a party.” He didn't even run for reelection.

Tyler worked to admit Texas to the Union and did so through a joint resolution of Congress rather than via treaty. Tyler signed the joint resolution into law a few days before leaving office, but Texas did not formally join the Union until 1845. On Tyler's last full day in office, Florida was admitted to the Union. Then the next president, James K. Polk, brought Jacksonian democracy back in force.

Presidential Campaigns of 1844

There were several issues that characterized the presidential race after John Tyler. For example, campaigns included the pros and cons of American expansion. The question of annexing Texas (as arguably a Mexican property) also dominated the debate during the election season, though of course that was a moot point by the end of Tyler's presidency because he squeaked the annexation through Congress before leaving office.

The issue of slavery, reopened by the Texas annexation question, was also on the table. As American expansion was discussed and debated, some were concerned about how new territories would be admitted to the Union. Would new territories be admitted as free states or slave states? Would the current line in Missouri that determined slave or free states move further west? In light of these questions, the issue of slavery continued to rise to the surface in the political discussions of the day.



The political history of 1820-1845 in America is quite full enough of backstabbing, insubordination, neglect of Constitutional duties, shady dealings, and other unsavory actions. It seems the American public had become quite jaded about their politicians, as Charles Dickens noticed when he visited the country for the first time in 1842.

That same year, Dickens wrote a book called *American Notes for General Circulation and Pictures from Italy*. In Chapter 28, which is called "Concluding Remarks," he observes that,

"It is an essential part of every national character to pique itself mightily upon its faults, and to deduce tokens of its virtue or its wisdom from their very exaggeration. One great blemish in the popular mind of America . . . is Universal Distrust. Yet the American citizen plumes himself upon this spirit, even when he is sufficiently dispassionate to perceive the ruin it works; and will often adduce it, in spite of his own reason, as an instance of the great sagacity and acuteness of the people, and their superior shrewdness and independence.

'You carry,' says the stranger, 'this jealousy and distrust into every transaction of public life. By repelling worthy men from your legislative assemblies, it has bred up a class of candidates for the suffrage, who, in their very act, disgrace your Institutions and your people's choice. It has rendered you so fickle, and so given to change, that your inconstancy has passed into a proverb; for you no sooner set up an idol firmly, than you are sure to pull it down and dash it into fragments: and this, because directly you reward a benefactor, or a public servant, you distrust him, merely because he is rewarded; and immediately apply yourselves to find out, either that you have been too bountiful in your acknowledgments, or he remiss in his deserts. Any man who attains a high place among you, from the President downwards, may date his downfall from that moment; for any printed lie that any notorious villain pens, although it militate directly against the character and conduct of a life, appeals at once to your distrust, and is believed. You will strain at a gnat in the way of trustfulness and confidence, however fairly won and well deserved; but you will swallow a whole caravan of camels, if they be laden with unworthy doubts and mean suspicions. Is this well, think you, or likely to elevate the character of the governors or the governed, among you?'

The answer is invariably the same: 'There's freedom of opinion here, you know. Every man thinks for himself, and we are not to be easily overreached. That's how our people come to be suspicious.'

If Jackson's "common man" had become suspicious, he was certainly encouraged in it by the exaggerations, insinuations, insults, and outright lies and slanders that politicians heaped upon one another during this era. Clearly, democracy in America works much better when each citizen makes a serious attempt to treat his neighbor as he himself would wish to be treated.



CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the Age of Jackson was much like the old general himself: hard fighting, rough, ready, and occasionally wrong-headed. Not everyone agreed with Manifest Destiny, but those who did pushed and plunged on ahead, dragging the rest of the country after them.

There was much to admire about the new nation, but yet there was also much, in hindsight, that Christians now regret. The power of the common man was on the rise, and woe be to anything that got in his way, whether eastern elites, the Mexican border, or Native Americans. In the end, however, God is not mocked. The pain and suffering inflicted on the innocent would be required from all Americans very soon during the Civil War. The seeds were sown and had sprouted, and soon that dreadful harvest will be ripe.