

Manifest Destinies: America's Westward Expansion and the Road to Civil War

Christopher Childers

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/cwbr>

Recommended Citation

Childers, Christopher (2011) "Manifest Destinies: America's Westward Expansion and the Road to Civil War," *Civil War Book Review*. Vol. 13 : Iss. 2 .

DOI: 10.31390/cwbr.13.2.12

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/cwbr/vol13/iss2/11>

Review

Childers, Christopher

Spring 2011

Woodworth, Steven E. *Manifest Destinies: America's Westward Expansion and the Road to Civil War*. Alfred A. Knopf, \$30.00 ISBN 978-0-307-26524-1

Re-examining American Expansion and the Coming of War

America's truly breathtaking westward expansion has captivated the attention of the nation's citizens since those heady years preceding the Civil War. So too Manifest Destiny and its discontents have drawn generations of historians to study the link between territorial extension and the coming of war in 1861, for in most every instance that the United States expanded its boundaries toward the Pacific, the issue of whether slavery would follow the flag assumed critical importance. In *Manifest Destinies: America's Westward Expansion and the Road to Civil War*, Steven E. Woodworth offers a narrative of how territorial expansion became fused with the extension of slavery, how together they fostered the demise of a political system designed to allay sectional tensions over slavery, and how expansion paved the road to disunion.

Woodworth begins with an analysis of Jacksonian era party politics, starting in 1840 when both Whigs and Democrats competed for the presidency using advanced electioneering tactics. Both parties hit their stride with the Log Cabin Campaign, as the electoral campaigns of Martin Van Buren and William Henry Harrison vied for popular votes throughout the nation. Van Buren had led the creation of a party system designed to suppress the sectional tensions that erupted in the Missouri controversy and instead grapple with economic issues that influenced both North and South. The New Yorker's creation had finally flowered. Woodworth focuses on the hoopla surrounding the campaign, which makes for good reading, but at the expense of engaging with the issues of Jacksonian politics at high tide. And because he insists at the outset of his book that the federal government had largely ignored slavery during its early years, Woodworth's analysis of party politics seems separated from the question of slavery and expansion. Recently, a number of historians have compellingly

demonstrated that the extension of slavery indeed played a role in national politics before the 1840s, in spite of the best efforts of party functionaries like Van Buren. In Woodworth's narrative, slavery becomes important only after John Tyler—Harrison's states rights successor—made Texas annexation his hobbyhorse. With that came the rise of abolitionism and the sectional cleavage of American churches, a disturbing development that Woodworth argues played no small role in presaging the disruption of the Union. Again though, the warning signs had appeared in the previous decade.

Woodworth shifts from party politics and abolitionism to discuss the process of westward expansion and the migration of thousands of Americans to Oregon and California. Here we find many of the familiar characters: the Whitmans and their trek to Oregon; the ill-fated Donner Party on their way to California; the Mormons in their quest for a promised land. Most importantly, Woodworth reminds his readers of just how many Americans, particularly northerners, sought a new beginning in the West, even before the United States had become a continental republic. They did not seem to mind that the nation certainly did not hold clean title to the lands they sought to settle. Americans did care deeply, however, when Tyler and his southern ally John C. Calhoun sought to add the Lone Star Republic to the Union's banner. Northerners feared southern political dominance should Texas become a state, and later divide into numerous other states—all of which would presumably become slave states. Woodworth recounts the contentious negotiations within Congress and throughout the nation over what Texas annexation would mean for the future.

Annexation caused a stir at home—and it meant war with Mexico. Woodworth's considerable skills as a writer—and as a military historian—emerge when he chronicles the Mexican War. In 143 pages of lucid prose, he provides a concise history of the conflict that would make the United States a continental nation. The author skillfully weaves a narrative of the military campaigns with the debates at home between Whigs and Democrats over the righteousness of the war, as well as the necessity of territorial aggrandizement. Whigs opposed the war and the demand for a "territorial indemnity," a phrase coined by Democrats for what would become the Mexican Cession. But the greatest threat to territorial expansion, the extension of slavery, and the Union itself would come via a northern Democratic catalyst—Pennsylvanian David Wilmot and his 1846 proviso. The Wilmot Proviso brought the slavery issue into sharp relief by linking the war with slaveholders' demands for territorial expansion. And as Woodworth shows, it

would serve as one of the chief animating forces in American politics until the Civil War came.

In the final part of *Manifest Destinies*, Woodworth focuses on the two-year period between the presidential election season of 1848 and the successful passage of the Compromise of 1850. The Wilmot Proviso left Democrats and Whigs scrambling for a way to neutralize the debate over slavery's extension to the West. The Democratic nominee of 1848, the phlegmatic Lewis Cass of Michigan, espoused popular sovereignty, a nebulous doctrine that called for the people of the territories themselves to permit or prohibit slavery. The Democrats drew from the states rights, localist heritage of Jacksonian politics in reinventing the popular sovereignty formula, but they imbued the idea with a critical ambiguity: to southern audiences, Democrats insisted that slavery could be prohibited only by a sovereign constitutional convention; in the North, territorial legislatures had sovereignty over slavery.

As Woodworth argues, "The Democrats tried to have it both ways by means of popular sovereignty, while the Whigs preferred to have it no way at all, completely ignoring the issue" and instead running the Mexican War hero Zachary Taylor for the presidency (305). Meanwhile northerners streamed to the cession, lured by the gleam of gold at Sutter's Mill and the continued promise of new beginnings. Southerners cried foul; without some guarantees protecting the sanctity of slave property in the territories, they could not equally enjoy the spoils of war. The crisis over slavery extension would culminate in the contentious congressional session of 1849-1850, where for the last time a great triumvirate of leaders, Henry Clay, Daniel Webster, and John C. Calhoun, would grapple with the issues. A compromise finally came, though it passed only through the skill of a new political leader's parliamentary skills. As Woodworth notes, the compromise became law because Stephen A. Douglas utilized sectional voting blocs to pass its individual pieces. Northerners and southerners voted for the pieces they wanted and voted against the parts they opposed, an arrangement that led historian David M. Potter to call it the "Armistice of 1850."

Woodworth has written a useful introduction to the contentious politics of slavery and westward expansion, though his book does not offer an original interpretation of the period. In Woodworth's narrative, readers will find much historical synthesis but little analysis. And unfortunately, in some places Woodworth relies on outdated sources, omitting mention of recent cutting-edge work that historians of the antebellum era have produced in recent years—a

significant literature that has illustrated how national leaders grappled with the slavery issue throughout the nation's eighty years preceding the Civil War. Readers searching for new answers to how the extension of slavery disrupted the Union will need to consult other works. Nevertheless, in *Manifest Destinies* they will find a clear overview of the pivotal decade of the 1840s, a decade in which sectional tensions over slavery and westward expansion surely flared.

Christopher Childers is a lecturer in the history department at Pittsburg State University. He is currently completing a book on popular sovereignty, the extension of slavery, and southern politics. Childers is a former editor of Civil War Book Review.