

## **SUMMARY...Manifest Destiny: An Empire for Liberty--or Slavery?**

The near doubling of the nation's size in the 1840s gave credence to the concept of Manifest Destiny. Many Americans believed that Providence's grand design was for the United States to occupy all of North America. Intertwined with this was the racist belief that Native Americans, Mexicans, and anyone else who might stand in the way of expansion should be expelled. However, the question of slavery's role in this grand design still remained unanswered.

By the 1840s, the Oregon Country drew expansionists' attention. Oregon's discovery by "mountain men" and missionaries created a land rush known as "Oregon fever." At the same time, the Oregon Country became a source of contention between the United States and Great Britain.

Elsewhere, the westward march brought the Mormons under Brigham Young's leadership to arid lands around the Great Salt Lake. In territory still claimed by Mexico, Mormons sought isolation and self-determination in order to prevent clashes with their non-Mormon neighbors, the problem that had plagued the group in the East.

As the decade continued, traders and would-be settlers moved into New Mexico and California, sparking expansionist interest in those lands. At the same time, Texans, independent since 1836, agitated for annexation to the United States. James Knox Polk and the Democrats' victory in the 1844 election seemed a clear mandate for occupation of all the coveted territories: Oregon, New Mexico, California, and Texas.

In his first two years in office, Polk welcomed Texas into the American fold, split the Oregon Country with Great Britain, and offered to buy California and the rest of the Southwest from Mexico. Failing in the latter effort, Polk found pretexts for war with Mexico to achieve by conquest what negotiations had failed to produce.

The Mexican War deeply divided the nation, in large part because it brought into sharp focus the question of slavery's expansion. Deeply distrustful northerners saw Texas's annexation and the Mexican conflict as a territorial "grab" by the slave-owning southerners. Those same southerners, such as John C. Calhoun, saw the Wilmot Proviso and the Free Soil stance as efforts to contain the South and to destroy its political power. Seeking a middle position, supporters of popular sovereignty, such as Lewis Cass and Stephen A. Douglas, tried to make the issue of slavery's expansion a matter of territorial policy and not one of national debate that threatened to split North from South.

California's acquisition from Mexico and the almost simultaneous discovery of gold there deepened the growing rift between the two sections. By the end of 1849, with Californians clamoring for statehood, with Texas bitterly disputing the boundary with New Mexico, with abolitionists trying to rid the nation's capital of slavery, and with proslavery supporters agitating for a harsher fugitive-slave law, the Union faced its greatest crisis to date. The Compromise of 1850 settled the question of slavery's expansion in California but left the matter undecided in other areas, including possible new territories in the Caribbean and Central America. Meanwhile, the Compromise's Fugitive Slave Act, an ill-disguised proslavery effort to force northerners to show more support for slavery, brought mob action against slave catchers and federal officials trying to enforce the law. The publication of Uncle Tom's Cabin and other regional protests seemed a rallying cry for northern whites who saw the slave trade as a threat to their own civil liberties.