13-1 Texas, California, and Manifest Destiny (1845)

John L. O'Sullivan

John L. O'Sullivan (1813–1895) came from a line of Irish-American adventurers, and he carried his family's love of grand gestures into journalism, politics, and diplomacy. In 1837, at the age of twenty-three, O'Sullivan, a lawyer and Democratic Party activist, founded the *United States Magazine and Democratic Review*, which he made into a mouthpiece for Democratic Party propaganda; a vehicle for his own expansive, romantic views on the future of American democracy; and an outlet for such emerging American writers as Emerson, Hawthorne, Thoreau, and Whitman. O'Sullivan was especially obsessed with the notion that the mission of the United States was to spread the gospel of democracy across the continent; it was he who coined the term *Manifest Destiny* (used for the first time in the following article) to justify American expansion.

O'Sullivan later sought to practice what he preached; he became involved in efforts by private adventurers to seize Cuba and annex it to the United States, a project that ruined him financially and nearly threw him into prison. He later moved back to Europe, where he promoted the Confederate cause during the Civil War. He returned to the United States in the 1870s, broken by years spent promoting grand schemes; but his humptious, continental vision of his country's promise fundamentally shaped the ways in which Americans understood their relationship to their neighbor countries and, later, the world.


Why, were other reasoning wanting, in favor of now elevating this question of the reception of Texas into the Union, out of the lower region of our past party dissensions, up to its proper level of a high and broad nationality, it surely is to be found, found abundantly, in the manner in which other nations have undertaken to intrude themselves into it, between us and the proper parties to the case, in a spirit of hostile interference against us, for the avowed object of thwarting our policy and hampering our power, limiting our greatness and checking the fulfilment of our manifest destiny to overspread the continent allotted by Providence for the free development of our yearly multiplying millions. This we have seen done by England, our old rival and enemy. . . .

It is wholly untrue, and unjust to ourselves, the pretense that the Annexation has been a measure of spoliation, unjust, and unrighteous—of military conquest under forms of peace and law—of territorial aggrandizement at the expense of justice, and justice due by a double sanctity to the weak. . . . If Texas became peopled with an American population, it was by no contrivance of our government, but on the express invitation of that of Mexico herself; accompanied with such guaranties of State independence, and the maintenance of a federal system analogous to our own, as constituted a compact fully justifying the strongest measures of redress on the part of those afterwards deceived in this guaranty, and sought to be enslaved under the yoke imposed by its violation. She was released, rightfully and absolutely released, from all Mexican allegiance, or duty of cohesion to the Mexican political body, by the acts and fault of Mexico herself, and Mexico alone. There never was a clearer case. It was not revolution; it was resistance to revolution; and resistance under such circumstances as left independence the necessary resulting state, caused by the abandonment of those with whom her former federal association had existed. What then can be more preposterous than all this clamor by Mexico and the Mexican interest, against Annexation, as a violation of any rights of hers, any duties of ours? . . .

California will, probably, next fall away from the loose adhesion which, in such a country as Mexico, holds a remote province in a slight equivocal kind of dependence on the metropolis. Imbicile and distracted, Mexico never can exert any real governmental authority over such a country. The impotence of the one and the distance of the other, must make the relation one of virtual independence; unless, by stunting the province of all natural growth, and forbidding that immigration which can alone develop its capabilities and fulfill the purposes of its creation, tyranny may retain a military domination which is no government in the legitimate sense of the term. In the case of California this is now impossible. The Anglo-Saxon foot is already on its borders. Already the advance guard of the irresistible army of Anglo-Saxon emigration has begun to pour down upon it, armed with the plough and the rifle, and marking its trail with schools and colleges, courts and representative halls, mills and meeting-houses. A population will soon be in actual occupation of California, over which it will be idle for Mexico to dream of dominion. They will necessarily become independent. All this without agency of our government, without responsibility of our people—in the natural flow of events, the spontaneous working of principles, and the adaptation of the tendencies and wants of the human race to the elemental circumstances in the midst of which they find themselves placed.
will have a right to independence—to self-government—to the possession of the homes conquered from the wilderness by their own labors and dangers, suffering and sacrifices—a better and a truer right than the artificial title of sovereignty in Mexico a thousand miles distant, inheriting from Spain a title good only against those who have none better. Their right to independence will be the natural right of self-government belonging to any community strong enough to maintain it—distinct in position, origin and character, and free from any mutual obligations of membership of a common political body, binding it to others by the duty of loyalty and compact of public faith. 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... Away, then, with all idle French talk of balances of power on the American Continent. There is no growth in Spanish America! Whatever progress of population there may be in the British Canadas, is only for their own early severance of their present colonial relation to the little island three thousand miles across the Atlantic; soon to be followed by Annexation, and destined to swell the still accumulating momentum of our progress. And whosoever may hold the balance, though they should cast into the opposite scale all the bayonets and cannon, not only of France and England, but of Europe entire, how would it kick the beam against the simple solid weight of the two hundred and fifty, or three hundred millions—and American millions—destined to gather beneath the flutter of the stripes and stars, in the fast hastening year of the Lord 1945!

Questions
1. Explain what John L. O'Sullivan meant by the term Manifest Destiny. By what right did O'Sullivan believe that the United States must annex Texas? Do you agree with his argument?
2. According to O'Sullivan, who was responsible for Texas's declaration of independence?
3. Why did O'Sullivan believe that California would "fall" next? For what reasons did he argue that California would inevitably declare its independence from Mexico? Why did O'Sullivan consider Mexico's title of sovereignty over California to be "artificial"?

13-2 The Great Prize Fight (1844)

In the 1840s, expansionists, emboldened by the idea that American possession of the entire continent had been providentially ordained "our manifest destiny," were determined to add Texas and California to the Union (see Document 13-1). Texas had already declared its independence from Mexico and its desire to be annexed into the United States; however, neither Andrew Jackson nor Martin Van Buren chose to act on the matter for fear of inflaming northern opposition to the enlargement of the slave south. In the meantime, southern suspicions that British antislavery advocates were conspiring to keep Texas independent in order to check the growth of the United States only added to the urgency with which annexationists approached the issue. "The Great Prize Fight" depicted the American eagle defending its "natural" offspring, including unhatched Texas and California, against competing challengers: Spain, represented by Don Quixote battling Cuba, and Britain with John Bull risking Canada. The ghost of George Washington encourages America: "Go it, my Boy, you will beat them all!"


Questions
1. What was the significance of Cuba and Canada to the Americans? Had expansionists expressed any interest in these territories?
2. Why was the slave (in the foreground) depicted as essentially uninterested in the outcome of the "prize fight"?