



The Origin of "Manifest Destiny"

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THE ORIGIN OF "MANIFEST DESTINY"

ONE can hardly read a work on the history of the United States in the two decades before the Civil War without meeting the phrase "manifest destiny", widely used as a convenient statement of the philosophy of territorial expansion in that period. One searches the histories in vain, however, for any statement of when or by whom the phrase was invented.¹ Considerable investigation points to the following hypothesis of its origin.

In a speech in the House of Representatives on January 3, 1846, opposing the resolution for the termination of the joint occupation of Oregon, Representative Robert C. Winthrop of Massachusetts used the following words:

There is one element in our title [to Oregon], however, which I confess that I have not named, and to which I may not have done entire justice. I mean that new revelation of right which has been designated as *the right of our manifest destiny to spread over this whole continent*. It has been openly avowed in a leading Administration journal that this, after all, is our best and strongest title—one so clear, so pre-eminent, and so indisputable, that if Great Britain had all our other titles in addition to her own, they would weigh nothing against it. The right of our manifest destiny! There is a right for a new chapter in the law of nations; or rather, in the special laws of our own country; for I suppose the right of a manifest destiny to spread will not be admitted to exist in any nation except the universal Yankee nation!²

This seems to have been the first occurrence of the phrase in Congress. It was taken up and made much of by both sides in the Oregon debate, openly avowed as an argument by the advocates of an aggressive policy and ridiculed by their opponents.³ Before the Oregon question was settled, the nation was engaged in the war with Mexico, and the enthusiasm for expansion at the expense of our southern neighbor served to popularize and perpetuate the phrase.⁴

Winthrop had ascribed the phrase to "a leading Administration journal". Examination of the columns of many Democratic papers brings to light in the *New York Morning News* for December 27, 1845 (just a week before Winthrop's speech), an editorial under the caption of "The True Title" which precisely fits Winthrop's description. It contains the following passages:

¹ In *A Dictionary of American Politics* by Professor Edward C. Smith (New York, 1924), p. 257, it is stated that this phrase "was derived from Webster's declaration that it was 'the manifest destiny for North America to become the home of a free people' ". I have been unable, even with the courteous assistance of the editor of that publication, to find any substantiation for this statement.

² *Congressional Globe*, 29 Cong., 1 sess., Appendix, p. 99.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 207, and Appendix, pp. 79-80, 92, 96, 99, 104, 110.

⁴ See especially Niles, *The Weekly Register*, LXXIII. 334.

Our legal title to Oregon, so far as law exists for such rights, is perfect. There is no doubt of this. Mr. Calhoun and Mr. Buchanan have settled that question, once and for all. Flaw or break in the triple chain of that title, there is none. Not a foot of ground is left for England to stand upon, in any fair argument to maintain her pretensions. . . .

And yet after all, unanswerable as is the demonstration of our legal title to Oregon—and the whole of Oregon, if a rood!—we have a still better title than any that can ever be constructed out of all these antiquated materials of old black-letter international law. Away, away with all these cobweb tissues of rights of discovery, exploration, settlement, continuity, etc. To state the truth at once in its neglected simplicity, we are free to say that were the respective cases and arguments of the two parties, as to all these points of history and law, reversed—had England all ours, and we nothing but hers—our claim to Oregon would still be best and strongest. And that claim is by *the right of our manifest destiny to overspread and to possess the whole of the continent* [italics mine] which Providence has given us for the development of the great experiment of liberty and federated self-government entrusted to us. . . . The God of nature and of nations has marked it for our own; and with His blessing we will firmly maintain the incontestable rights He has given, and fearlessly perform the high duties He has imposed.⁵

It was, I feel sure, this editorial which set Congressmen to talking about “manifest destiny” and thus insured the lasting hold of the phrase. But this was not the first occasion upon which the editor of the *Morning News* had used it. Mr. John L. O’Sullivan, editor of the *News*, was also at this time editor of a monthly publication, the *Democratic Review*.⁶ The issue of this magazine for

⁵ Files of the *Morning News* are rare. The only one I know of is in the possession of the New York Historical Society and extends from Aug. 21, 1844 (the first issue) to Sept. 7, 1846. The above editorial was also printed in the weekly edition of the paper, the *New York Weekly News*, for Jan. 3, 1846. For the history of the founding of the *Morning News* by Samuel J. Tilden and John L. O’Sullivan see John Bigelow, *Life of Samuel J. Tilden* (New York, 1895), I. 108–110.

⁶ The bound volumes of this magazine bear the title *Democratic Review*. In reality it was published under several varying titles from 1837 to 1859. Its first home was Washington, D. C., and its first issue, that of October, 1837, bore the names of Langtree and O’Sullivan as publishers. From January, 1840, to June, 1841, the name of S. D. Langtree appears as the only publisher. In or prior to July, 1841, the magazine was moved to New York and to the close of 1845 published variously by J. and H. G. Langley, by Henry G. Langley, and by J. L. O’Sullivan and O. C. Gardiner. Throughout this period Mr. O’Sullivan appears to have been continuously the editor-in-chief of the magazine. An article in the *New York Evening Post* of Aug. 6, 1845, speaks of him as “now the exclusive proprietor”. From 1846 on, the name of Thomas Prentice Kettell gradually supplants that of Mr. O’Sullivan until in January, 1849, Mr. Kettell is spoken of as “Sole Editor and Proprietor”, but Mr. O’Sullivan continued to be associated with the magazine until at least as late as 1852. From 1837 through 1851 the title was uniformly *The United States Magazine and Democratic Review*. From 1852 on, the title-page bears the various designations of *The Democratic Review*, *The United States Review*, *The United States Democratic Review*, and

April, 1859, contains the boast that the *Review* has "from its birth until the present moment, advocated the 'manifest destiny' of the American Republic" (XLIII. 2). The claim seems to be in part substantiated by an editorial article in the issue for November, 1839, on "The Great Nation of Futurity". The writer dwells upon the mission of American democracy to "smite unto death the tyranny of kings, hierarchs, and oligarchs, and carry the glad tidings of peace and good will where myriads now endure an existence scarcely more enviable than the beasts of the field", and pictures thus the future of the United States:

The far-reaching, the boundless future will be the era of American greatness. In its magnificent domain of space and time, the nation of many nations is destined to manifest [here is a suggestion of the phrase] to mankind the excellence of divine principles; to establish on earth the noblest temple ever dedicated to the worship of the Most High—the Sacred and the True. Its floor shall be a hemisphere—its roof the firmament of the star-studded heavens, and its congregation an Union of many Republics, comprising hundreds of happy millions, calling, owning no man master, but governed by God's natural and moral law of equality, the law of brotherhood—of "peace and good will amongst men".⁷

Here, in the vision of a great and democratic nation, specially favored by Providence, whose "floor shall be a hemisphere", is the complete idea which was to be so conveniently summed up in the words "manifest destiny". From the style of the article as well as from O'Sullivan's known connection with the *Review* at the time, there can be little doubt that the article is from his pen.

But it was not till more than five years later, if my conclusion is correct, that the phrase "manifest destiny" was first used in this connection. In a combined number for July and August, 1845, the *Democratic Review* carried a leading article on "Annexation", denouncing the still lingering opposition to the last step in the annexation of Texas. All parties should now unite, urged the writer, especially since other nations have tried to intrude themselves "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

United States' Democratic Review. The names of the publishers in these years also underwent numerous changes. Throughout its twenty-two years the magazine was an important organ of expression of the thought of the Democratic party at the North. But its interests were literary as well as political. Among its distinguished contributors were George Bancroft, Lewis Cass, Samuel J. Tilden, William Cullen Bryant, Bryant's son-in-law Parke Godwin, Nathaniel Hawthorne, and Edgar Allan Poe. For glimpses of Poe's relations with the magazine and its editor see G. E. Woodberry, *The Life of Edgar Allan Poe* (Boston and New York, 1909), I. 353, II. 123.

⁷ *United States Magazine and Democratic Review*, VI. 426-430.

and hampering our power, limiting our greatness and checking the fulfilment of our *manifest destiny* [italics mine] to overspread the continent allotted by Providence for the free development of our yearly multiplying millions".⁸

Here, I am inclined to think, is the first appearance of "manifest destiny"—"our manifest destiny to overspread the continent". With the first word omitted, the phraseology appears almost contemporaneously in the *Morning News* of July 9, 1845, where the editor speaks of "our destiny to overspread this entire North America with the almost miraculous progress of our population and power". As already shown, language almost identical appeared in the *Morning News* of December 27, 1845. If further evidence is needed of O'Sullivan's connection with the phrase, we have it in a letter printed over his signature in the *Morning News* of January 5, 1846, where he speaks of "this destiny to overspread the whole North American continent with an immense democratic population". "Manifest" is here omitted, but the remainder of the language bears unmistakable evidence of kinship with the other passages quoted.

If it is asked why the use of the phrase in the *Democratic Review* of July–August, 1845, seems to have escaped notice, whereas almost immediately upon its appearance in December in the *Morning News* it became a catchword with the expansionist group, the answer is that on the first occasion it was used in referring to what was then virtually a closed issue—the annexation of Texas—but that upon its second appearance it was applied directly as an argument for taking possession of Oregon and appeared in the nick of time to be quoted by both sides in the debate on that troublesome and very live question in the House of Representatives in Washington.

To summarize the hypothesis here advanced: The author of the phrase "manifest destiny" was John L. O'Sullivan, editor in 1845–1846 of the monthly *Democratic Review* and of the New York *Morning News*. The phrase first appeared in an editorial article in the *Democratic Review* for July–August, 1845. It was repeated in an editorial in the *Morning News* of December 27, 1845, in reference to the Oregon question. Thence it was carried into the debate on the Oregon question in the House of Representatives and proved to be such a convenient summing up of the self-confident nationalist and expansionist sentiment of the time that it passed into the permanent national vocabulary.

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⁸ *United States Magazine and Democratic Review*, XVII. 5–10.