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# RACE

## AND MANIFEST DESTINY

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The Origins of American  
Racial Anglo-Saxonism

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## Introduction

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By 1850 American expansion was viewed in the United States less as a victory for the principles of free democratic republicanism than as evidence of the innate superiority of the American Anglo-Saxon branch of the Caucasian race. In the middle of the nineteenth century a sense of racial destiny permeated discussions of American progress and of future American world destiny. Many think of rampant doctrines of Caucasian, Aryan, or Anglo-Saxon destiny as typical of the late years of the nineteenth century, but they flourished in the United States in the era of the Mexican War.

The contrast in expansionist rhetoric between 1800 and 1850 is striking. The debates and speeches of the early nineteenth century reveal a pervasive sense of the future destiny of the United States, but they do not have the jarring note of rampant racialism that permeates the debates of mid-century.<sup>1</sup> By 1850 the em-

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phasis was on the American Anglo-Saxons as a separate, innately superior people who were destined to bring good government, commercial prosperity, and Christianity to the American continents and to the world. This was a superior race, and inferior races were doomed to subordinate status or extinction. This new racial arrogance did not pass unnoticed at the time. A minority frequently asked why the American Anglo-Saxons could so easily read God's intentions for mankind, and some, unkindly but accurately, pointed out that there was no "Anglo-Saxon race"; England clearly contained a mixture of peoples, and the white population of the United States was even less homogeneous. The religious orthodox had the additional problem of reconciling the idea of a superior separate race with the biblical notion of one human species descended in just a few thousand years from Adam and Eve through Noah. But the logical inconsistencies and contradictions were ignored. Even the critics of the new assumptions of peculiar racial destiny acknowledged that the idea had caught the political and popular imagination, and even the opponents of a vigorously expansionist foreign policy cast their arguments in racial terms.

The origins of this American rejection of other peoples have to be sought both in Europe and the United States. In one respect the new assumptions stemmed logically from a whole trend toward racialist thinking in Western thought in the first half of the nineteenth century. The ideas of superior and inferior races that permeated American thinking about continental and world mission also often permeated the thinking of the English and of western Europeans in general by the mid-nineteenth century. When Gobineau published his work on the inequality of the human races in 1854, he was summarizing and amplifying more than half a century of ideas on race rather than inaugurating a new era. It is impossible to understand why the United States viewed its international role racially by 1850 without understanding why the European nations had also come to think of themselves in racial as well as political terms.

But the United States had a history that gave a particularly fervent and unique quality to the arguments of special racial destiny and accentuated the rate at which a racial explanation of

world power was accepted. Since the seventeenth century the idea of the Americans as a "chosen people" had permeated first Puritan and then American thought. It is not uncommon for a people to think of themselves as chosen, but it is much rarer for a people to be given apparent abundant empirical proof of God's choice. God's intentions were first revealed in the survival and prosperity of the tiny colonies, elaborated by the miracle of a successful revolution against the might of Great Britain, and confirmed by a growth that amazed the world in the sixty years after that conflict. When religious fervor assumed a less central role in America, it was succeeded by the political fervor of a successful revolution.

If the continent had been empty and colonized only by white Europeans, the remarkable success of the United States would have still made it a rich breeding ground for the new racial thought of the nineteenth century; but it was neither empty nor exclusively white. In the first half of the nineteenth century many in the United States were anxious to justify the enslavement of the blacks and the expulsion and possible extermination of the Indians. The American intellectual community did not merely absorb European ideas, it also fed European racial appetites with scientific theories stemming from the supposed knowledge and observation of blacks and Indians. In this era the popular periodicals, the press, and many American politicians eagerly sought scientific proof for racial distinctions and for the prevailing American and world order; the intellectual community provided the evidence they needed.

The success of the Puritan settlement, the triumph of republicanism in the Revolution, the extensive material prosperity, the rapid territorial growth, and the presence of blacks and Indians all gave a special quality to the manner in which the United States received and developed the racial thought of Western Europe. Yet American racial thought was also peculiarly English. As English colonials, the new Americans fell heir to a long Anglo-Saxon-Teutonic tradition. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, long before a specifically racialist Anglo-Saxon concept emerged, the Americans shared with the English a belief in the political and individual freedoms of the Anglo-Saxon per-

iod. Americans of the Revolutionary generation believed they were helping to recreate freedoms enjoyed in England more than seven hundred years before.

The term "Anglo-Saxon" has had a long history of misuse. In reality there was never a specific Anglo-Saxon people in England. A number of tribes from northern Germany began to settle in England in large numbers in the fifth century; they were not an homogenous group of "Anglo-Saxons," and they did not completely replace the Celtic tribes already living in England. Later the Viking invasions resulted in the settlement of other groups from northern Europe, and the Normans were added to the mix by the Conquest. When in the nineteenth century the English began writing "Anglo-Saxon" in a racial sense, they used it to describe the people living within the bounds of England, but, at times, they also used it to describe a vague brotherhood of English-speaking peoples throughout the British Isles and the world.

In the United States in the nineteenth century the term "Anglo-Saxon" became even less precise. It was often used by the 1840s to describe the white people of the United States in contrast to blacks, Indians, Mexicans, Spaniards, or Asiatics, although it was frequently acknowledged that the United States already contained a variety of European strains. Yet even those who liked to talk of a distinct "American" race, composed of the best Caucasian strains, drew heavily on the arguments developed to elevate the Anglo-Saxons. It was repeatedly emphasized that it was the descendants of Anglo-Saxons who had successfully settled the eastern seaboard and established free government by means of a Revolution. An Irishman might be described as a lazy, ragged, dirty Celt when he landed in New York, but if his children settled in California they might well be praised as part of the vanguard of the energetic Anglo-Saxon people poised for the plunge into Asia.

The process by which the long-held beliefs in the superiority of early Anglo-Saxon political institutions became a belief in the innate superiority of the Anglo-Saxon branch of the Caucasian race was directly linked to the new scientific interest in racial classification. But in a more general sense it involved the whole

surging Romantic interest in uniqueness, in language, and in national and racial origins. Both directly from Germany and by transmission through England, the Americans were inspired to link their Anglo-Saxon past to its more distant Teutonic or Aryan roots. Even in colonial America the ancient idea of the westward movement of civilization had brought dreams of a great new empire on the North American continent, but as German philologists linked language to race and wrote of tribes spreading westward from central Asia following the path of the sun, the Americans were able to see new meaning in their drive to the Pacific and Asia. They could and did conceive of themselves as the most vital and energetic of those Aryan peoples who had spilled westward, "revitalized" the Roman Empire, spread throughout Europe to England, and crossed the Atlantic in their relentless westward drive. Americans had long believed they were a chosen people, but by the mid-nineteenth century they also believed that they were a chosen people with an impeccable ancestry.

By 1850 a clear pattern was emerging. From their own successful past as Puritan colonists, Revolutionary patriots, conquerors of a wilderness, and creators of an immense material prosperity, the Americans had evidence plain before them that they were a chosen people; from the English they had learned that the Anglo-Saxons had always been peculiarly gifted in the arts of government; from the scientists and ethnologists they were learning that they were of a distinct Caucasian race, innately endowed with abilities that placed them above other races; from the philologists, often through literary sources, they were learning that they were the descendants of those Aryans who followed the sun to carry civilization to the whole world.

The new ideas fell on fertile ground in the 1830s and 1840s. In a time of rapid growth and change, with its accompanying insecurities and dislocations, many Americans found comfort in the strength and status of a distinguished racial heritage. The new racial ideology could be used to force new immigrants to conform to the prevailing political, economic, and social system, and it could also be used to justify the sufferings or deaths of blacks, Indians, or Mexicans. Feelings of guilt could be as-

suaged by assumptions of historical and scientific inevitability.

In the 1840s and 1850s there were obviously specific reasons why particular Americans desired Texas, Oregon, California, Cuba, Canada, and large parts of Mexico and central America, and why many urged the commercial penetration of Asia. Agrarian and commercial desires and the search for national and personal wealth and security were at the heart of mid-nineteenth-century expansion, but the racial ideology that accompanied and permeated these drives helped determine the nature of America's specific relationships with other peoples encountered in the surge to world power. By the 1850s it was generally believed in the United States that a superior American race was destined to shape the destiny of much of the world. It was also believed that in their outward thrust Americans were encountering a variety of inferior races incapable of sharing in America's republican system and doomed to permanent subordination or extinction.

My interest in this book is in suggesting how and why by the mid-nineteenth century many Americans were less concerned with the liberation of other peoples by the spreading of republicanism than with the limitless expansion of a superior American Anglo-Saxon race. My concern is not with the history of science, of language, or of ideas in themselves, but in how the ideas of various sections of the intellectual community both reflected and influenced popular and political attitudes. My interest is in the origins of the new racial ideology and in how it affected the course of American expansion rather than in ways in which the ideology was used internally in an attempt to protect the interests of various classes and groups within American society. To me the Americans of 1850, when talking or writing of their world mission, have always made a lot less sense than the Americans of the Revolutionary generation, and I have written this book in an attempt to find out why.

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## EUROPEAN AND COLONIAL ORIGINS

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## Conclusion

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In the three quarters of a century after the American Revolution, Americans rethought their relationships with other peoples of the world. By the 1850s two ideas were firmly engrained in American thinking: that the peoples of large parts of the world were incapable of creating efficient, democratic, and prosperous governments; and that American and world economic growth, the triumph of Western Christian civilization, and a stable world order could be achieved by American commercial penetration of supposedly backward areas.

It is not difficult to find the seeds of this rejection of non-American, non-Anglo-Saxon peoples in the eighteenth century American, non-Anglo-Saxon peoples in the eighteenth century at the time of the greatest optimism concerning the ameliorating effects of American republicanism. The prevailing eighteenth-century intellectual belief in an innate general human capacity for progress had never convinced whites in close proximity to

large numbers of black slaves or frontiersmen clashing with Indians that those they dominated or destroyed were fully their equals. At that time the possibility of the United States inspiring republican progress across Latin America and large areas of the globe undoubtedly seemed more likely because the peoples who were to be involved in this transformation were largely unknown and distant, and because they appeared to have no basic interests which clashed with those of the United States. The peoples of Mexico, Central America, and the Caribbean could still be viewed benignly in the late eighteenth century, for the United States had seemingly limitless horizons of opportunity stretching westward across the Mississippi Valley. The latent racialism which permeated southern plantation society or the western frontiers could be ignored when talking or writing of transformations that were to occur among distant peoples. Even in the 1850s, when the racialism was no longer latent, the peoples of the distant Pacific were often written or talked of in the vague language of regeneration and redemption, because, in the immediate future, it seemed impossible that the United States would have to work out specific relationships with such peoples.

Yet while there were potential problems with eighteenth-century attitudes, the change from the time of the Revolution to the mid-nineteenth century is still striking. At the time of the Revolution America's leaders sincerely believed that they could teach the peoples of the rest of the world to govern themselves in happiness and prosperity; they did not believe that the majority of other peoples were unteachable or expendable. The doubts that already existed about the innate capacity of America's black slaves were not allowed to overshadow the belief that ultimately most of the peoples of the world could be taught to share in the republican system of the new nation. America's leaders were able to envision an expansion across the North American continent that would quickly transform the lives of America's Indians for the better and would, by enhancing the power and prosperity of the United States, demonstrate to the world that the Americans had found in their federal republicanism a way to ensure the happiness as well as the security of their

citizens. The incipient racialism which frequently shaped the acts of southern slaveowners or western frontiersmen had no coherent body of thought to justify and enlarge it. The Americans of the Revolutionary generation were ethnocentric, and in their attitudes to other peoples it is possible to perceive a nascent racialism, but their dominant mood in approaching other peoples of the world was optimistic. They thought of them as fellow human beings, not as members of inferior races. Even in considering black slaves they readily conceded the possibility of some transformation, some solution, that would end the dilemma of slavery. In the dawn of republicanism, when hope was high, everything seemed possible.

The remarkable outward thrust, economic growth, and rise to power of the United States in the seventy-five years after 1783 not only turned optimism into arrogance but also brought obvious conflicts of interest with other peoples. At the heart of the American and western European consignment of other races to an inferior, lesser human status was the need to justify exploitation and destruction. This need was particularly pressing in countries that prided themselves on their democratic ideals. The rhetoric of freedom could not countenance the mistreatment, exploitation, or destruction of equals. It took only a few years for it to become obvious that the creation of a new American republican government would neither make the Indians happy to yield their lands for the benefit of world civilization nor in some magic manner cause slavery and the slaves to disappear. Governmental dreams of an Indian policy based on Enlightenment ideals were in disarray by 1815 and were shattered by 1830. It was easier to blame Indian incapacity for this failure than it was to condemn the American desire for lands and profit. It was similarly convenient for Southerners to deny the innate potential of blacks when they realized fully that continuing slavery suited them much better than abolishing it. By the 1830s pro-Indian and antislavery spokesmen were drawn almost exclusively from areas in which there were few blacks and fewer Indians. It was much easier to take a high moral tone in Boston than in Nashville or Mobile. When basic interests were involved intel-

lectuals thought hard to discover why blacks should be enslaved or Indians dispossessed.

America's racial theorists in these years have to be considered as an integral part of the society in which they lived. They can not simply be discussed as part of an intellectual tradition that stretched from the rethinking of attitudes toward human beings in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries through the Enlightenment and into the nineteenth century. Their prejudices helped shape their research, and their research helped give society the justifications it needed for its actions. They obviously drew heavily on a transatlantic intellectual tradition, but they also drew on American experience with blacks and Indians and European experience with their colonial peoples to explain the apparent wide discrepancies between the achievements of different races. Scientific discussions of race were hopelessly confused in the first half of the nineteenth century. Race, culture, language, nationality were jumbled together in even the most respected works. Physical scientists bolstered their theories of racial differentiation with cultural observations and apparent historical evidence. In effect, by mid-century, America's racial theorists were explaining the enslavement of blacks, the disappearance of Indians, and the defeat of the Mexicans in a manner that reflected no discredit on the people of the United States.

Scientific theories of superior and inferior races were eagerly grasped by an American society undergoing complex changes. As Jacksonian America brought at least a much greater expectation, if not always the reality, of social mobility, and as the old order began to crumble, the elaborate racial hierarchies provided a new certainty and created a new aristocracy, an aristocracy of race. There was no logic in the way this new superior race was defined. By the late 1840s most Americans either thought of themselves as the descendants of English immigrants, speaking English, bound together by a common culture and a talent for government, or they thought of themselves as a superior, distant "American" race, drawn from the very best of the stocks of western and northern Europe. The former argument was clearly in the ascendancy, but there were indications by the

early 1850s that the idea of the Americans as a distinct race might challenge the Anglo-Saxon theorists. This potential challenge never developed, mainly because of the increasing fear of mass immigration by non-Teutonic peoples.

A professed dislike of the English aristocratic government and a commercial rivalry with Great Britain were not enough to drive the American political and cultural establishment into a fervent kinship with the rapidly increasing immigrant masses. Even those who had been attracted by the idea of a superior "American" race balked at the idea of the creation of a "mongrel" America with traits drawn from a mass of new immigrants. The established basis of society might be changing, but it was still possible to cling to the continuity of a special heritage that stretched back across the Atlantic to England and then across the North Sea to Germany. Immigrants could not be made to change their own racial heritage, but they could be forced to conform to prevailing standards in language and culture and could be absorbed as quickly as possible within the main Anglo-Saxon tradition. In the later years of the century, as the new immigration threatened to become overwhelming, many argued that the entrance of the new stocks should be checked before the American Anglo-Saxon race was polluted by the presence of inferior strains.

The acceptance of "Anglo-Saxon" as the prevailing type in America in the latter part of the century was made easier by the continuing confusion over race, language, culture, and nationality. Many who were not of exclusively English origin had already found it easy to slip into the prevailing Anglo-Saxon rhetoric and beliefs, and Theodore Roosevelt was to see his heritage and name as no obstacle in defending a full-scale Anglo-Saxon interpretation of American and world history. The American Anglo-Saxonists reached new heights of confidence in the last years of the nineteenth century.

Many Americans continued to reject a formal imperial system as well as the admission of inferior peoples into the union, but practically all were able to support American world trade and the economic penetration of distant lands. The transformation of other areas by American enterprise was repeatedly defended

as a moral as well as a commercial good; it was the means by which the superior Anglo-Saxon race could bring Christian civilization and progress to the world as well as infinite prosperity to the United States. Without taking on the dangerous burden of a formal empire, the United States could obtain the market and raw materials its ever-expanding economy needed. American and world economic growth, the triumph of Western Christian civilization, and a stable world order could be achieved by the American economic penetration of underdeveloped areas. And as Anglo-Saxons sought out the most distant corners of the globe, they could ultimately replace a variety of inferior races. The Anglo-Saxonism of the last half of the century was no benign expansionism, though it used the rhetoric of redemption, for it assumed that one race was destined to lead, others to serve — one race to flourish, many to die. The world was to be transformed not by the strength of better ideas but by the power of a superior race.