Manifest Destiny

The Evolution of American Expansionism

From Territory to Markets, Technology and Soft Power

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India Policy Foundation

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Introduction

The United States of America, as one of the most resourceful nations in the contemporary global order, is increasingly reshaping the rules of international relations and challenging conventional notions of sovereignty under President Donald Trump. Its most recent actions in Iran have exposed the limits and dangers of a foreign policy where the established international norms are flouted to carry out the self-determined objectives of a nation.

Prior to this, the involvement of the United States in regime change in Venezuela and its strategic interest in Greenland made it evident that the nation has pivoted towards a more assertive and interventionist foreign policy. These developments are changing geopolitical realties and giving rise to a chaotic world order that is predominantly defined by the ambitions of the United States and its strategic interests. Most importantly, it also underlines how the control over resources has become the driving force of its foreign policy decisions.

Prior to the military involvement in Iran, its decisive role in Venezuela's political transition have sharply underlined the shift toward direct influence over strategic regions and resources. Similarly, its growing interest in Greenland where the United States President Donald Trump termed the country "a poorly run piece of ice"[1] has once again highlighted the importance that the United States places on territorial control and resource access in an evolving geopolitical landscape. However, to understand the current geopolitical developments, it is pertinent to examine the historical foundations of United States expansionism and view these events as part of a larger supremacist framework.

The United States began to aggressively expand its territories in the nineteenth century which led to a drastic transformation of the political and geographic landscape of North America. Guiding this ambition was an ideology known as **Manifest Destiny**,[2] a staunch belief that the United States was destined or divinely ordained to expand its territory across the continent and spread its influence.

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[1] Anniek Bao. *'Poorly run, piece of ice': Trump targets Greenland again as Iran war deepens NATO rift*. CNBC. 8 April 2026.
[2] David S. Heidler. *The End of Manifest Destiny*. Brittanica.

Initially, this theory was used to justify the displacement of the Native American communities from their ancestral land. While subjecting the indigenous people to violent suppression, the United States argued that it was a necessary step to bring progress and spread "civilisation."[3] It was portrayed as a natural and beneficial process that would help the indigenous population assimilate into what was termed the "modern society." From a vantage point, it is imperative to view the expansion of the United States through the lens of settler colonialism in order to understand the systematic marginalisation of Indigenous populations. It is also important to juxtapose this with current geopolitical developments to examine how the United States derives legitimacy for its controversial actions.

Manifest Destiny framed the actions of United States as both inevitable and morally justified, rendering legitimacy to American expansionism. When coupled with the elements of divine mission and cultural superiority, it normalised the annexure of indigenous lands. It also aided in the restructuring of entire regions to serve the economic and political interests of the United States. In his seminal work, *The Tragedy of American Diplomacy,* William Appleman Williams argued that Manifest Destiny never "ended" the Pacific, but it simply shifted territorial annexation to "informal empire," where the United States restructured the politics of foreign nations to serve American economic interests.[4] In the later years, this became increasingly evident when the narratives were applied to present the unlawful expansions as a civilising project rather than an act of conquest. The United States continued to justify its expansions and the displacement of native populations as a necessary step toward national progress.

Although the era of westward expansion formally ended by the late nineteenth century, the ideological foundations of Manifest Destiny became strongly embedded in the nation's psyche. As the global influence of United States started growing, the idea of Manifest Destiny took on a different form. It started manifesting through economic pressure, political intervention, and strategic competition in regions of geopolitical importance. The Monroe Doctrine (1823) which warned the European powers to stay out of the Western Hemisphere, and the

[3] Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz. *An Indigenous Peoples' History of the United States*. Beacon Press. 2014

[4] William Appleman Williams. *The Tragedy of American Diplomacy. Cleveland and New York*: World Publishing Co. 1959

Roosevelt Corollary (1904) which asserted the United States' right to intervene militarily in Latin American nations to "stabilise" them and protect American economic interests, were all different forms of Manifest Destiny. The recent geopolitical events in Iran, Venezuela and Greenland have pointed towards the United States once again turning to its theory of Manifest Destiny to justify its actions. Now termed as "*Donroe Doctrine*" (a portmanteau of "Donald" and "Monroe"), it focusses on transactional interventionism. Much like the theory which drew its origin from, the Donroe Doctrine asserts that the United States has a right to intervene in neighbouring countries not just for security, but to secure strategic resources.

This paper seeks to examine the origins of Manifest Destiny and how it was used to legitimise the dispossession of Native Americans and examine a political culture which framed the expansion of American power as morally justified. The paper also throws light on how this ideology continues to shape American foreign policy and assert its influence in the modern world.

Historical Context: Manifest Destiny

The term "Manifest Destiny" first appeared in the context of the United States' annexation of Texas in 1845. There were fears that Great Britian would gain a strategic and economic foothold in North America and it would affect the United Sates' westward expansion. The southern politicians also wanted to increase the number of slave states. Following this, the concept of Manifest Destiny was first propounded by journalist John L. O'Sullivan in an essay titled "Annexation" in the *Democratic Review.*[5] In his article, he urged the United States to annex Texas, encapsulating the belief that the United States was destined, both historically inevitable and divinely sanctioned to expand across the North American continent. He argued that annexation was the fulfilment of "our manifest destiny to overspread the continent allotted by Providence." He also warned that Texas would become a "satellite" of Britain if the United States did not act in time. This resulted in the idea of Manifest Destiny becoming a powerful framework through which Americans understood and justified rapid and violent territorial expansion of their nation. An examination of the broader context of the nineteenth-century American political culture

[5] John L. O'Sullivan. *Annexation.* Democratic Review & United States Magazine. 1845.

will help understand why the idea found acceptance among such a large section of the country's population.

During the 1840s, the United States experienced rapid population growth and economic development which gave way to increased political confidence. The central theme of the "Young America" movement led by O'Sullivan was that American democracy stood in stark contrast to the monarchies and empires of Europe and he argued that the United States has a "God-given mission" to fulfil its democratic example by overspreading the continent.[6] Many Americans started taking pride in the democratic values of their nation. These ideas were further cemented through pamphlets, political debates and heavy newspaper coverage of events that framed expansion as a positive and inevitable necessity for the republic's prosperity. This collective sense of national purpose contributed to the idea that expansion was both natural and necessary.[7]

In essence, the narratives set by the newspapers and political leaders at that time made Americans believe that their nation was not just different but fundamentally superior to other countries. The interrelated beliefs like American exceptionalism, divine mission, and assumptions of racial and cultural superiority became the core of Manifest Destiny. The nineteenth century proponents of this theory like John O'Sullivan portrayed the United States as a "beacon of democracy, liberty, and progress" tasked with a responsibility to spread these values to new territories. They projected any expansionist effort as an act of benevolence to extend the benefits of American institutions to places that were termed as "disadvantaged." This ability to frame expansion not as an imperial conquest but as a moral progress became the most defining feature of Manifest Destiny. The language of "benevolence" and "progress" was used to justify what essentially was a race-based and interest-driven land grab.[8] Such rhetoric helped shape the public perception and became a potent tool to help Americans turn a blind eye to the displacement of Native Americans, the violation of treaties, and

[6] J. Wilsey. *Our Country Is Destined to be the Great Nation of Futurity: John L. O'Sullivan's Manifest Destiny and Christian Nationalism, 1837–1846*. Religions. Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary. 2017

[7] M. Vassallo. *Extending the Area of Freedom: The Influence of American Exceptionalism and Manifest Destiny on the United States' Geographic Expansion*. Arches Institutional Repository. 2009

[8] Thomas R Hietala. *Manifest Design: American Exceptionalism and Empire*. Cornell University Press. 2003

the use of military force.[9] It helped them view expansion as fundamentally different from European imperialism.

Another factor that gave this belief further legitimacy was its close connection to the idea of a divine mission. It was used as a moral shield and made Americans believe that they were fulfilling God's plan. Because of the religious framing, any group opposing their expansionist policies, including the Native Americans, was seen as a political enemy and an obstacle to "providential progress".[10] Political leaders and religious leaders kept invoking divine will and portrayed territorial growth as morally righteous. These ideas were further strengthened through assumptions of racial and cultural hierarchy.

To give further credence to this argument, a narrative was spread that white Anglo-American culture was superior to that of Indigenous peoples and other groups. From the idea that anyone embrace democratic values, a narrative, which emphasised on the idea of "race", was spread that only certain groups are capable of democracy. The Native Americans began to be projected as "uncivilised" or "backward" while the white settlers were placed at the top of a perceived hierarchy.[11] This sentiment was perfectly summed up by Senator Albert J. Beveridge in his *March of the Flag* speech in 1898 where he invoked divine will to show the divide. He said, "God has not been preparing the English-speaking and Teutonic peoples for a thousand years for nothing but vain and idle self-contemplation... He has made us the master organisers of the world to establish system where chaos reigns." A powerful imagery was created which helped Americans reconcile the contradictions between their democratic values and the harsh realities of conquest and displacement.

The concept of Manifest Destiny was also deeply intertwined with practical considerations of power and economic growth. During the nineteenth century, the theory had turned from rhetoric to realpolitik taking the form of a calculated economic strategy. The political leadership saw it as an opportunity to increase the nation's access to resources, markets and strategic position. An argument put forth by

[9]Reginald Horsman. *Race and Manifest Destiny: The Origins of American Racial Anglo-Saxonism*. Harvard University Press. 1981

[10] Anders Stephanson. *Manifest Destiny: American Expansion and the Empire of Right*. Hill and Wang. 1995.

[11] Reginald Horsman. *Race and Manifest Destiny: The Origins of American Racial Anglo-Saxonism*. Harvard University Press. 1981

historian Frederick Jackson Turner in 1893, which is popularly known as the "Frontier Thesis", states that the availability of free land in the West was the primary driver of American economic independence and the development of a unique national character. He argued that the frontier provided a place for the colonisers to escape the crowded, industrialising East. He also stated that contrary to popular belief American democracy, individualism, and national identity were formed by the settlement of the western frontier and not European influence.[12]

Earlier, in the 1840s, the policy of expansion was legitimised through legal means. Presidents James K Polk and John Tyler used it to solve domestic tensions by acquiring lands and ports. The aim was to dominate global markets as argued by historian Charles Sellers. He said, "Beyond the religious rhetoric, Manifest Destiny functioned as a robust economic program designed to secure continental resources and Pacific trade routes, ensuring the United States would emerge as a global commercial power."[13]

Territorial expansion continued to define how Manifest Destiny was viewed and interpreted by the leaders in power. One of its earliest examples was the annexation of Texas in 1845. Originally part of Mexico, Texas declared its independence in 1836 and sought to join the United States. The United States interested in expanding slavery and economic ties portrayed it as a fulfilment of national destiny and proceeded to annex Texas. This resulted in the Mexican–American War (1846–1848) which resulted in the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo. Signed on 2 February 1848, it led to Mexico ceding 55 per cent of its territory including present-day California, Nevada, Utah, and parts of Arizona, New Mexico, Colorado, and Wyoming to the United States in exchange for USD 15 million and the assumption of certain citizen claims.

The administration as well as supporters of this war framed it as a necessary step in fulfilling Manifest Destiny. However, as settlers moved into these newly acquired territories, they left the idea of them being protectors far behind and assumed the role of exploiters. They forcibly removed the Indigenous communities from their ancestral land

[12] Frederick Jackson Turner. *The Significance of the Frontier in American History*. H. Holt and Company. 1893
[13] Charles Sellers. *The Market Revolution: Jacksonian America, 1815-1846*. Oxford University Press. 1991

and established farms, towns and infrastructure. They fully integrated these regions into the American economy, disrespecting the original terms of the agreement they had with the Native Americans.

Further accelerating the westward migration was the discovery of gold in California in 1848. It drew thousands of settlers to the region and this influx intensified competition for land and resources. It further disadvantaged the position of Native American communities. In the end, the government policies and military action forced the transfer of land of the Indigenous population to the American settlers, giving a further impetus to the expansionist project and restructuring the West.[14] From this point onwards, the United States government solidified the gains made through a series of legislative acts like the Homestead Act of 1862 and the Pacific Railway Act, which led to the restructuring of the Western region into a federally managed economic zone. To contain the last leg of Indigenous resistance, the reservation system was established which made the displacement permanent. This event also marked the transition of Manifest Destiny from a political slogan to a state-sponsored economic engine and a sophisticated state bureaucracy.[15]

Impact on Native Americans

A group that had to face the devastating consequences of Manifest Destiny was the Native Americans. Using the language of "economic progress", the United States government turned the forced removal of Indigenous people into a profitable national project. There was systematic dispossession carried out in the garb of national development.[16] The process was carried out in stages beginning with the displacement and then marginalisation and eventually the destruction of Indigenous societies. The repeated violation of treaties and wilful erasure of Indigenous cultures were justified in the name of Manifest Destiny. In the book, *An Indigenous Peoples' History of the United States*, Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz has argued that such narrative of progress was used to normalise what she termed "genocidal policies." She also stated that the United States was founded on a "settler-

[14] Benjamin Madley. *An American Genocide: The United States and the California Indian Catastrophe, 1846-1873*. Yale University Press. 2017
[15] Patricia Nelson Limerick. *The Legacy of Conquest: The Unbroken Past of the American West*. Norton 1988
[16] Claudio Saunt. *Unworthy Republic: The Dispossession of Native Americans and the Road to Indian Territory*. W. W. Norton & Company. 2020

colonial" model where the objective was not just to rule over Indigenous people, but to replace them entirely.[17] Yet the United States was able to reframe the territorial theft and ethnic cleansing as a "natural and benevolent byproduct of civilisation's march."[18]

When viewed from a vantage point, the United States intervention in multiple spheres was a form of civilisational arrogance that refused to recognise non-Western, polytheistic, or indigenous cultural traditions as equals. They forced monoculturalism on the Native Americans greatly undermining their local values and spiritual traditions. It was a direct and ruthless attack on their cultural roots and sacred geography. The Western paradigms alienated native populations from their ancestral lands, traditional knowledge systems and replaced them with rootless consumerism and individualism.

One of the means by which the process of forced removal of Native American tribes from their ancestral lands was formalised was through the Indian Removal Act of 1830. This authorised the federal government to relocate Indigenous populations from the southeastern United States to lands west of the Mississippi River. The primary aim of the westward expansion was to gain access to land for agriculture and economic growth. In the larger scheme, the Indigenous communities came to be seen as obstacles. So, their legitimate claims went unheard and their sovereignty was ignored.

The consequences of such forced removal were catastrophic. Communities that had inhabited the lands for generations were forcibly uprooted. Families were separated and the traditional ways of life were undermined. The relocation process was harsh and inhumane conditions, with inadequate food, shelter, and medical care which led to the perishing of thousands of people. Claudio Saunt (2020) argued that what occurred was not an accidental tragedy but was a calculated state project that prioritised "national growth" and "economic development" (specifically for the cotton industry) over the "legitimate claims" and "sovereignty" of the Five Tribes.[19]

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[17] Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz. *An Indigenous Peoples' History of the United States.* Beacon Press. 2014

[18] Jeffrey Ostler. *Surviving Genocide: Native Nations and the United States from the American Revolution to Bleeding Kansas*. Yale University Press. 2019

[19] Claudio Saunt. *Unworthy Republic: The Dispossession of Native Americans and the Road to Indian Territory*. W. W. Norton & Company. 2020

Among the most well-known examples of the human cost of Manifest Destiny is the Trail of Tears, which refers to the forced migration of the Cherokee and other southeastern tribes during the 1830s. The Cherokee had built a sophisticated identity tied to their land. So, the loss the territory meant a fundamental disruption to their way of life as their legal systems, social hierarchies, and spiritual practices were geographically rooted in the Southeast.[20] They became isolated socially as well as uprooted culturally.

While on one side, the displacement took a mental toll, on the other side, it took a heavy physical toll on the Native Americans. Thousands died during these journeys due to starvation, lack of immunity and diseases. The stress of the journey weakened the immune systems of the Indigenous people making them susceptible to cholera and dysentery outbreaks that decimated the columns.[21] For those who survived the arduous journey, they had to endure the trauma of being moved to a landscape that lacked the sacred sites and ancestral burial grounds that anchored their spiritual life.[22] Duane King (2007) has summarised the situation as follows: "The Trail of Tears was not merely a physical relocation but a 'total war' on the Indigenous psyche, where the severance of the bond between a people and their ancestral geography resulted in a profound state of cultural and spiritual dispossession."[23]

In addition to forced removal, the expansion of the United States was also characterised by a pattern of broken treaties with Native American tribes. Throughout the nineteenth century, treaties were often negotiated under conditions of unequal power. The United States government issued threats of military force and economic coercion and forced Native American leaders to agree to the former's terms. Treaties were often framed as voluntary transaction.[24] Even then, if any of the treaties conflicted with American expansionist interests, they were

[20] Theda Perdue and Michael D. Green. *The Cherokee Nation and the Trail of Tears*. Penguin Books. 2007
[21] Russell Thornton. *The Cherokees: A Population History.* University of Nebraska Press. 1990
[22] Circe Sturm. *Blood Politics: Race, Culture, and Identity in the Cherokee Nation of Oklahoma*. University of California Press. 2002
[23] Duane King. *The Cherokee Trail of Tears: A Documentary History*. Graphic Arts Center Pub Co. 2007
[24] Stuart Banner. *How the Indians Lost Their Land: Law and Power on the Frontier*. Harvard University Press. 2005

repeatedly violated. Every time, new resources were discovered, previously agreed upon boundaries were redrawn in the name of upholding national interests.

The United States shifted from treating tribes as sovereign nations to "domestic dependent nations". For example, the Treaty of Fort Laramie (1851 and 1868) were violated immediately after gold was discovered in the Black Hills.[25] Once the Cluster Expedition confirmed gold in the hills in 1874, the United States government redrew the boundaries and used military force to seize the land, leading to the Great Sioux War. The original agreement granting the Black Hills to the Lakota Sioux "in perpetuity was not honoured.

Over time, this led to the erosion of Indigenous sovereignty and resulted in the consolidation of American control over vast territories. From a broader perspective, the pattern of broken treaties clearly highlights the gap between rhetoric and reality which is a key element in understanding the impact of Manifest Destiny. In a landmark judgement in the United States v. Sioux Nation of Indians (1980), the Supreme Court ruled that the 1877 Act, which officially seized the Black Hills from the Lakota, was a violation of the Fifth Amendment because the land was taken without just compensation. The Court ordered the government to pay over USD 100 million. To this day, the Sioux tribes have refused to accept the money insisting that the land was never for sale and that the treaty remains the only valid legal document. Justice Harry Blackmun famously wrote that "a more ripe and rank case of dishonourable dealings will never be found in our history".

Francis Prucha in his book, *American Indian Treaties* summed up the injustice as follows: "The history of treaty-making in the nineteenth century reveals a strategy of 'legalised dispossession', where the United States utilised the language of international law to maintain an image of democratic morality while systematically violating that law to satisfy the demands of capitalist expansion".[26]

After the physical displacement of the Native Americans, efforts were made to complete the goals of the United States expansionism by

[25] David E Wilkins, and Heidi Kiiwetinepinesiik Stark. *American Indian Politics and the American Political System*. Rowman & Littlefield. 2017
[26] Francis Paul Prucha. *American Indian Treaties: The History of a Political Anomaly*. University of California Press.1994

forcibly assimilating Native Americans into mainstream American society. The first step was to transform and control Indigenous cultures by discrediting their traditions and practices. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, policies were formulated to eliminate Indigenous identities and replace them with American value systems. This is often summarised by Captain Richard Henry Pratt's phrase, "kill the Indian in him, and save the man." Delivering a speech at the National Conference of Charities and Correction in 1892, Pratt who was the founder of the Carlisle Indian Industrial School termed the indigenous identity as a "disease" and stated that the "Indian problem" could only be solved by total cultural immersion through the means of Western education. The cultural assimilation was imposed through Abrahamic/Enlightenment-era morality frameworks and was seen as a direct manifestation of Western moral superiority.

With the specific goal of imparting Western education and severing the ties of Indigenous community to their roots, boarding schools were established. Young Indigenous children were forcibly removed from their families with the stated objective of "civilising" them. There were taught English, Christianity, and Western social practices and prohibited from speaking their native languages or practicing their cultural traditions. In case of any violations, the children were subjected to strict discipline and emotional trauma. Since the children were separated from their families with no support, the impact of these boarding schools resulted in deep psychological scars with lasting social consequences.

Even before the children could gain an understanding of what they were put through, they were made to return to their tribes without a language or a clear identity. Their social position did not allow them to integrate into the American society and the Western education they received alienated them from their own people. They came to be known as the "Lost Generation" and symbolised the erasure of Indigenous culture.[27] In 2022, a report by the United States Department of the Interior, commissioned by Secretary Deb Haaland (the first Native American Cabinet secretary) provided a state-level admission of the "long-term psychological and social consequences" and identified over 400 schools that practiced these policies.

[27] David Wallace Adams. *Education for Extinction: American Indians and the Boarding School Experience, 1875–1928*. University Press of Kansas. 1995

These actions also stood for a shift in how Manifest Destiny was viewed. For a policy of expansion, it turned to a policy of colonisation. Churchill (2004) states: "The boarding school system represented a shift in the Manifest Destiny project from 'continental expansion' to 'internal colonisation', where the objective was to eliminate the Indigenous threat not through physical removal, but through the destruction of the Indigenous child's mind and soul."[28]

Another key aspect through which the United States established control over the Native Americans was through the deliberate suppression of Indigenous languages. For the Native American cultures, language was not just a means of communication but it was deeply rooted to their cultural identity. It was also the fundamental carrier of their history and worldview. So, a concerted effort was made to dismantle Indigenous systems of knowledge and social continuity by enforcing English as the dominant language.

This linguistic suppression disrupted transmission of traditions, oral histories, and community values across generations. In boarding schools, efforts were made to completely erase social identities by spreading an environment of fear and cultural alienation. Native children were punished for speaking their native languages. The calculated strategy led to the erosion of cultural identities and over time, it also weakened the unity among Indigenous communities. This feeling of alienation that was created left them with no choice but to integrate into the mainstream American society. By removing the native languages, the state not only broke the intergenerational transmission of culture, but it also broke the primary tool for maintaining tribal governance and spiritual traditions.[29]

With the colonisation of minds, the United States was able to extend its assimilation policies to land ownership and governance. Western models of property ownership were imposed on Native Americans through programs such as the allotment system which divided communal tribal lands into individual plots. The General Allotment Act of 1887 also known as The Dawes Act authorised the President to break up tribal lands into small parcels for individual

[28] Ward Churchill. Kill the Indian, *Save the Man: The Genocidal Impact of American Indian Residential Schools*. City Lights Publisher. 2004
[29] Jon Reyhner and Jeanne Eder. *American Indian Education: A History*. University of Oklahoma Press. 2017

Native Americans. Those who accepted the allotments and adapted to what was termed the "civilised life" were granted United States citizenship. This resulted in the Native Americans losing approximately 90 million acres of treaty land between 1887 and 1934. Most of the land was deemed surplus and they were pressured to sell it to the colonisers. This transfer of indigenous land to non-Native settlers not only disrupted the traditional land-use practices but it also forced the Native Americans into a capitalist land-ownership framework.[30] In addition to erasing cultural values, a unified national culture was created that aligned with the colonial values.

United States President Theodore Roosevelt acknowledged this in 1901 in his First Annual Message to Congress. He said, "The Dawes Act functioned as a 'mighty pulverizing engine' intended to break up the tribal mass and force Indigenous individuals into a Western social and economic hierarchy, effectively using land ownership as a weapon of cultural assimilation."

When viewed together, forced removal, broken treaties, and cultural assimilation demonstrate that the end goal was to establish civilisational supremacy. Through systematic efforts, colonialism was given legitimacy and the ideology was provided a framework to justify the displacement of Indigenous peoples as a necessary and even a positive step. From vantage point, it is now clear that the expansion of the settler population was dependent on the removal and replacement of Indigenous peoples. Using a mix of power, ideology and economic interests, the social and political fabric of America was altered to serve the needs of the colonisers. A fact that cannot be overlooked is that similar patterns of power and justification continue to influence the United States' political and strategic decisions in the present.

From Continental Expansion to Global Power

Throughout the nineteenth century, the United States forged ahead with the staunch belief that their civilisation was culturally and morally superior to the one they colonised. The concept of frontier remained central to the American identity and it symbolised growth and opportunity as well as the realisation of Manifest Destiny. As argued by Frederick Jackson Turner, the continental expansion had provided a

[30] Stuart Banner. *How the Indians Lost Their Land: Law and Power on the Frontier*. Harvard University Press. 2005

crucial "safety valve" for American energy and capital.[31] However, in 1890, by the end of the century, the U.S. Census Bureau declared the frontier closed as the land available for settlement diminished. But that did not mark an end to the country's expansionist ambitions, it only transformed the way expansion was pursued.

The belief in American exceptionalism remained intact and it became a means to further exert United States' influence over strategic and economic resources. It also led to the country looking for new outlets to expand its reach and extend its influence on a global stage through overseas engagement and also to prevent domestic stagnation. The United States also understood the importance of sea power. It aimed to build a strong navy, establish strategic refuelling bases across the Pacific, and actively look for new outlets to secure international commercial markets.[32]

The most significant reflection of the new thought process was seen in the Spanish–American War of 1898. Initially the American interference was framed as an effort to support Cuban independence from Spanish rule. It was masked as a humanitarian intervention aimed at liberating the oppressed Cuban population. However, it quickly took the form of a broader assertion of American power and represented a form of imperialism that was similar to those practiced by European powers. The war soon resulted in the United States gaining control over territories such as Puerto Rico, Guam, and the Philippines. Instead of incorporating these territories as future states, the United States began to exercise its control over overseas possessions. It chose to operate a hidden global empire.[33]

In this strong assertion of power, the acquisition of Philippines particularly stood out as control was forcibly imposed over a distant land and its population without taking into account their consent. Staying true to the ideology of manifest destiny, this was done in the name of bringing civilisation and economic development to the islands. Further, the annexation of Philippines also signalled a shift towards a more assertive foreign policy. It demonstrated that the United States

[31] Frederick Jackson Turner. The Significance of the Frontier in American History. 1893
[32] Alfred Thayer Mahan. The Influence of Sea Power upon History, 1660–1783. Little, Brown & Co. 1890
[33] Daniel Immerwahr. How to Hide an Empire: A History of the Greater United States. Farrar, Straus and Giroux. 2019

was willing to use military force to achieve its strategic objectives as seen in the Philippine–American War (1899–1902). It shattered the benevolent rhetoric of the intervention and gave birth to an assertive and interventionist foreign policy.

As stated in the book, *Fighting for American Manhood: How Gender Politics Provoked the Spanish-American and Philippine-American Wars* by Kristin L. Hoganson (1998), "The closing of the continental frontier did not extinguish the driving forces of Manifest Destiny; rather, it globalised them. By capturing Spain's colonial fragments, the United States successfully reconciled its anti-imperial identity with actual imperial practices by framing foreign subjugation as a benevolent duty of global tutelage."

Economic Imperialism: From Manifest Destiny to Informal Empire

As mentioned in the earlier section, the closing of the American frontier at the end of the nineteenth century diminished the opportunities for territorial acquisition within North America. This led the policymakers to recognise that economic growth is now dependent upon securing overseas markets, investment opportunities, and strategic commercial routes. From acquisition of territories, manifest destiny evolved as a projection of economic influence beyond its borders. The frontier came to be defined by access to global markets, financial systems, and strategic resources.

Historian William Appleman Williams argued that the United States replaced formal colonial rule with what he termed an "informal empire". In this economic penetration and influence helped achieve many of the objectives that were traditionally associated with imperial conquest. Willimas further argued that the United States did not need formal colonies as its Open Door Policy served the same purpose. It opened global markets to American surplus capital while preserving an anti-colonial rhetoric at home.[34]

Over the years, the United States has increasingly sought to shape the political and economic structures of independent nations in ways that favoured its commercial and strategic interests. Without

[34] William Appleman Williams. *The Tragedy of American Diplomacy.* World Publishing Company. 1959

assuming any administrative burdens that were characteristic of the colonial rule, the United States was able to exert considerable influence over different countries through investment, trade agreements, financial dependence, and diplomatic influence. Economic imperialism helped reduce the political costs associated with territorial conquests.

This transformation became even more visible during the presidency of William Howard Taft, whose administration embraced what became known as Dollar Diplomacy. William H. Taft in his Fourth Annual Message to Congress in 1912 explicitly framed Dollar Diplomacy as "substituting dollars for bullets" and argued that financial investment was a humane, modern tool to achieve national stability and foreign market access. It encouraged the use of American financial capital which eventually became an important instrument of American foreign policy. American banks were asked to invest heavily in politically unstable regions, particularly in Latin America and East Asia. This specific mechanism of control came to be known as Customs Receiverships. In this, the United States took direct control of a foreign nation's import/export tax houses to service debts owed to American banks. The United States' agreement with Dominican Republic is recognised as the formal Customs Receivership where the former collected taxes to pay European creditors.

The underlying assumption was that economic dependence could achieve many of the same strategic objectives as military occupation while safeguarding them from international scrutiny. It made governments depended on American loans and under the pressure to repay, they were forced to adopt policies favourable to the American government. Economic power produced political leverage though financial institutions. Wherever there was a possibility for military intervention, it became a means for protecting financial investments and ensuring energy security.

An example of how economic interests completely integrated with state power can be seen in the experience of Nicaragua. During the early twentieth century, the United States facilitated loans through American banks and started exerting influence over customs revenues and fiscal policy. Through the Knox-Castrillo Treaty, the United States

banking consortiums assumed control of the National Bank and railways with the support of United States Marines.[35]

When the political instability in Nicaragua threatened these financial arrangements, it led to multiple military interventions, signifying how economic interests and strategic objectives were increasingly becoming mutually reinforcing. Soon, similar patterns emerged in Haiti and other Latin American and East Asian countries where American officials exercised substantial control over fiscal administration, public finances, and debt repayment mechanisms. Although the countries retained formal political independence, their economic sovereignty was substantially compromised. The Western hyper-materialism and unbridled consumerism eroded community cohesion, family structures, and ecological balance.

Bretton Woods, the Dollar and Financial Hegemony

The end of the Second World War marked a significant transformation in the evolution of American expansionism. After the war, the United States emerged as the single largest economy with its industrial base largely untouched by the devastation of war. This meant that the United States was uniquely positioned to shape the post-war international economic order. The post-war era witnessed the institutionalisation of American power through international financial governance. In 1944, the Bretton Woods system was established to enable the economic leadership of the United States and exercise its influence over the global economy without direct political annexation. Though the system was publicly presented as a mechanism to promote international stability, reconstruction, and free trade, it essentially paved the way for American economic dominance by placing the United States at the centre of the global financial architecture.

The Bretton Woods Conference was held in New Hampshire in July 1944 and brought together representatives from forty-four Allied nations with the aim of establishing a new framework for international economic cooperation. The conference led to the creation of two important institutions, namely the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development, later incorporated into the World Bank Group. The primary objectives were

[35] Michel Gobat. *Confronting the American Dream: Nicaragua under U.S. Imperial Rule*. 2007

to stabilise exchange rates, facilitate international trade, prevent the competitive currency devaluations and provide financial assistance to countries experiencing balance-of-payments difficulties. Most importantly, the system also established the U.S. dollar as the central currency of the international monetary system by pegging it to gold at a fixed rate of thirty-five dollars per ounce, while other major currencies were pegged to the dollar.

This arrangement led the United States to acquire an unparalleled position within the global economy as most international trade and financial transactions had to increasingly rely upon the dollar. From a national currency, the dollar became the foundation of international finance as governments accumulated dollar reserves, international banks conducted transactions in dollars, and global commodity market adopted the American currency as their principal medium of exchange. This gave the United Stated substantial structural advantage that was not previously enjoyed by any other global power. It also meant that the American fiscal deficits could be financed more easily and United States could maintain levels of expenditure that was difficult for other nations.[36]

The influence created by the Bretton Woods institutions was not limited to monetary arrangements. Through its dominant voting power within both the IMF and the World Bank, the United States had considerable influence over international lending and economic policy. When countries experiencing financial crises approached these institutions for loans, assistance was provided only if the conditions requiring economic restructuring were met. The policies which included fiscal austerity, trade liberalisation, deregulation, privatisation of state-owned enterprises, and reductions in government expenditure came to be collectively called the Washington Consensus. It reflected the prominence of economic ideas developed within institutions headquartered in Washington, D.C. Many governments adopted these measures with the expectation that liberalisation would generate sustained economic growth and improve competitiveness. However, in reality these measures limited the policy autonomy of borrowing states.

The Structural Adjustment Programmes implemented during the 1980s and 1990s came with significant social costs as it required

[36] Barry Eichengreen, Exorbitant Privilege: The Rise and Fall of the Dollar and the Future of the International Monetary System. Oxford University Press. 2011

governments to reduce public spending on healthcare, education, and social welfare while opening domestic markets to foreign competition. This led to rising unemployment, declining public services, and increased economic inequality. Financial dependence became the mechanism through which powerful states exercised influence over weaker economies.[37] Prior to this, in 1971, the dollar was delinked from the gold which forced foreign central banks to hold U.S. Treasury bonds. This in turn funded American military and geopolitical expansion.[38]

Sanctions, Corporations, and Economic Statecraft

Another powerful tool used by the powerful United States to exert its influence is economic sanctions. As access to the American financial system became essential for governments, multinational corporations, and international banks to participate in the international transactions. Therefore, economic sanctions became the most important feature of contemporary American foreign policy. The sanctions succeeded in by restricting access to dollar clearing systems, financial markets, or international payment networks. They controlled access of nations to global markets, technology, finance, and investment. It enabled the United States to impose significant economic costs on targeted states without resorting to direct military intervention.

In effect, the Bretton Woods system represented another stage in the evolution of Manifest Destiny. the justification came to be framed in the language of stability, development, and international cooperation. They were commonly justified as peaceful alternatives to military action and are frequently employed to deter nuclear proliferation, combat terrorism, punish human rights violations, or respond to authoritarian governance. The central position occupied by the United States within the global financial system means that sanctions function as a powerful instrument of geopolitical influence.

The extensive sanctions imposed on Iran serve as an example of how economic coercion became a strategic tool in international relations. After the 1979 Islamic Revolution, successive American

[37] John Williamson. What Washington Means by Policy Reform. Institute for International Economics. 1990
[38] Michael Hudson. Super Imperialism: The Origin and Fundamentals of U.S. World Dominance. Pluto Press. 1972/2003

governments imposed sanctions specifically targeting Iran's banking system, energy exports, shipping networks, and financial institutions. These actions were used to put pressure on Iran to halt its nuclear programme. Further, secondary sanctions were imposed that penalised foreign companies conducting business with Iranian entities. Since access to the American financial system carried significantly greater economic value for the multinational corporations and financial institutions, they often withdrew from the Iranian market. In this way, the United States started controlling the commercial decisions of private actors operating across the global economy.

A similar pattern was also observed in Venezuela where successive rounds of financial and oil-sector sanctions sought to isolate the government economically while forcing political change. The restrictions targeted the elements that were the backbone of the Venezuelan economy like state-owned enterprises, access to international credit markets, and oil exports. The stringent measures were presented as responses to democratic backsliding and human rights concerns. The extraterritorial sanctions imposed by the United States leveraging its central position in global banking networks is an example of how globalisation did not flatten power but it concentrated power in just one nation.[39]

In the United States' quest for greater influence, multinational corporations have remained an important actor furthering the nation's interests. The overseas expansion of American businesses became closely intertwined with the country's strategic interests throughout the twentieth century. American foreign policy was heavily influenced by factors like access to natural resources, energy security, food security and emerging consumer markets. Several governments that threatened the commercial interests of major corporations were diplomatically and politically targeted.

Among the frequently cited examples is Guatemala in 1954, where the democratically elected government of Jacobo Árbenz initiated land reforms affecting the holdings of the United Fruit Company. Following this, a CIA-backed operation was carried to remove Árbenz from power. Though publicly it was portrayed as an ideological competition with the Soviet Union, the protection of

[39] Henry Farrell and Abraham L. Newman. Weaponized Interdependence: How Global Economic Networks Shape State Power. International Security, 44(1), 42–79. 2019

American commercial interests remained at the core of its actions. In the historical text, *Bitter Fruit* which has documented Operation PBSUCCESS, there are details of how top Eisenhower administration officials (including Secretary of State John Foster Dulles and CIA Director Allen Dulles) had direct personal and legal ties to the United Fruit Company. The book brings out the deep links between corporate balance sheets and state intervention which converged with Cold War national security policy in Guatemala.[40]

Beyond agriculture and natural resources, the pharmaceutical industry has emerged as an important player for American economic influence. As is well known, the United States hosts many of the world's largest pharmaceutical companies and has held considerable influence over the global regulation of intellectual property through agreements such as the Agreement on Trade-Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights (TRIPS). On paper, the strong patent protection laws help innovation by allowing companies to recover the substantial costs associated with pharmaceutical research and development which eventually allows the creation of life-saving drugs. However, in reality, extended patent protections delay the production of affordable generic medicines, particularly in developing countries facing major public health challenges.

The debates surrounding access to HIV/AIDS treatments in the early 2000s and, more recently, the distribution of COVID-19 vaccines highlighted the tension between protecting intellectual property rights and ensuring equitable access to essential medicines. The influence of the pharmaceutical industry has demonstrated how leadership in advanced industries can translate into broader geopolitical influence by shaping global health governance, technology transfer, and international trade negotiations. Susan K. Sell in her book[41] has cited how a coalition of twelve United States-led multinationals (including major pharmaceutical and software firms) successfully lobbied the U.S. government to include strict Western patent standards directly into the World Trade Organisation (WTO) framework. This effectively turned global trade law into an enforcement mechanism for proprietary technology.

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[40] Stephen Schlesinger and Stephen Kinzer. *Bitter Fruit: The Story of the American Coup in Guatemala.* Harvard University Press. 1982

[41] Susan K. Sell. *Private Power, Public Law: The Globalization of Intellectual Property Rights.* Cambridge University Press. 2003

Yet another way that the United States has been leveraging its influence is through the use of export controls and technology restrictions. By justifying its actions on grounds of national security and the protection of sensitive technologies from strategic competitors, the United States has been imposing restrictions on the export of advanced semiconductors, artificial intelligence technologies, telecommunications equipment, and critical manufacturing capabilities. The control over supply chains, technological innovation, financial infrastructure, and access to critical resources indicate that the United States is no longer relying solely on military superiority, but has been employing economic instruments to expand its geopolitical position. In a world which is entirely run by technology, the microchip fabrication networks function as the core physical chokepoints of twenty-first century military and economic power. A strong parallel can be drawn between the United States' use of export controls on advanced lithography tools and the traditional naval blockades. Both methods blocked strategic rivals from basic infrastructure.[42]

In summary, economic imperialism is the modern-day evolution of Manifest Destiny. Though the contemporary policies are justified in terms of promoting stability, economic development, free markets and democracy, they continue to reflect a broader belief that American leadership is both necessary and legitimate. The continuity lies in the persistence of an expansionist culture that seeks to preserve American hegemony by adapting its instruments of power to changing international realities.

Cultural Hegemony: American Influence through Media and Popular Culture

The influence of United States extends far beyond the military alliances and economic institutions. During the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, America began exercising its power through culture, media, and technology. Cultural influence is considered a more powerful tool as it operates through shaping preferences, aspirations, identities, and patterns of consumption. It involves colonisation of minds and imposition of unilateral thinking across the globe.

[42] Chris Miller. *Chip War: The Fight for the World's Most Critical Technology.* Scribner. 2022

This form of influence is described by scholars as cultural hegemony. It is a concept developed by Antonio Gramsci to explain how dominant powers secure consent by normalising their values and worldviews rather than relying solely on coercion. Robert Cox has applied Gramsci's concept of cultural hegemony to global politics and argued that a dominant state establishes world order not merely through military force (coercion), but by embedding its values and social structures into international institutions and norms (consent).[43]

The United States has facilitated cultural hegemony through literature, cinema, television, music, food, digital platforms, and, more recently, artificial intelligence. Collectively, these have encouraged the adoption of American values, lifestyles, and political narratives globally, making culture an important instrument of geopolitical influence.

Among the earliest vehicles that spread American cultural influence was literature. Throughout the twentieth century, there was intellectual dominance of American authors, publishing houses and universities as they became central to the production and dissemination of knowledge across the world. The dominant themes during that time were individual liberty, capitalism, democracy, and most importantly, the "American Dream" which came to symbolise modernity and progress. Concurrently, the United States focussed on rapidly expanding English-language publishing, making American scholarship, political thought, and popular fiction more accessible than literature produced in many other languages. This created a deliberate imbalance in global knowledge production as American perspectives began shaping international academic discourse. The lack of resources and the inability to compete with American influence meant that the voices from the Global South remained underrepresented.

Beyond literature, what truly gave impetus to the rise of American cultural influence was the emergence of American entertainment industry, termed as Hollywood. It not just transformed cinema, it changed the way the world looked at the United States. Throughout the twentieth century, Hollywood became the world's largest film industry, having a presence across almost every continent. More than entertainment, what these films projected and marketed were ideals associated with American society including individualism,

[43] Robert W. Cox Gramsci, *Hegemony and International Relations: An Essay in Method.* Millennium: Journal of International Studies, 12(2), 162–175. 1983

consumerism, technological progress, military strength, and liberal democracy. During the Cold War, an ideological framework was portraying the United States as the defender of freedom against authoritarianism. When films were not political, there were repeated depictions of American lifestyles, urban spaces, consumer culture and brands which contributed to the normalisation of American social values. American experiences became the primary cultural reference point for millions of viewers worldwide.

The dawn of the television era further expanded the American influence as it brought entertainment directly into households across the globe. Popular sitcoms, dramas, reality shows, and news networks altered the perceptions of family life, politics, education, and social mobility in many nations. Satellite television and cable broadcasting further increased the accessibility and viewership of American programmes during the late twentieth century. Most of these programmes often presented America as the saviour of the world or made the lifestyle so aspirational that people across the globe started shunning their own traditions and practices. The widespread consumption of American television contributed to the marginalisation of local cultural industries in many developing countries as they did not have the resources to compete with the cable networks.

Another important factor that played a central role in the projection of American soft power is music. Joseph Nye has defined soft power as the ability to affect others to obtain the outcomes one wants through attraction rather than coercion or payment, citing American popular culture, higher education, and political values as core assets. [44] Jazz, blues, rock and roll, hip-hop, country music, and contemporary pop in addition to achieving global popularity influenced local music industries across Asia, Africa, Europe, and Latin America. The United States has particularly promoted music as a symbol of artistic freedom and cultural openness. Here, the dominance of the English language popular music has also contributed to the global diffusion of American slang, fashion, and youth culture. The commercial distribution strengthened the international reach of American cultural industries.

[44] Joseph S. Nye Jr. *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics.* PublicAffairs. 2004

The digital revolution further expanded the scope of American cultural influence through streaming platforms and over-the-top (OTT) services. United States-headquartered companies like Netflix, Disney+, Amazon Prime Video, YouTube, and Spotify are the dominant distributors of entertainment worldwide. The type of content millions of people consume daily is essentially determined by the algorithms decided by these companies. These firms have access to data from all over the world and have become a potent tool in narrative building. They recommend what millions of people should watch, listen to, and discuss on a daily basis. In addition to this, these streaming platforms are also increasingly investing in regional content which allows them to push their narratives to a section of audience who would have otherwise remained outside its influence.

The rise of social media has further accelerated this transformation. Most of the popular social media platforms are developed by American technology companies—including Facebook, Instagram, X, and YouTube. Over the years, they have become central spaces for political debate, cultural exchange, and information dissemination. These companies through their powerful algorithms interfere in the internal politics of nations by determining the importance and visibility of news. These private players have played an important role in pushing American narratives and shaping public opinion across the world, raising serious concerns about digital sovereignty and information asymmetry. Algorithmic architectures often encode societal biases and Western-centric assumptions.[45]

Yet another factor spreading American influence is the rise of consumer culture. The global expansion of fast-food chains such as McDonald's, KFC, Domino’s, Burger King, Baskin-Robbins, Starbucks, Subway, Taco Bell, Pepsi and Coca-Cola has made American brands familiar across diverse societies. These corporations did not sell food and over the years, they have erased local cuisines which have deep links with a region’s culture. They have exported standardised models of consumption and lifestyle which has led to cultural homogenisation. This has a powerful psychological impact as the constant visibility of these brands also sends out a message that American culture is aspirational and superior.

[45] Safiya Umoja Noble. *Algorithms of Oppression: How Search Engines Reinforce Racism.* NYU Press. 2018

The Artificial intelligence era has become the new frontier of American cultural and technological influence. The country has the first mover advantage in the development of large language models, generative AI systems, and advanced machine learning technologies. American companies are at the forefront of research and development and has unparallel control over a technology that has revolutionised how the world functions. These systems influence how individuals access information, create content and conduct research. Since AI models are trained on vast datasets reflecting existing linguistic and cultural patterns, it often reflects the perspectives, languages, and cultural assumptions of the West, dominated by the United States. Further reinforcing the existing imbalances in global knowledge production is that AI development is concentrated within a small number of technologically advanced firms which means that developing countries have no control over the information it disseminates. Slow and constant exposure to a single perspective can fundamentally change the thought process of those who consume AI-generated content.

Taken together, literature, cinema, television, music, consumer brands, streaming platforms, and artificial intelligence have shaped preferences globally which is much more effective than direct military force or economic pressure. In the current times, the frontier is defined by narratives, algorithms, digital platforms, and the global circulation of ideas.

Geopolitical Parallel

The pivot from local territorial acquisition to securing global trade networks and strategic zones under the guise of “benevolent actions” came to redefine international power struggles. Even in the twenty-first century, the United States has been using this exact paradigm to justify its interventions.

The United States began to adapt its doctrine to the changing times in the early twentieth century when it began to assert its influence in Latin America. This period was characterised by a series of political and military interventions aimed at securing American interests in the

region. Latin America served as the primary proving ground where the United States mastered how to run informal empires.[46]

The doctrine of Manifest Destiny which took the form of Monroe Doctrine in 1823 was further expanded through policies such as the Roosevelt Corollary to justify the United States intervention in Latin America for supposedly "maintaining stability and protecting economic interests." The major area where it differed was that Manifest Destiny framed the westward expansion as a moral and civilising mission. In stark contrast to this, the early twentieth-century interventions were justified in terms of stability, progress, and the spread of democratic values. However, the end goal remained the same which was to reinforce American dominance and limit the sovereignty of affected nations.

The United States kept justifying these interventions as necessary to promote order, support democratic governance and prevent European interference. But in effect, the actions supported American business interests and maintained political and cultural hegemony over other nations. Though military occupation, debt management, economic leverage or by supporting specific political factions, the United States shaped outcome through strategic control. This was witnessed in the 1953 coup in Iran, 1954 in Guatemala, and 1973 in Chile. It replaced traditional colonial conquest with covert operations and military aid to ensure governments aligned with American interests.[47]

The Cold War added further impetus to the evolution of American expansionism. It strengthened American influence through military alliances, economic aid, and political intervention. The United States believed that Communism can only be countered and contained by shaping the political orientation of countries across the world. To achieve this objective, they supported anti-communist governments, orchestrated coups and participated in proxy wars. The United States exerted its influence in regions as far as Latin America, West Asia and Southeast Asia, gaining strategic advantage. It also arrested the growth of its rival powers to advance its own geopolitical interests. The Cold

[46] Greg Grandin. *Empire's Workshop: Latin America, the United States, and the Rise of the New Imperialism.* Metropolitan Books. 2006
[47] Stephen Kinzer. *Overthrow: America's Century of Regime Change from Hawaii to Iraq.* Times Books. 2006

War showed the adaptability of expansionist logic and how it could continue evolving to change the dynamic nature of international politics. It reinforced a belief in the legitimacy of American power and its alleged importance in shaping the broader world. This has remained the central thread of American statecraft and has been seamlessly woven into the rules of international order.

The American Influence in South Asia

The United States engagement in South Asia must be viewed through the lens of national interest and increasing its global influence. During the Cold War, attempts were made to forge relations with the South Asian nations with the goal of containing communism and preventing the expansion of Soviet influence. Across South Asia, American foreign policy has leveraged military alliances, covert interventions, conditional development aid, and diplomatic coercion to project its power and undermine local sovereignty in the process. The United States made continuous attempts to curb the natural resurgence of a civilisational power.

During the Cold War, Washington used Pakistan as its primary regional security proxy through military pacts while it actively sought to limit non-aligned India through economic tools. President Lyndon B. Johnson exploited India's severe drought by withholding Public Law 480 food aid through a “ship-to-mouth” policy to force domestic agricultural reforms and silence Indian criticism of the Vietnam War. American pressure reached its zenith during the 1971 Bangladesh Liberation War, when the Nixon administration deployed the nuclear-capable USS *Enterprise* task force to the Bay of Bengal to intimidate India and support Pakistan’s military regime.

In a post-war Bangladesh, the United States weaponised aid dependencies. It withheld food assistance during the devastating 1974 famine due to Dhaka’s trade with Cuba. Following the 1998 nuclear tests in Pokhran and Chagai, both India and Pakistan were subjected to severe U.S. sanctions under the Glenn Amendment. Meanwhile, smaller nations like Sri Lanka faced political and economic pressure tied to IMF bailouts, maritime access, and human rights resolutions and Nepal experienced heightened diplomatic manoeuvring over the Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC) infrastructure grant amid fears of military alignment. Afghanistan had to endure two decades of

direct military occupation, regime-building, and sudden withdrawal. In the current times, the United States continue to leverage its power through “democracy promotion” initiatives and trade tariffs. It has on multiple occasions subordinated the autonomy of South Asian nations to achieve its broader strategic influence and extend its influence in the region.

Current Trends

In the present times, the interventions of the United States in Iran, Venezuela and Greenland have highlighted how the expansionist policies have evolved to adapt to the changing global order. Though control of resources and territory remain the major drivers of America’s foreign policy, it is now presented as an act to save and uphold democratic values.

Prior to the war with Iran which is challenging the global order, the United States effected a regime change in Venezuela in an overnight operation in which the Venezuelan president Nicolás Maduro was arrested with his wife and brought to the United States. When the fact that Venezuela has the largest proven oil reserves in the world, making it a key player in the global energy markets, is taken into consideration, it becomes evident that the intervention is part of a larger power game. Staying true to its playbook from the nineteenth century, the United States claimed that it wanted to free the people of Venezuela who were oppressed under a dictatorship. Before the direct intervention, the United States had imposed extensive economic sanctions on Venezuela and had taken steps to support opposition leadership, including the recognition of Juan Guaidó as interim president in 2019. These actions were justified as steps necessary to promote democracy and to respond to authoritarian governance.

From the nineteenth century, the United States well established that its foreign policy is dictated by national interests and it came above everything. Iran has always been a focal point of the United States foreign policy due to its vast oil and gas reserves and its geographic location near the Strait of Hormuz, a crucial chokepoint for global oil transportation.

Historically, the United States has always used the concept of Manifest Destiny without explicitly mentioning it to define its relations with Iran. The roots of the contemporary tensions can be traced back to

the 1953 Iranian coup d'état, an important event in the nation's history. It saw the convergence of economic interests, geopolitical strategy, and foreign intervention.

In 1951, the imperial control over the nation was challenged when Iranian Prime Minister Mohammad Mossadegh nationalised the country's oil industry taking the rights away from the British-owned Anglo-Iranian Oil Company. This move threatened Western economic interests and made the United States and the United Kingdom to launch Operation Ajax which triggered a political crisis. It overthrew the elected Mossadegh-led government from power and restored the Shah, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, reestablishing a pro-Western regime. The coup involved covert actions like propaganda campaigns, political manipulation, and support for pro-monarchy forces. Following this, American firms acquired significant control over Iran's oil industry and also succeeded in preventing the expansion of Soviet influence during the Cold War. It is worth noting that Operation Ajax established the precedent of using covert action and regime change to protect Western resource control. This template directly establishes a link between the Cold War strategy to modern operations.[48]

Over time, the regime heavily relied on Western support and became increasingly repressive which resulted in fostering distrust of the United States among Iran's public. The public dissatisfaction kept growing which culminated in the 1979 Iranian Revolution, which overthrew the Shah and established the Islamic Republic. Ever since then, tensions between the two countries have persisted, encompassing issues like nuclear development, regional influence, and economic sanctions.

On 28 February 2026, the conflict reached its zenith with a series of coordinated strikes by the U.S. and Israel named Operation Epic Fury, targeting Iranian military leadership, air defences, and nuclear infrastructure. The stated reason was to prevent nuclear weapons development and ensure the safety and security of the region. However, the actions that followed brought out the sharp rhetoric regarding the promotion of democracy, stability, and non-proliferation, values that were often publicly emphasised by the United States.

[48] Stephen Kinzer. *All the Shah's Men: An American Coup and the Roots of Middle East Terror*. John Wiley & Sons. 2003

From an analytical perspective, the parallels between Manifest Destiny and the current saviour complex exhibited by the United States cannot be easily overlooked. The change is visible only in the language used where the spread of civilisation has been replaced by regime change and upholding of democratic values. In effect, both frameworks have legitimised the exercise of power in ways that gives precedence to national interests. The recent airstrikes carried out by the United States on Iran symbolise a transformation in method than a change of principle.

In the twenty-first century, the focus of the United States has been in establishing geo-economic hegemony in which energy security, critical minerals and maritime chokepoints have replaced continental farmland as the primary objects of statecraft. The American military deployment and foreign policy interventions though framed as anti-authoritarianism or democracy promotion and in effect aimed at securing energy supply and critical resources.[49]

Yet another extension of Manifest Destiny is the United States' renewed interest in Greenland. Located in the Arctic, Greenland is seen as an important strategic asset to the United States due to its geographic location for military and surveillance operations and its potential natural resources, including rare earth minerals. The melting ice caps and resource scarcity have turned the Arctic into a primary zone of strategic rivalry. Countries like the United States have been framing territorial ambitions in the Arctic around "national and world security" to legitimise access to emerging shipping routes and rare earth deposits.[50]

In 2019, the United States expressed interest in purchasing Greenland from Denmark, an idea that was rejected. Since 2025, the language has shifted to annexation and invasion with the United States claiming that "Greenland is imperative for national security and world security."[51] In its long-term vision, the United States sees Greenland as an important asset for monitoring Arctic activity and securing access to emerging shipping routes as ice levels decline. It sees Greenland both

[49] Michael T Klare. Resource Wars: *The New Landscape of Global Conflict.* Metropolitan Books. 2001

[50] Klaus Dodds. *Scramble for the Poles: The Geopolitics of the Antarctic and the Arctic.* Polity Press. 2018

[51] *Trump Warns There's 'No Going Back' on Greenland and Lambasts U.K. Over Other Geopolitical Move: 'An Act of Great Stupidity'*. Time. 20 January 2026.

as an economic opportunity and military strategy. In this case too, the United States derives its legitimacy from Manifest Destiny which looks to displace the native population and the acquisition of land.

As argued by John Agnew in Geopolitics: Re-visioning World Politics (2003): “The functional continuity between 19th-century Manifest Destiny and contemporary strategic intervention lies in the moralisation of state necessity. Whether asserting a duty to ‘civilise’ the frontier or a mandate to secure ‘world security’ in the Arctic and Middle East, American grand strategy consistently relies on an exceptionalist framework to reconcile resource extraction and sovereignty infringement with democratic values.”

Comparative Analysis

A comparative analysis of the conditions in which the Native Americans were displaced in the nineteenth century and the current military interventions of the United States prove that the underlying ideology has remained the same despite seeming differences.

Among the most important points of comparison is the shift in methods. During the era of Manifest Destiny, expansion was primarily territorial and led to direct annexation of land. The occupation displaced native populations and brought vast regions under the rule of the United States. The process was direct, visible and in many cases violent. However, as modern geopolitics operate differently, the focus went from direct annexation to indirect control through economic sanctions, diplomatic pressure, military alliances, and political intervention. The United States is now focussed on influencing the internal dynamics of sovereign states which firmly places the control in the hands of the former.

A second key factor that shows that Manifest Destiny remains key part of the United States policy is the central role of resources and strategic interests. In the nineteenth century, the lands of the Native Americans were appropriated because they were valuable for agriculture, had mineral wealth and gave access to trade routes. In the modern era, similar priorities remain a fundamental driver of expansionist mind-set. While the miliary interventions in Iran and Venezuela point towards energy security in a world where access to resources is diminishing, the interest in Greenland reflects the importance of strategic positioning.

Another important factor that has remained similar in all the conquests and action of the United States is the use of ideological justification. While earlier, the country heavily relied on religion and its teachings, in the current times, it draws legitimacy from its democratic traditions. Manifest Destiny had its beliefs rooted in American exceptionalism and divine purpose. It presented the narrative that the actions were not exploitative but beneficial and were carried out with the purpose of bringing civilisation to the Native Americans. In modern geopolitics, though similar forms of justifications persist, they are expressed in different terms. They are framed as promoting democracy, protecting human rights, and maintaining global stability. Here, the language of moral responsibility has continued to play a key role in shaping public perception and policy.

Yet another factor that has remained constant is the blatant disregard for internationally established norms of sovereignty and international law. In a multipolar world that has several multilateral institutions to keep a check on unbridled power, the United States continues to play by its own rules and interests. Instead of recognising the sovereignty of other nations, the United States believes that it has a moral right to intervene in the internal affairs of nations that act against the long-term interests of the United States. It relies on regime change to secure its strategic and economic interests.

From the above, it is evident that modern geopolitics cannot be meaningfully comprehended without analysing the historical experience of Native American displacement through critical lens. Since the nineteenth century, the United States has used narratives of progress and national interest to obscure power imbalances and justify actions that disproportionately affect vulnerable groups or nations. The legacy of Manifest Destiny continues to inform the ways in which expansion and influence are understood and enacted. The recurring patterns need to be acknowledged to understand the United States engagement with the world.

Conclusion

The history of the United States is, in numerous ways, a history of expansion. From the westward movement of colonisers across the North American continent to the emergence of the United States as a global super power, the expansion has remained deeply embedded in

the country's political imagination. Manifest Destiny provided the ideological foundation for nineteenth-century territorial expansion by presenting the growth of the United States as inevitable, divinely sanctioned, and morally justified. It transformed the acquisition of territory into a project of civilisation and national progress, allowing expansion to be understood not as imperial conquest but as the fulfilment of a historical mission. Yet the experience of Native Americans reveals the profound contradiction at the heart of this narrative. The displacement of Indigenous communities, violation of treaties, destruction of traditional societies, and suppression of Indigenous cultures were not unfortunate consequences external to American expansion; they were deeply connected to the process through which the American nation expanded and consolidated its power.

The significance of Manifest Destiny therefore extends beyond the territorial gains of the nineteenth century. More important was the political culture it helped establish. American exceptionalism created a powerful framework through which the expansion of American power could be interpreted as beneficial not only to the United States but, ultimately, to those subjected to it. Expansion could be described as civilisation when colonisers moved westward, liberation when the United States intervened overseas, stability when it became involved in regional politics, development when it promoted economic integration, and security or democracy promotion when it exercised influence in the contemporary international system. The vocabulary changed with the circumstances, but the ability to present American interests as having a wider moral or universal significance remained remarkably persistent.

The closing of the continental frontier consequently did not bring American expansionism to an end. It transformed its methods. The Spanish-American War demonstrated the willingness of the United States to project power beyond the North American continent, while interventions in Latin America and Asia created new mechanisms through which Washington could shape the political affairs of other regions. During the twentieth century, the United States increasingly discovered that territorial possession was not always necessary for the exercise of power. Financial influence, trade, investment, international institutions, military alliances, and political intervention could produce strategic outcomes without formal annexation. The frontier therefore

began to move from physical territory toward markets, capital, resources, and financial systems.

Economic imperialism represents an important stage in this transformation. The growing importance of American capital, the dollar, multinational corporations, international financial institutions, and global trade networks enabled the United States to exercise influence far beyond its territorial boundaries. Sanctions demonstrated how financial interdependence could be converted into an instrument of foreign policy, while American corporations became important actors in the international projection of economic power. Technology has further expanded this frontier through control over intellectual property, critical minerals, semiconductor supply chains, and other strategically important sectors. Economic power can now translate directly into geopolitical power, allowing states to influence the choices of other countries without physically occupying them.

Yet American influence has never been confined to material power. It has also operated through culture. American literature, cinema, television, music, food, consumer brands, OTT platforms, social media, and digital technologies have become deeply embedded in societies across the world. Hollywood and American popular culture have helped make particular ideas of individualism, consumerism, modernity, and social aspiration globally recognisable. Streaming platforms have extended the reach of American cultural industries, while digital platforms have increasingly shaped the circulation of information and political narratives. Artificial intelligence represents an even newer frontier, as American companies occupy a leading position in the development of technologies that increasingly mediate how people obtain information, communicate, create content, and understand the world. The frontier has therefore moved beyond land and markets into culture, information, and technology.

This transformation provides an important framework for understanding contemporary geopolitics. Iran, Venezuela, Greenland, and South Asia are not exact repetitions of nineteenth-century territorial expansion, nor should they be treated as though the international system has remained unchanged. Modern international relations operate within a system of sovereign states, international law, multilateral institutions, and competing centres of power. Nevertheless, these cases demonstrate that strategic resources, geopolitical positioning, economic interests, technology, and national security continue to influence

American foreign policy. Iran's energy resources and position near the Strait of Hormuz make it strategically significant; Venezuela's enormous oil reserves give its political trajectory international importance; Greenland's Arctic location and potential mineral resources have increased its strategic value; and South Asia has become increasingly important because of China's rise, defence partnerships, trade, technology, and the struggle to shape the Indo-Pacific balance of power.

The contemporary world is therefore not witnessing a simple return of nineteenth-century Manifest Destiny. What has emerged is an adaptation of the expansionist impulse to an international system in which direct territorial conquest has become considerably more difficult to justify and sustain. Influence can be exercised without annexation, and control can operate without formal sovereignty. Financial restrictions can pressure governments; sanctions can isolate economies; trade arrangements can influence domestic economic choices; technology controls can constrain the strategic capabilities of rivals; and cultural and digital platforms can shape preferences and narratives. The instruments have become more sophisticated, but the pursuit of strategic advantage remains central to the behaviour of great powers.

At the same time, it would be simplistic to conclude that every exercise of American influence is inherently imperialistic. The United States, like other major powers, acts according to perceptions of national interest. It seeks to protect its security, defend allies, secure access to resources, preserve economic advantages, respond to strategic competitors, and maintain its position within the international system. American institutions and alliances have also contributed to international economic integration, technological development, and security. Likewise, American cultural influence has frequently been embraced voluntarily by audiences around the world rather than imposed through direct coercion. The more important question is therefore not whether the United States has legitimate interests abroad, but where the pursuit of those interests becomes an attempt to shape the political, economic, or cultural choices available to other sovereign societies.

This distinction is particularly important because power rarely presents itself simply as power. Nineteenth-century expansion was rarely described by its supporters as the dispossession of Indigenous

peoples; it was presented as destiny, civilisation, progress, and national development. Similarly, contemporary American influence is frequently articulated through the language of democracy, human rights, free markets, stability, security, and a rules-based international order. These principles may possess genuine value, but they can coexist with material interests involving resources, markets, strategic territory, technological advantage, and geopolitical competition. The tension between universal ideals and national interests is therefore not a new feature of American foreign policy. It is one of the central themes running through its history.

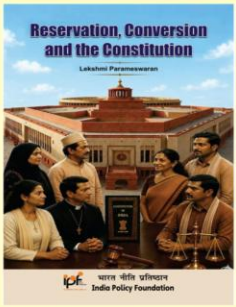
The argument of this paper is consequently not that the United States has remained unchanged since the nineteenth century. Rather, it is that American expansionism has repeatedly adapted its instruments to changing historical circumstances. When land was the principal frontier, expansion took the form of settlement, military conquest, and territorial acquisition. When overseas markets and strategic possessions became important, expansion moved beyond the continent. When formal colonialism became increasingly difficult to sustain, economic and financial influence provided alternative mechanisms of power. As globalisation deepened, American influence became embedded in international institutions, corporations, financial networks, technology, and supply chains. As culture and information became increasingly important sources of power, the frontier moved again into media, entertainment, digital platforms, and artificial intelligence.

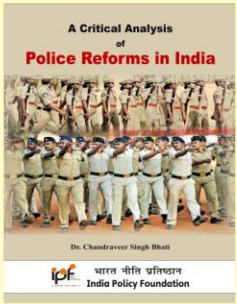
The experience of Native Americans provides the historical starting point from which this transformation can be understood. Their dispossession demonstrates what can occur when a powerful society defines its own expansion as progress while treating another society's sovereignty, culture, and territorial claims as obstacles to that progress. The contemporary international system is fundamentally different, but the underlying question remains relevant: who has the power to define the rules, whose interests are protected by those rules, and whose sovereignty becomes negotiable when it conflicts with the interests of a more powerful state?

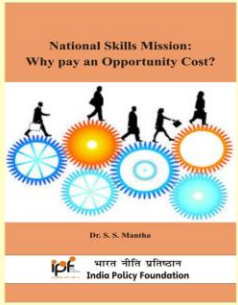
Ultimately, the frontier has never truly disappeared. It has moved. It moved from Indigenous lands to the territories beyond the American continent; from territory to markets; from markets to financial systems; and from financial systems to culture, technology, information, and artificial intelligence. The instruments of American

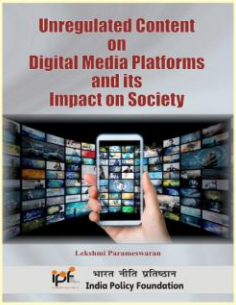
power have changed because the international environment has changed. Yet the capacity to identify new frontiers of influence and develop new mechanisms for exercising power has remained one of the defining characteristics of the American state.

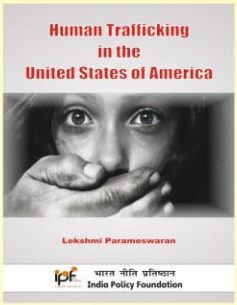
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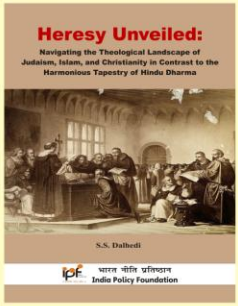




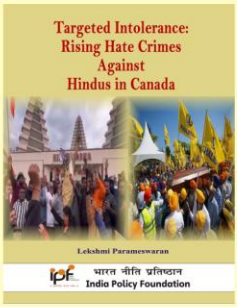


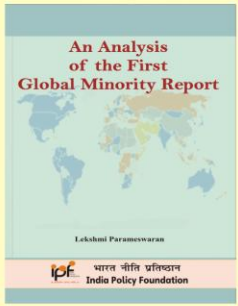












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