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MANIFEST DESTINY

FOCUS QUESTIONS



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- What were the dominant issues in national politics in the 1840s?
- Why did settlers migrate west, and what conditions did they face?
- Why did Texas declare independence from Mexico in 1836, and why were many Americans reluctant to accept it as a new state in the Union?
- What were the causes of the Mexican War?
- What territories did the United States gain from the Mexican War, and what controversial issue consequently arose?

In the American experience the West has always had a mythical magic and allure. Moving westward was one of the primary sources of energy and hope in the development of the United States. The West—whether, initially, the enticing lands over the Allegheny Mountains that became Ohio and Kentucky or, later, the fertile prairies watered by the Mississippi River or, at last, the spectacular lands on the Pacific coast that became the states of California, Oregon, and Washington—served as a powerful magnet for adventurous people dreaming of freedom and self-fulfillment. During the 1840s and after, Americans moved west in droves, seeking a better chance and more space. “If hell lay to the west,” one pioneer declared, “Americans would cross heaven to get there.” Millions of Americans crossed the Mississippi River and endured unrelenting hardships in order to fulfill their “providential destiny” to subdue the entire continent. By 1860 some 4.3 million people had settled in the trans-Mississippi West.

Most of these settlers and adventurers sought to exploit the many economic opportunities afforded by the new land. Trappers and farmers, miners and merchants, hunters, ranchers, teachers, domestics, and prostitutes,

among others, headed west seeking freedom or new converts to Christianity formed an unceasing migratory stream to the Rocky Mountains. Of course, the region developed by hardy pioneers, trapped long before the American migration to the region soon found themselves seeking settlement.

THE TYLER YEARS

When President William Henry Harrison, like Andrew Jackson, mainly on the basis of a lack of a public stand on key issues, emerged as a pliant figurehead, a tool in the hands of the most cunning—statesmen, Daniel Webster, secretary of state. Clay, who preferred to work in cabinet with his friends. Within a year strain appeared between Harrison and Clay. The nomination had made Harrison's cabinet. Harrison exploded: “Mr. Clay, you quarrel never had a chance to be president. At the inauguration after delivering a two-hour speech, the inauguration, the sixty-eight-year-old He was the first president to die.

Thus mild-mannered John Tyler succeeded upon the death of a president. And if there was ambiguity about Tyler's convictions. He was the youngest president to confront important issues had been forced to choose between an official Whig, at an earlier time a Whig: he was stubbornly opposed to the Bank System,” Henry Clay's pro-tariffs, a national bank, and in 1841 and, like Thomas Jefferson, was a defender of the Constitution, and territories.

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among others, headed west seeking their fortune. Others sought religious freedom or new converts to Christianity. Whatever the reason, the pioneers formed an unceasing migratory stream flowing across the Great Plains and the Rocky Mountains. Of course, the West was not empty land waiting to be developed by hardy pioneers, trappers, and miners. Others had been there long before the American migration. The Indian and Mexican inhabitants of the region soon found themselves swept aside by successive waves of American settlement.

THE TYLER YEARS

When President William Henry Harrison took office in 1841, elected, like Andrew Jackson, mainly on the strength of his military record and his lack of a public stand on key issues, the Whig leaders expected him to be a pliant figurehead, a tool in the hands of the era's most prominent—and most cunning—statesmen, Daniel Webster and Henry Clay. Webster became secretary of state. Clay, who preferred to stay in the Senate, tried to fill the cabinet with his friends. Within a few days of the inauguration, signs of strain appeared between Harrison and Clay, whose disappointment at missing the nomination had made him peevish. At one point an exasperated Harrison exploded: “Mr. Clay, you forget that I am the President.” But the quarrel never had a chance to fester, for Harrison served the shortest term of any president. At the inauguration, held on a chilly, rainy day, he caught cold after delivering a two-hour speech. On April 4, 1841, exactly one month after the inauguration, the sixty-eight-year-old military hero died of pneumonia. He was the first president to die in office.

Thus mild-mannered John Tyler of Virginia, the first vice president to succeed upon the death of a president, served practically all of Harrison's term. And if there was ambiguity about where Harrison stood, there was none about Tyler's convictions. At age fifty-one, the slave-owning Virginian was the youngest president to date, but he had already had a long career as legislator, governor, congressman, and senator, and his opinions on all the important issues had been forcefully stated and were widely known. Although officially a Whig, at an earlier time he might have been called an Old Republican: he was stubbornly opposed to everything associated with the “American System,” Henry Clay's program of economic nationalism—protective tariffs, a national bank, and internal improvements at national expense—and, like Thomas Jefferson, was in favor of states' rights, strict construction of the Constitution, and territorial expansion.