

## Senator Thomas Hart Benton on Manifest Destiny (1846)

It would seem that the White race alone received the divine command, to subdue and replenish the earth: for it is the only race that has obeyed it—the only race that hunts out new and distant lands, and even a New World, to subdue and replenish . . . .

The Red race has disappeared from the Atlantic coast; the tribes that resisted civilization met extinction. This is a cause of lamentation with many. For my part, I cannot murmur at what seems to be the effect of divine law. I cannot repine that is this Capitol has replace the wigwam—this Christian people, replaced the savages—white matrons, the red squaws . . . . Civilization, or extinction, has been the fate of all people who have found themselves in the trace of the advancing Whites, and civilization, always the preference of the Whites, has been pressed as an object, while extinction has followed as a consequence of its resistance . . . .

The van of the Caucasian race now top the Rocky Mountains, and spread down on the shores of the Pacific. In a few years a great population will grow up there, luminous with the accumulated lights of the European and American civilization. There presence in such a position cannot be without it influence upon eastern Asia. . . .

The Mongolian, or Yellow race is there, four hundred millions in number spreading almost to Europe; a race once the foremost of the human family in the arts of civilization, but torpid and stationary for thousands of years. It is a race far above the Ethiopian, or Black—above the Malay, or Brown, (if we admit five races)—and above the American Indian or Red; it is a race far above all these, but still far below the White and like all the rest, must receive an impression from the superior race whenever they come in contact . . . .

The sun of civilization must shine across the sea; socially and commercially the van of the Caucasians, and the rear of the Mongolians, must intermix. They must talk together, and trade together, and marry together. . . . Moral and intellectual superiority will do the rest; the White race will take the ascendant, elevating what is susceptible of improvement—wearing out what is not. . . . And thus the youngest people, and the newest land, will become the reviver and the regenerator of the oldest . . . .

It is in this point of view, and as acting upon the social, political, and religious condition of Asia, and giving a new point of departure to her ancient civilization, that I look upon the settlement of the Columbia river by the van of the Caucasian race as the most momentous human event in the history of man since his dispersion over the face of the earth.

Source: Congressional Globe, 29:1 (1846), 917–18.

#### 4. President Polk's Message to Congress, 1846

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... An envoy of the United States repaired to Mexico, with full powers to adjust every existing difference. But though present on the Mexican soil, by agreement between the two governments, invested with full powers, and bearing evidence of the most friendly dispositions, his mission has been unavailing. The Mexican government not only refused to receive him, or listen to his propositions, but, after a long continued series of menaces, have at last invaded our territory, and shed the blood of our fellow-citizens on our own soil. . . .

In my message at the commencement of the present session, I informed you that, upon the earnest appeal both of the congress and convention of Texas, I had ordered an efficient military force to take a position "between the Nueces and the Del Norte." This had become necessary, to meet a threatened invasion of Texas by the Mexican forces, for which extensive military preparations had been made. The invasion was threatened solely because Texas had determined, in accordance with a solemn resolution of the Congress of the United States, to annex herself to our Union; and, under these circumstances, it was plainly our duty to extend our protection over her citizens and soil.

This force was concentrated at Corpus Christi, and remained there until after I had received such information from Mexico as rendered it probable, if not certain, that the Mexican government would refuse to receive our envoy.

Meantime Texas, by the final action of our Congress, had become an integral part of our Union. The Congress of Texas, by its act of December 19, 1836, had declared the Rio del Norte to be the boundary of that republic. Its jurisdiction had been extended and exercised beyond the Nueces. The country between that river and the Del Norte had been represented in the congress and in the convention of Texas; had thus taken part in the act of annexation itself; and is now included within one of our congressional districts. . . . It became, therefore, of urgent necessity to

provide for the defence of that portion of our country. Accordingly, on the 13th of January last, instructions were issued to the general in command of these troops to occupy the left bank of the Del Norte. This river, which is the southwestern boundary of the State of Texas, is an exposed frontier; from this quarter invasion was threatened; upon it, and in its immediate vicinity, in the judgment of high military experience, are the proper stations for the protecting forces of the government. . . .

The Mexican forces at Matamoras assumed a belligerent attitude, and, on the twelfth of April, General Ampudia, then in command, notified General Taylor to break up his camp within twenty-four hours, and to retire beyond the Nueces river, and, in the event of his failure to comply with these demands, announced that arms, and arms alone, must decide the question. . . . A party of dragoons, of sixty-three men and officers, were on the same day despatched from the American camp up the Rio del Norte, on its left bank, to ascertain whether the Mexican troops had crossed, or were preparing to cross, the river, "became engaged with a large body of these troops, and, after a short affair, in which some sixteen were killed and wounded, appear to have been surrounded and compelled to surrender." . . .

In the meantime, we have tried every effort at reconciliation. The cup of forbearance had been exhausted, even before the recent information from the frontier of the Del Norte. But now, after reiterated menaces, Mexico has passed the boundary of the United States, has invaded our territory, and shed American blood upon the American soil. She has proclaimed that hostilities have commenced, and that the two nations are now at war.

As war exists, and, notwithstanding all our efforts to avoid it, exists by the act of Mexico herself, we are called upon by every consideration of duty and patriotism to vindicate with decision and honor, the rights, and the interests of our country. . . .

#### 5. Abraham Lincoln Calls Polk to Account, 1848

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... The President, in his first war message of May, 1846, declares that the soil was ours on which hostilities were commenced by Mexico, and he repeats that declaration almost in the same language in each successive annual message, thus showing that he deems

that point a highly essential one. In the importance of that point I entirely agree with the President. To my judgment it is the very point upon which he should be justified, or condemned. . . .

Now, admitting for the present that the Rio

Grande was the boundary of Louisiana, what, under heaven, had that to do with the present boundary between us and Mexico? How, Mr. Chairman, the line that once divided your land from mine can still be the boundary between us after I have sold my land to you is to me beyond all comprehension. . . . His next piece of evidence is that "the Republic of Texas always claimed this river (Rio Grande) as her western boundary." That is not true, in fact. Texas has claimed it, but she has not always claimed it. There is at least one distinguished exception. Her State constitution—the republic's most solemn and well-considered act; that which may, without impropriety, be called her last will and testament, revoking all others—makes no such claim. But suppose she had always claimed it. Has not Mexico always claimed the contrary? . . . Now all of this is but naked claim; and what I have already said about claim is strictly applicable to this. If I should claim your land by word of mouth, that certainly would not make it mine; . . .

But next the President tells us the Congress of the United States understood the State of Texas they admitted into the Union to extend beyond the Nueces.

Well, I suppose they did. I certainly so understood it. But how far beyond? That Congress did not understand it to extend clear to the Rio Grande is quite certain, by the fact of their joint resolutions for admission expressly leaving all questions of boundary to future adjustment. . . .

[L]et the President answer the interrogatories I proposed, as before mentioned, or some other similar ones. Let him answer fully, fairly, and candidly. Let him answer with facts and not with arguments. . . . And, if, so answering, he can show that the soil was ours where the first blood of the war was shed,—that it was not within an inhabited country, or, if within such, that the inhabitants had submitted themselves to the civil authority of Texas or of the United States, and that the same is true of the site of Fort Brown,—then I am with him for his justification. . . . But if he can not or will not do this,—if on any pretense or no pretense he shall refuse or omit it—then I shall be fully convinced of what I more than suspect already—that he is deeply conscious of being in the wrong; that he feels the blood of this war, like the blood of Abel, is crying to Heaven against him; . . .

## 6. A Mexican View of the War, 1850

. . . Thus began anew the negotiations in December, 1845, and the Minister, Mr. John Slidell, presented himself in Mexico. But immediately this difficulty arose, that his government desired him to be received as a Minister Plenipotentiary, ordinary or general, and ours would only admit him as a Commissioner *ad hoc* for the question of Texas. . . . By admitting Mr. Slidell as he wished, it resulted also that, without Mexico receiving the satisfaction due to her, diplomatic negotiations would become re-established between both powers; that the business of annexation would be complicated with the pecuniary reclamations; that Mexico would withdraw her hand from making war, and the United States would follow up all the consequent advantages to her commerce and interests.

This opinion, concluded upon in a cabinet council, was that the agreement to admit a Plenipotentiary of the United States, with special powers to treat upon the subject of Texas, did not oblige Mexico to receive an Envoy Extraordinary and Minister Plenipotentiary, charged to reside near the government; and in which character Mr. Slidell came, according to his credentials. In conformity with these principles, the

administration of General Herrera made them known to the envoy, and refused to receive him. Mr. Slidell insisted on being received on the terms which his government offered, but ours returned a decided negative. . . .

To explain the occupation of the Mexican territory by the troops of General Taylor, the strange idea occurred to the United States that the limits of Texas extended to the Rio Bravo del Norte [Rio Grande]. This opinion was predicated upon two distinct principles: one, that the Congress of Texas had so declared it in December, in 1836; and another, that the river mentioned had been the natural line of Louisiana. To state these reasons is equivalent at once to deciding the matter; for no one could defend such palpable absurdities. The first, which this government prizing its intelligence and civilization, supported with refined malice, would have been ridiculous in the mouth of a child. Whom could it convince that the declaration of the Texas Congress bore a legal title for the acquisition of the lands which it appropriated to itself with so little hesitation? If such a principle were recognised, we ought to be very grateful to these gentlemen senators who