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Period A1

Manifest Destiny

Even though racism is not a socially accepted idea today, it was readily accepted in early American history. Not only was it an accepted idea, but it was also systematically enforced through political policies. As the idea of Manifest Destiny grew in America and westward expansion became a priority, racial attitudes became more prevalent. The ideas of Manifest Destiny reflected racial attitudes towards slaves, Native Americans and Mexicans prevalent in the mid-19century America.

Racial attitudes towards slaves were not just accepted but were an integral part of compromises to ratify the Constitution and to preserve the Union as Manifest Destiny pushed for westward expansion. During the Constitutional Convention in 1787 there were two major compromises written into the Constitution in order for the southern states to vote in favor of the Constitution. The first was the compromise over the international slave trade. Both the North and South agreed the international slave trade would be abolished in 1808. The second was the 3/5th compromise, which counted slaves as 3/5 of a person for both voting and representative purposes. The Constitution not only recognized slavery it also recognized the inferior status of slaves. Following the Constitution, political policies put in place to preserve the union as the nation pushed westward recognized the institution of slavery as well. Among these policies are the Missouri Compromise and the Kansas Nebraska Act, both of which were instituted to ensure the preservation of the union (Document A, Document N). The American Constitution and political policies recognized slavery but also they portrayed the racial attitudes towards slaves in early America.

The idea of American superiority associated with Manifest Destiny lead to the passing of policies that reflected racial attitudes towards Native Americans (Document K). Americans had been dishonest and unfair with Native Americans from the time of Christopher Columbus but there was no policy so blatantly racial as Andrew Jackson’s. Jackson’s Indian Removal Policy of 1830 completely disregards the prior ownership of Native Americans on their father’s lands and forces them off their land (Document D). As reasons for the removal of Indians he lists their “savage” habits, unchristian traditions, and the “progress of civilization” (Document D). American’s idea of superiority found in Manifest Destiny lead to policies that used negative racial attitudes as a foundation of discrimination.

Not only were Native Americans subjects of Manifest Destiny’s ideas of superiority but the Mexicans were also mistreated based on their inferior status (Document K). James K. Polk pushed for the war with Mexico in order to acquire more land. However, his evidence for starting the war was based on racial attitudes felt towards Mexicans. Persifor Smith, General Winfield Scott’s second in command said this of the Mexicans, “Their whole moral character is debased, they have no self respect & are therefore incapable of self government” (Document I). It was this justification of the Mexicans inferior status that lead to Polk to declare war on Mexico.

Even though the racial attitudes present in the United States were reflected in some of the ideas of Manifest Destiny, America also used Manifest Destiny in a positive way. Manifest Destiny was not just the acquisition of territory but also was the idea of spreading the democratic ideas of America through out the world. It was the idea that America was the land of hope and opportunity. Not only did America have a wonderful destiny ahead of them but they also ensured that opportunity for other nations to grow undaunted by European powers through the Monroe Doctrine (Document B). This policy was in place to protect neighboring nations from the unwanted influence of European powers, ensuring their development in their desired way. Manifest Destiny did forward some racial attitudes prevalent in the time period but not all of Manifest Destiny was negative.

In mid-19century America, some of the ideas of Manifest Destiny reflected racial attitudes towards slaves, Native Americans and Mexicans. This is evident by the Mexican American War, Indian Removal Policy, and by the policy that provided for slavery. In each of these cases, race was used as a determining factor in the discrimination and mistreating of minority groups.