On July 23, 1948 a sun-beaten, dark-eyed, and mustached Narciso López disembarked from an American vessel barely escaping arrest in Cuba during Spain’s crackdown that month on revolutionary activity. The Venezuelan native arrived in Rhode Island with the intention to overthrow the Spanish rule in Cuba. Being a prominent supporter of slavery, López realized the advantages for the South if Cuba became independent and perhaps a stronger partner of slavery and joined the Union as a slave state, like Texas. In May 1850, with the financial backing of southern lawmakers such as Mississippi Governor John Quitman and former senator John Henderson, Narciso López and six hundred Americans traveled to Cuba. López and his force arrived in the town of Cárdenas where he expected the local support of Cubans; however, many of the local population joined the Spanish against the American force. Consequently, López and his troops were forced to hastily retreat back to the United States where he disbanded the expedition. Again in July of 1851, López and an army of several hundred men departed for Cuba. To his dismay, López was surrounded and outnumbered by Spanish forces, and was forced to surrender. The Spanish executed Narciso López and many of his men during his second endeavor to overthrow the Spanish rule in Cuba.¹

Narciso López’s private attack on a foreign country was the first of many filibusters that occurred after the Mexican American War. López’s failed endeavor caused outrage throughout the United States, and was a watershed to future attacks in Latin America. The successors of Narciso

López were inspired by his failed expedition and began to filibuster other Latin American countries throughout the 1850s. Throughout the antebellum period Americans from both northern and southern states conducted filibustering attacks throughout the world.²

The term “filibuster” carried a far different connotation before the Civil War than it does today. During the 1840s and 1850s, the word commonly referred to American adventurers that participated in private military forces that either invaded or planned to invade foreign countries while the United States was at peace.³ Derived from the Old Dutch word for freebooter vrijbuiter, contemporary politicians, lawmakers, journalists and citizens condemned filibusterers.⁴ These acts violated the United States Neutrality Act of 1818 and disrupted foreign relations as one Costa Rican official in Washington D.C. asserted that filibustering was America’s “social cancer.”⁵ These men were damned as pirates but also worshiped as heroes by masses of people. Thousands of Americans either joined regimes such as the one led by Narciso López or provided them with material and financial support as part of a movement that crossed American ethnic, regional and class lines. In light of these adventurers and their ambitions to invade foreign countries, why did Americans partake in the illegal and dangerous activity of filibustering during the antebellum period? How did the intellectual discourse of Manifest Destiny affect the American ideology of expansion during the years following the Mexican American War? More importantly, how were the ideas of democratic expansionists reflected in the filibusters of the time?

These men were motivated by financial gain, political ideology, in the case of Narciso López, regional

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² Throughout this paper I use the term “antebellum” to refer to decades prior to the Civil War, specifically focusing on the 1840s and the 1850s.
³ Robert E. May, Manifest Destiny’s Underworld: Filibustering in Antebellum America, xi.
⁵ Robert E. May, Manifest Destiny’s Underworld, 59.
benefits, or the thrill of adventure. The combination of the Jacksonian romantic language and emphasis on boundlessness and expansion of the country, the growing role of the United States in the world, and the movement of Americans to new and far reaching areas in the continent all gave impetus to the many varied interpretations of Manifest Destiny. The Mexican American War epitomizes the dogma of an event being conducted in the name of Providence and the political ideology of Manifest Destiny. This event both inhibited filibustering and guaranteed its revival.6 Like the democratic expansionists, such as John Quincy Adams, Stephen A. Douglas and John L. O’Sullivan, filibusters were engrossed by the political ideology of Continentalism. Although filibustering was not condoned by the American government, the men that partook in the activity looked to expand the domain of American power or the republican ideology to swarthy and racially inferior races that were vulnerable.

This essay, consequently, contends to shed light on a topic that has so often been overlooked in American history.7 Filibustering after the Mexican American War has often been overshadowed by the regional tensions and the debate over the peculiar institution of slavery that ultimately led to the first shots of the bloody and gruesome Civil War in 1860. In turn, this essay looks to examine the actions of the filibusters during the antebellum period and how the romantic language of Manifest Destiny led to the illegal and violent nature of privateering in the 1850s. The intellectual ideology of Manifest Destiny and the failed plans of filibusters to expand the United States into Central and South America emerge as one to enrich our understanding of the American foreign relations during the antebellum period.

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6 Following historian Robert W. Johannsen, I understand that Manifest Destiny was not a political discourse, instead it was an intellectual ideology created by journalists to romantically depict the growth of the United States during the 1840s and 1850s. See Johannsen, “The Meaning of Manifest Destiny,” 7-10. See also, Anders Stephanson, Manifest Destiny: American Expansionism and the Empire of Right. New York: Hill and Wang, 1995, xi-xxii.

With an eye toward acknowledging the complex state of intellectual discourse between the Mexican American War and the Civil War, part one of this essay outlines the contours of the intellectual ideology that came to be known as Manifest Destiny, paying close attention to how the multilayered interpretation of democratic expansionism and the actions conducted in the name of Providence led to Americans partaking in the illegal acts of privateering. This brief survey of the term that came to define American expansionism from the mid-1840s to the start of the Civil War underscores the state of geopolitical relations between America and its neighbors during the 1840s and 1850s. The second section examines more closely the episodes of filibustering that occurred after the Mexican American War, focusing primarily on the attacks conducted in Latin American countries, but also outlines the recruitment of the men that partook in these activities and the actions that the government took to prevent these measures. This outline of campaigns conducted during the 1850s highlights the way that privateers were perceived by both the public and the government. The third section concludes by briefly speculating the implications that filibustering had on both the foreign relations of the United States and how the phrase impacted the interpretation of the word and altered the American lifestyle within the United States.

*Manifest Destiny: John L. O'Sullivan's Empire*

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During the summer of 1844, a New York journalist of Irish decent named John Louis O’Sullivan penned the words “Manifest Destiny” for the first time. O’Sullivan was an outspoken champion of the Romantic language of Jacksonian Democracy; like so many other men of his generation, he saw the “hand of Providence in the workings and will of the majority.” He first penned the phrase in the pages of the Democratic Review in an article titled, “Annexation,” justifying the annexation of Texas. Nations such as Great Britain and France, he charged, had sought to impede and frustrate the process of annexation, and had intruded in a spirit of hostile interference against us, for the avowed object of thwarting our policy and hampering our power, limiting our greatness and checking the fulfilment of our manifest destiny to overspread the continent allotted by Providence for the free development of our yearly multiplying millions.

To O’Sullivan, America was sanctioned by Providence to obtain Texas and spread farther across the continent to shelter the millions of Americans and spread it racial superiority. However, the presence of the phrase “Manifest Destiny” did not create a lasting impact at this time. This was partially because the voters in Texas approved annexation at the same time the article had been published. Texas was admitted to the Union under John Tyler’s presidency in December 1845.

Almost six months later, O’Sullivan used the phrase again. In the New York Mourning News on February 27, 1845, in what has been called “the most famous editorial of the decade,” the phrase Manifest Destiny provoked a quite different response. Since Texas had been admitted to the Union, public attention had shifted to the Oregon boundary dispute with Great Britain. Like other expansionists

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of the time, O’Sullivan insisted that all of Oregon, from the forty-second parallel to 54 degrees 40 minutes north latitude, was rightfully American. O’Sullivan believed that “our claim to Oregon” is “by the right of our manifest destiny to overspread and to possess the whole of the continent which Providence has given us for the development of the great experiment of liberty and federated self-government entrusted to us.”¹³ In this belligerent address John L. O’Sullivan captures the romantic language of the Jacksonian political ideology and addresses the highly touted ideology of Continentalism. The reply from the American public was immediate. The phrase “Manifest Destiny” quickly caught fire and found its way into the congressional debates, where it gave added fervor to the romantic oratory of the expansionists and the new intensity to the nation’s territorial aspirations.

After the Mexican American War, John L. O’Sullivan’s original belief that Manifest Destiny had continental limitations began to be questioned. He originally thought,

> our national birth was the beginning of a new history, the formation and progress of an untried political system, which separates us from the past and connects us with the future only; and so far as regards the entire development of the natural rights of man, in moral, political, and national life, we may confidently assume that our country is destined to be the great nation of futurity.¹⁴

This belief, consequently, contended to spread democratic and republican ideals across the continent and permitted the American government to add to the American lexicon in the name of Providence. During this time, the purchase of land and treaties were the preferred and morally correct American way of expansion.¹⁵ However, men such as the highly noted Democrat, Stephen A. Douglas, believed that expansionism had no limitations. Douglas delivered a speech to the Senate in 1853 with regards to limitations to expansion and asserted, “Why the necessity of pledging your faith that you will never annex

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any more of Mexico? Do you not know that you will be compelled to do it; that you cannot help it; that your treaty will not prevent it, and that the only effect it will have will be to enable European Powers to accuse us of bad faith when the act is done…”\textsuperscript{16} Congressmen Caleb Cushing of Massachusetts believed “the United States’ rise to national greatness, prosperity, freedom and stability could be explained in one word: Land.” “Land was the throne of our empire.”\textsuperscript{17} Filibusters were inspired by John L. O’Sullivan’s call upon Americans to share their institutions of representative government with other peoples and extend culture and share democracy. More importantly, Manifest Destiny gave filibusters a chauvinistic and missionary justification for their conquests and attempted overthrow of native peoples. Filibustering commanders explained that filibustering would bring “American civilization” and capitalist development into contact with populations of inferior people who had already endured too many years of misgovernment, economic stagnation, and civil war.\textsuperscript{18} Thus, the American public’s view of geographical predestination extended its reach and looked toward Central America and South America.

John L. O’Sullivan’s legacy was distinctive; he provided a catchphrase for a concept that was as old as the nation itself.\textsuperscript{19} His new slogan for expansionism derived from nationalism and patriotism, and fueled the American people’s desire to acquire new and foreign lands. As Albert Weinberg states in his book \textit{Manifest Destiny: A Study of Nationalist Expansionism in American History}, “the law of natural right contributed to the ideals of this new national belief of expansion”—to the nation’s growing needs. The ideals and needs of the American people concurrently obscured the conflict between the

\textsuperscript{18} Robert E. May, “Manifest Destiny’s Filibusters,” 162-164.
original principles and entrance upon the path of empire.\textsuperscript{20} Throughout the next decade, the phrase that the New York journalist exerted to influence the expansion of the United States began to be twisted and turned to fit so many circumstances, that it assumed a life of its own, and much of its original meaning and intent was lost.

\textit{The Predecessors of Narciso López}

Southward filibustering climaxed between the Mexican American War and the Civil War—the years immediately following Narciso López’s attack on Cuba and the coining of Manifest Destiny. During this era, private expeditions to foreign lands became a national epidemic. There was not a lull during this time when Americans were planning or partaking in a campaign; often there were several campaigns in progress at one time.\textsuperscript{21} War veterans, U.S. army officers stuck in low ranks, immigrants, unskilled workers, doctors, convicts, and men of all other walks of life took up the call of filibustering to escape their socioeconomic status in the new and growing urban economy and have a chance to enter new markets and seaports, gain large monetary sums, governmental positions and other incentives. Other men joined these expeditions to distance themselves from dysfunctional marriages, romantic failures, or in some cases to impress a woman.\textsuperscript{22} Likewise, many young Americans signed up as filibusters genuinely believing that they would better their fellow man by following the design of Providence and oust tropical poverty with American prosperity.

The spur-of-the-moment nature of many filibuster enlistments suggests the movement’s romantic impulses as volunteers became engulfed in the excitement of filibustering and let their emotions rule their minds. This phenomenon attracted the aggressive and adventurous type. In many instances Mexican

\textsuperscript{22}Charles Henry Brown, \textit{Agents of Manifest Destiny: the lives and times of the filibusters}. Chapel Hill: North Carolina University Press, 1980, 216-218; Also see Robert E. May, \textit{Manifest Destiny’s Underworld}, 103.
American War military veterans seized the opportunity to join these campaigns. This can be explained in part by what so many young American males experienced during this time, finding work and adjusting to a new urban economy. Moreover, the close quarters of filibustering campaigns offered veterans nostalgic wartime associations and camaraderie. During this time many of the men that partook in filibustering campaigns became repeat offenders.

The reports of filibustering expeditions during the Civil War were so common that many Americans assumed that filibustering, as a Connecticut paper put it, “a new trait” in the “national character.” Americans became increasing interested in filibustering; they participated in balls, serenades, parades, rallies and welcoming ceremonies in honor of the young men who filibustered. Citizens were swarm onto the docks to welcome home filibusterers. In December 1856, a crowd of New Yorkers walked under a sign that read “Enlarge the Bounds of Freedom” to enter a rally raising money for William Walker. Ironically it became difficult for the government to suppress demonstrations raising money for filibustering campaigns since civilians were protected by freedom of speech and peaceful assembly. The government often resorted to military force to stop filibustering campaigns and put these men on trial. Narciso López sought to conduct a campaign in 1849 against Cuba, but was stopped by U.S. naval vessels that blocked him and his five hundred volunteers who had gathered at Round Island off of Mississippi’s coast. López and a majority of his men were put on trial; however, they were unable to be indicted. During trials such as López’s, court rooms were jammed to watch the trials, and filibustering warped into a spectator sport. Correspondents covering cases such as López’s constantly resorted to phrases such as “packed,” “densely crowded,” “large concourse of

24 *Hartford Daily Courant*, August 14, 1851.
The Folly of Manifest Destiny

citizens,” and “numerous crowd of spectators” to describe the onlookers who appeared to hear the sentencing.\textsuperscript{26}

The Narciso López invasions of Cuba and the William Walker expeditions to Mexico and Nicaragua attracted more headlines than any other filibusters of the day. William Walker, a Tennessee native, nicknamed the “grey-eyed man of Destiny”\textsuperscript{27} was bar none the most notable filibuster of the antebellum period. He became known as the “model filibuster” and in 1853 he invaded and occupied the peninsula of Lower California because its “indolent and half civilized people” had failed to utilize the area’s “mineral and pastoral wealth” and because the Mexican government neglected providing the Lower Californians with protection from robbers or with means of communication to the outside world.\textsuperscript{28} During this time he successfully captured La Paz, the capital of Baja California, and went on to announce that he had created a sovereign state that he named the “Republic of Sonora” with Lower California and Sonora as its two states.\textsuperscript{29} Due to a lack of supplies and strong resistance from both the Mexican government and Mexican natives, William Walker was lucky to escape with his life at the end of 1854. He returned to California where he was put on trial for conducting illegal war and violating the neutrality act of 1818. However, in the era of Manifest Destiny, his filibustering project was popular in the southern and western United States and the jury took eight minutes to acquit him.\textsuperscript{30}

By November of the following year, Walker had assembled fifty-six men and was ready to conduct another filibustering expedition. William Walker and his followers journeyed to Nicaragua in the spring of 1855 to conduct an expedition to connect the Pacific Ocean with the Atlantic Ocean by

\textsuperscript{26} Robert E. May, \textit{Manifest Destiny’s Underworld}, 74-76.
\textsuperscript{27} Robert E. May, \textit{Manifest Destiny’s Underworld}, p xiii.
\textsuperscript{28} Robert E. May, “Manifest Destiny’s Filibusters,” 153-154; see also May, \textit{Manifest Destiny’s Underworld}, 174-175.
\textsuperscript{29} Robert E. May, Manifest Destiny’s Filibusters,” 155.
creating a canal. Within months, he controlled the military establishment and held virtually all the power within the government. Walker staged his own inauguration as the president of Nicaragua and became of beacon of inspiration for American men. Inspired by his success, eventually over two thousand daring American males poured into Nicaragua to serve in the ranks of Walker’s army. Walker severed as the President of Nicaragua from 1856 until May, 1857 when he was expelled from Central America. Walker attempted a series of successive expeditions but never was able to regain his title as president. Similar to Narciso López, William Walker died on his final expedition at the hands of a Honduran firing squad in September 1860.

The above summary of both men by no means depletes the filibustering stories conducted in the name of Manifest Destiny. Americans enlisted and died in the hope of political and monetary gain, and the belief that they were helping the subservient people of foreign countries.

_Bleeding Kansas and the Consequences of Filibustering_

Manifest Destiny provided a set of common beliefs that allowed filibusters to unite and conduct private enterprises and endeavor to spread democracy and republicanism across the world to the swarthy and what Americans believed to be subservient people. Young American males were eager to scratch at what the *New York Times* called their country’s “great filibustering flea.” During the antebellum period newspapers, the American public, and the filibusters themselves believed they were spreading democracy and republican ideals throughout the world. The *Democratic Review* believed, for instance, that filibusters would pave the way for new acquisitions for the United States by drawing the attention of Americans to the “vast riches” of the tropics. However, filibustering was a failed offspring of Manifest Destiny. In many lands that either heard of rumored campaigns or suffered

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31 *New York Times* October 5, 1859.
32 Robert E. May, “Manifest Destiny’s Filibusters,” 166.
The Folly of Manifest Destiny

privatized campaigns, filibustering undermined the likelihood that these nations would join the United States. American filibustering angered and frightened the peoples and governments of invaded nations, and threatened other countries, that it helped eliminate whatever hopes existed of future annexations of these countries.

In 1854, the President of Mexico, Santa Anna, signed and agreed to the Gadsden Purchase and ceded 45,000 square miles to the United States. When James Gadsden negotiated the only U.S. territorial acquisition from a foreign power during the interval between the Mexican American War and the Civil War, he believed the filibusters of Lower California and Mexico conducted by William Walker hindered him from obtaining more land. He thought that he might have received Baja California from Mexico had it not been for Walker’s private expedition in Mexico.\(^{33}\) Expeditions such as Walker’s gave Mexican conservatives an excuse to rally public opinion against further expansion of American institutions and within the treaty of 1854, Gadsden had to agree to an anti-filibustering provision. Gadsden saw the act of filibustering as an obstruction to Manifest Destiny and believed that the American system did not need to resort to auxiliaries who would debase and abuse democratic principles.\(^{34}\)

Similar to the sundered relations with Mexico, filibusters disrupted and inflamed relations with other Latin American countries and European countries such as Spain since Americans had invaded their periphery of Cuba. The López filibusters, and other rumored expeditions against Cuba, irritated U.S. relations with Spain and reduced the likelihood that Spain might sell Cuba, as a large portion of

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\(^{33}\) Paul N. Garber, *The Gadsden Treaty*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1923, 91-92. Gadsden’s negotiating instructions, suggested six possible boundary lines as terms, the most coveted of which envisioned Mexico ceding all of Lower California and other areas not included in the final settlement for $50 million—considerably more than the sum Gadsden paid of 10 million.

\(^{34}\) Robert E. May, “Manifest Destiny’s Filibusters,” 167.
Americans might have hoped. López’s campaigns caused dissemination of animosity throughout Cuba and Spain. As noted in May’s “Manifest Destiny’s Filibusters,” an American consul in Cuba noted how López’s first expedition cause a “strong animosity…in the minds of the old Spaniards against our Government, and indeed everything American.” Likewise the U.S. minister to Spain, Daniel M. Barringer observed after López’s fatal invasion in 1851 that the Spanish government was threatening to wage war against the United States and even the most moderate newspapers in Spain condemned “our government and people.” Rather than intimidate foreign countries into territorial concessions to the United States, filibustering tended to coalesce other powers in brief alliances to hinder such annexations. Spain and Mexico asked for the aid of European powers such as Great Britain and France to protect and aid them. Similarly, Central American and South American countries signed a never-implemented Continental Treaty, containing several anti-filibustering clauses, in response to Walker’s campaign in Nicaragua. Countries such as Guatemala and Costa Rica maintained a much larger military force, after Walker’s expulsion, than they had before his arrival. Thus filibustering abroad unified foreign people and granted them nationalism and patriotism, the exact opposite of what the filibusters intended to do.

Similar to the implications abroad, filibustering impacted and infiltrated antebellum American culture. In accordance with Robert E. May, “the most telling testimony to filibustering’s infiltration of antebellum American culture is its impact on language.” The American populations made it apparent that filibustering had a grasp on their subliminal thought when they held parades for the men that partook in these activities, newspapers frantically wrote and approved of these activities, and abolitionists grew weary of the possibility of slavery expanding to these exotic and distant locations.

For an example of the United States desiring to buy Cuba see for example the Onsted Manifesto.


Robert E. May, Manifest Destiny’s Underworld, 294.

Robert E. May, Manifest Destiny’s Underworld, 77.
Americans began to use the term *filibustering* to connote whatever type of political behavior they deemed aggressive and offensive. The term was corrupted and when Americans applied the term, they often used it to describe behavior that had nothing to do with the invasion of foreign countries. In 1854 the Kansas-Nebraska Act was issued, opening new lands under the political idealism of popular sovereignty. The altered logic of filibustering was applied to this bloody instruction over slavery as the *Springfield Republican* alluded to “Missouri Filibusters in Kansas” and the *New-York Tribune* denounced the “Kansas filibusters.” To the American public, filibustering no longer signaled an activity abroad, but encompassed all activities on the home-front as well. The *Harrisburg Morning Herald* frequently used the term *filibuster* to berate local Whig politicians who nominated their own candidate for public office rather than joining the American Party in a common battle against the Democratic Party. Others such as Henry W. Bellows denounced proslavery southerners through his acts of moral filibustering.

This new interpretation of the word paved the way for modern usage of the word as a legislative obstructionism. Through this understanding of the word, *filibustering*, the meaning of the word drastically changed from defining the young American men who conducted or planned attacks on foreign domains for personal gain, capitalism, and democratic beliefs, to defining the lawmaking obstructions that are used as preventative measure to stall a piece of legislature from being passed or discussed.

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39 Popular Sovereignty was a political ideology fathered by Stephen A. Douglas. The belief behind this ideology, in this instance, was that the men living within the region were able to decide whether the state foster slavery or ban the peculiar institution.  
41 See *Harrisburg Morning Herald*, September 10, 11, 14, 15, 20, 21, 22, 24, 25, 28, 1855; Cited in May, *Manifest Destiny’s Underworld*, 74.
During the antebellum period, the intellectual discourse of Manifest Destiny presented by John L. O’Sullivan altered and changed throughout this interval. The term that once expressed continental limitations became a beacon for young, eager and adventurous men looking to escape the urban socioeconomic sphere. These men were despised and praised by masses of people and thousands of Americans from all walks of life joined in the cause of filibustering. The American government endeavored to end American filibustering during this time, but they were unsuccessful to halt the efforts of filibusters due to the popularity amongst the American public. This movement crossed American ethnic, regional and class lines as all these men sought economic prosperity, new and adventurous opportunities and nostalgic memories for army veterans. As shown throughout this essay, however, the men that partook in filibustering campaigns failed to expand the domain of American democracy. Instead, these men disrupted foreign relations, prompted foreign peoples to promote patriotism and nationalism for their country, and form alliances with one another to hinder the progress of American expansionism. Consequently, this large group of daring young men changed the antebellum American culture and created a new connotation and meaning for the word *filibuster*. 
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