

New Romes for a New World



Every age has some ostentatious system to excuse the havoc it commits.

Horace Walpole, 1762

No one had anticipated the big chill that had fallen on the nation's capital overnight. Temperatures had suddenly plunged into the single digits, forcing planners to scrap the extravaganza that was to have celebrated the second inaugural of the man from California. His party had abandoned a million dollar reviewing stand on the west steps of the Capitol; there would be no triumphal cavalcade that day, no procession down Pennsylvania Avenue to the accompaniment of two hundred high school marching bands and innumerable drum majorettes. Wan shafts of winter light fell on the faces of power brokers and plutocrats crowded inside the Pantheon-like space of the Capitol's rotunda to hear their president deliver his vision for the nation, amid the murals and other symbols of its heroic past.

"So we go forward today, a nation still mighty in its youth and powerful in its purpose," proclaimed the politician whom House Speaker Tip O'Neill had called the most popular in his fifty years of public service. Ronald Reagan had the knack, said the *New York Times*, for "firing the public imagination with short, symbolic messages," a master salesman's intuition for the hypnotically repeated adjective, the clarion noun. He invoked "freedom" fourteen times in twenty minutes to unfailing acclaim. President Reagan was winding up his pitch.

"History is a ribbon, always unfurling; history is a journey," mused the president, taking the big view as his speech suddenly veered from an imagined future to a past no less fantastic. From the promise of an

ever stronger economy unfettered by taxes to the prospect for planetary peace offered by his Strategic Defense Initiative, Reagan segued back to the American epic: "The men of the Alamo call out encouragement to each other; a settler pushes west and sings a song, and the song echoes out forever and fills the unknowing air. It is the American sound: it is hopeful, big-hearted, idealistic—daring, decent, and fair. That's our heritage, that's our song. We sing it still." Past, present, or future? History or Hollywood musical? Unknowing as the song-filled air, the distinctions blurred as much in the popular as in the president's mind.

"No other President in memory could have got away with Reagan's Whitmanesque finish," ventured *Time*. Historians might quibble that the actor's address did not match the Ciceronian cadences of Abraham Lincoln's second inaugural, its somber reflections on hard truths in time of crisis. That noble speech is carved in Roman lapidary lettering on an inner wall of the Lincoln Memorial at the opposite end of the Mall from the Capitol. Out there in the frozen city, the enthroned statue of the Emancipator brooded in its crumbling temple as his successor called for "a new American Emancipation . . . to liberate the spirit of enterprise in the most distressed areas of our country." Washington was among the worst of those areas, the destitute sleeping on park benches across from the White House while gunfire punctuated the quiet of Capitol Hill neighborhoods.

Snow with a pH factor approaching that of lemon juice dusted the Lincoln Memorial, corroding and spalling its columns, loosening its cornices, fissuring its stylobate, penetrating joints to rot out the steel skeleton supporting the shrine. Barely sixty years old, the Doric temple was repeating in time-lapse the decay of the Parthenon, the votive god within it looking ever more morose.

Few noticed, but it was the same everywhere in the District of Columbia. Blocks fell from the Jefferson Memorial. The Tennessee marble of the National Gallery and the Vermont marble of the Supreme Court felt like granulated sugar as nitric and sulfuric acids etched away their carbonate bindings. The capital city's stone gods and virtues blurred in the corrosive atmosphere, its bronze generals blackened and pitted, eternal memorials and tombstones in Arlington Cemetery lost their inscriptions, the trees died. The west steps of the Capitol under the reviewing stands were streaked black with stone cancer. Inside, Reagan was upbeat; outside, his capital was quietly dissolving from the by-products of industrial expansion.

"We believed then and now that there are no limits to growth and human progress when men and women are free to follow their dreams," he continued. The president's words died out down the corridors of the Representative's Wing. They were not at all audible on a back staircase where a fresco of those very dream-led men and women summed up in one vast image Reagan's mythic appeal to the American electorate. "History is a ribbon," the president had said. A blue ribbon coiling itself like an anaconda around Indians at the top of the mural bore the painting's title: *Westward the Course of Empire Takes Its Way*.

It had been painted during the Civil War, during the completion of the Capitol Building ordered by President Lincoln as a symbol of the states forged by blood and iron into unbroken empire. While a German immigrant named Emanuel Leutze was working on it, the groans of mangled men brought in from nearby battlefields filled the rotunda. Leutze poured into that mural thousands of years of prophecy as well as the seemingly limitless prospects of his adopted country. In the grand tradition of European painting inherited from the Italian Renaissance, his painting idealized the past to legitimate the present. One hundred and twenty-one years later, the president from California was doing the same to television cameras.

Across a mountainous wall, a procession of buckskin-clad pioneers followed the sun from the darkening east into a Far West awash in golden light. Pausing on the crest, the emigrants gaped at the prospect below them. In the distance lay the Golden Gate and the Pacific Ocean, while at the center of the picture, a pioneer Madonna in red, white, and blue calico gave thanks to the Lord as she cradled her child. A coon-skin-capped Joseph pointed joyfully to the Promised Land below. On a crag behind them, a fellow pioneer claimed the land with the Stars and Stripes. Their companions hewed the virgin trees of the Pacific Slope.

To Leutze's cultivated sensibility, these were more than mere settlers entering California: they were both the Israelites entering Canaan and the holy family of the New World.¹ At the Lord's behest, they went forward, "a nation still mighty in its youth and powerful in its purpose," in Reagan's words. They were as inevitable and as *natural* as the course of the sun. As had the Hebrews before them, so these Christian Chosen entered *their* Promised Land fully armed and implacable. Springfield rifles carried the will of Providence forward.

Theirs was a destiny, like Christ's nativity, made manifest by thousands of years of past events and legends. Prophetic incidents surrounded and reinforced the main picture in a series of interlocked bor-

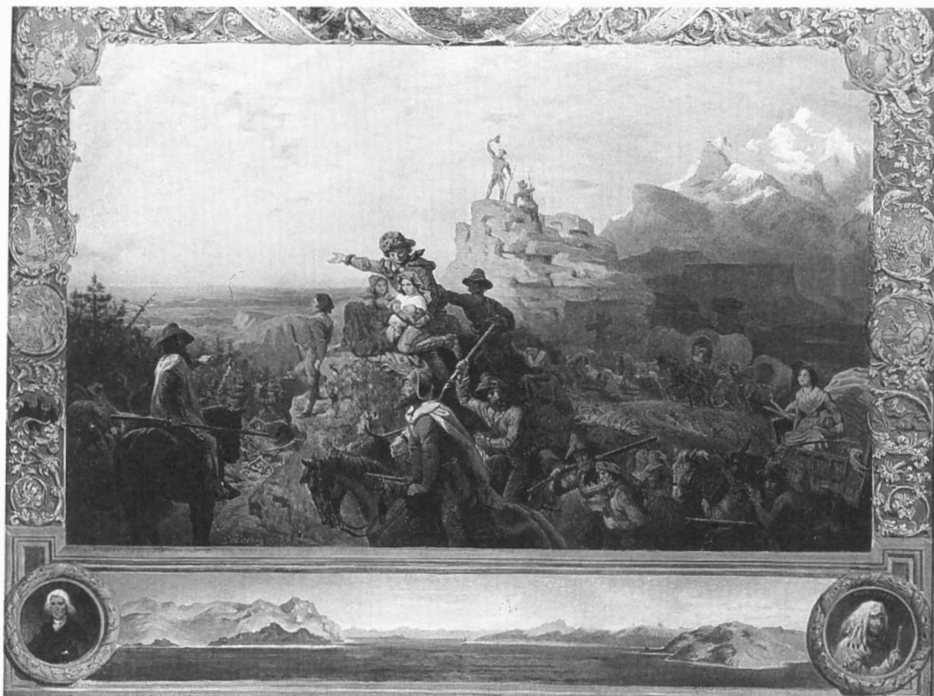


Figure 1. Emanuel Leutze's mural in the U.S. Capitol celebrates "a grand, peaceful conquest of the great West" in millennial terms. Study for *Westward the Course of Empire Takes Its Way*. Courtesy National Museum of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

der vignettes: the Three Kings following the star, Moses leading the Jews, a Viking longboat, Hercules splitting the continents, and, of course, Jason and the Golden Fleece. All were but prelude to the western migration of "the race."

To one perceptive woman at a Washington party, Leutze admitted that few Americans understood the references in his history painting. Most would probably have been offended by its Catholic symbolism if they had. Yet all could understand the divine justification for empire's expansion. As if to emphasize that this was a literal shrine to the religion of territorial conquest, the artist included a long panel at the bottom of the mural resembling the predella of a Renaissance altarpiece. The panel placed the viewer in the Pacific Ocean looking *east* through the Golden Gate and *into* California. At the time of the painting, the mile-wide strait had already attained mythic significance. More than just the entrance to San Francisco Bay, it served as the two-way door into the Far West and out to the longed-for empire in the Far East.

By his own admission, the army scout John C. Frémont had named the bay's mouth after the heir of imperial Rome and the maritime gateway to the Asian Silk Road. He called it "*Chrysopylae* (golden gate)," he said, "on the same principle that the harbour of *Byzantium* (Constantinople afterwards) was called *Chrysoceras* (golden horn.)[.]" Frémont explained to Congress during the war with Mexico in 1847 that, like the ancient Greeks, he had been inspired by "its advantages for commerce, (Asiatic inclusive)" that the harbor suggested to him. He anticipated for the city a destiny greater than Rome's once the bay was brought under Washington's aegis, and, sixteen years later, Leutze placed the army's Fort Point at the exact center of his panorama, its cannons guarding the harbor for its new owners.

Leutze went on to emphasize, in ornamental medallions on either side of the Golden Gate, the well-armed means of national expansion. On the left, a long rifle, ax, plow, and powder horn were festooned with Indian trophies. On the right, a crossed shovel, pickax, and Colt revolver were tied with a sack of gold. Weapons were the tools of civilization's advance, gold its goal.

"We believed then and now that there are no limits to growth and human progress," intoned the president off in the rotunda. "No pent up Utica contracts our Powers, but the whole boundless Continent is ours," boasted the inscription beside the rifle and ax medallion.

God, or the gods, seemed to have predestined Capitol Hill for imperial dominion. President Washington chose as the site for the new District of Columbia a plantation formerly named Rome, while the creek that flowed from the hill to the Potomac was called the Tiber. Major Pierre L'Enfant told Washington as early as 1789 that he wanted "to lay the foundations of a city which is to become the capital of this vast empire." He based his scheme on that of the regal gardens of Versailles.

Throughout most of history, cities had required defensive walls, but by the time of L'Enfant's plan, the cities of North America were increasingly free to grow without limits into their *contados*, and no city expressed that freedom more emphatically than the nation's capital. From near the west front of the Capitol Building itself, Ralph Waldo Emerson looked out on the stupendous Mall laid beside Tiber Creek and wrote that at sunset he "seemed to look westward far into the heart of the continent from this commanding position." The hill, the Mall, and the architecture increasingly bespoke the expansive ambition of Washington's leaders and planners; those who ruled from the capital claimed a continent. But why, some asked, stop there? Why not the world's largest ocean as well? The most visionary, such as Frémont, looked through the

Golden Gate and round the world's curve to the far shores of Asia.

Leutze celebrated the willful aggression inherited from Rome via the Renaissance at flood tide. All limits and all resistance fell before the ineluctable pioneers. Unaware of any inherent contradiction, he wrote that his mural showed "the grand peaceful conquest of the great West." A representative of the New York Historical Society recommended that the Capitol, like the new Houses of Parliament in London, be filled with similar "fresh emblems of honorable Peace and unbroken Empire."

The mural thus spoke visually not only of the national thrust into the West but of the divine justification for the new city aborning beside the Golden Gate as a command post for territorial control and further expansion. All history, said the painter, has been moving in this fateful direction. Yet for its most enthusiastic champions, the "final act" of empire must never arrive, a border never be reached that could not be gone through. Limitlessness became one of the chief tenets of the American Dream. For Ronald Reagan, space was the "high frontier," the endless "final act" of his mythic imagination. With the Strategic Defense Initiative, he told the unknowing electorate, everything would be under control, everyone happy and safe. Reagan neglected to name a price.

For countless others who preceded Reagan, the nation and its economy (as well as the Race, which so often subsumed both those ideas) must move ever outward. For much of U.S. history, that meant into the West, toward which the Mall pointed, the heaven-ordained direction of the sun toward the Garden of the Hesperides, where the golden apples grow at the edge of the world. Out there, beyond the fruited plains and the purple mountain majesties, lay the realm of eternal national youth, of powerful purpose, of limitless opportunity, of manly men—and, most ironically, of peaceful conquest. The means of obtaining the garden's wealth were washed clean in its attainment; for all the slag heaps, wars, strikes, smog, and desiccation, the song of the westerner remained forever "hopeful, big-hearted, idealistic—daring, decent, and fair." Gone in Reagan's time was the boastful candor of a *New York Sun* editorial of 1847: "By the quality of his social organism and civilization [the American] is carnivorous—he swallows up and will continue to swallow up whatever comes in contact with him, man or empire."

"Westward the course of empire takes its way": when George Berkeley, the Bishop of Cloyne, composed his poem "America: A Prophecy" in 1726, he could not have guessed that this one line would give its blessing to the military adventures of a nation not his own nor yet born.

Few propagandists in wartime ever did service better than did Berkeley. The cleric and philosopher had simply hoped to create a college in Bermuda where natives and newcomers alike would receive European enlightenment. Imperialism, perhaps, but of an unusually high-minded sort. The college failed for lack of funds, but that single line of the poem's final stanza took on a life of its own. For more than two centuries, it proved supremely useful to others less idealistic who had only the vaguest notion of who George Berkeley was. By the time the faint echo arrived at Reagan's inaugural, its origin had been lost altogether.²

Coined in 1845 by a now-forgotten journalist, the term *Manifest Destiny* was a latecomer compared with Berkeley's more stirring line, but once amalgamated, the twin slogans provided the rhetorical ordnance necessary to forcibly annex half of Mexico and then to "pacify" the natives—the American Canaanites—who stood in the way of empire's path and God's will. Few bothered to examine the roots of those twin injunctions to armed expansion. For more than a century, the combined phrases served to throw divine grace over repeated advances into the Far West, Latin America, and the Pacific Basin in search of trade, resources, and cheap labor. As Congress debated California statehood in 1850, Senator William H. Seward passionately declared to it that "the perpetual unity of the Empire hangs on the decision of this day." Six years later, while speaking before the American Geographical and Statistical Society, Commodore Matthew Perry cited Berkeley's line as just cause for the seizure by the "Saxon race" of Pacific islands and establishment of that race on the eastern shores of Asia. Once again, he told his audience, he was only acting as the tool of God's will and empire's ineluctable course when he forced a reluctant Japan to open itself to western trade in 1854.³

Few cited Berkeley's line more frequently or with greater fervor than did the leaders of the city by the Golden Gate and those who sought their favor. In newspapers, magazines, and diplomatic banquets in San Francisco, the course of Empire, of Christianity, of Civilization, of Trade, and of the Race were repeatedly and interchangeably invoked as justification for the city's conquest of the Pacific and for the deserving receipt of its tribute. With that wealth, San Francisco would leapfrog New York to become Rome's rightful heir, they said, while they repeatedly called upon the national capital for the military appropriations needed to seize and hold their empire. In popular usage, the word "course" in Berkeley's line was often replaced with the higher-octane "star" of empire, subliminally suggesting that sacred quest of the Wise



Figure 2. The back cover of a railroad promotional magazine depicts the "star of empire" as the headlamp of a locomotive shoving Indians and wildlife toward their appointed doom. *California Mail Bag*, June 1871. Courtesy California State Library.

Men for the Messiah, which Leutze had painted in the margin of his mural.

At second glance, Bishop Berkeley's anthem looks more than a little silly. For poetic effect, it left out the many directions that empire had taken under Alexander, the Romans, Venetians, Arabs, British, and Russian czars. By the late nineteenth century, the poem's devotees had to ignore the mounting evidence of ancient empires in the Americas, then wrestle with the aberrant Rising Sun in the very Far West. The newly industrialized Japanese empire violated natural order as handed down by Berkeley, then reiterated by Frémont, Seward, Perry, and so many others.

Yet such cavils hardly mattered to those who invoked the bishop's line for their own ends. The stirring phrase fired the public imagination with a short, symbolic message. Like textbook history, it created palatable myth—myth stripped of reality's messiness, its massacres and insatiate greed, then simplified and ennobled to a martial beat. Patriotism has always required careful weeding in the fields of the past; men do not easily die for ambiguities, nor knowingly to make the fortunes of others.

Toward the end of his life, a timber locater named C.B. Watson demurred. Watson was haunted by the role he had played in the destruction of an ancient forest on the Oregon border. "‘Westward the star of empire takes its way’ is a phrase that has been made to do duty on many occasions," he wrote in 1920. In fact, he claimed, it had only despoiled a magnificent continent "to fill the coffers of the already overrich, who have no thought of the morrow." The destiny of one race meant the holocaust of another: "Whole tribes and nations of picturesque men and women have vanished before this great ‘Star of Empire.’"⁴

Euphemism, he concluded—the salesman's nice choice of adjectives and nouns—had propelled the whole messy enterprise from the beginning: "Oh avarice and cupidity, dignified by the terms of ‘commerce and trade,’ what crimes are committed in thy name!" Remarkable for its rarity and perception, but above all for its publication in a popular magazine, Watson's protest was a whisper in the maelstrom of continuing commercial expansion. Such qualms could never elect a president to an empire that increasingly denied its own existence. Nor could they build a city that long boasted of its divinely ordained dominion over the greatest of the world's oceans.

