

Money Conquers All: The Commercial Conquest of the  
American Southwest  
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11<sup>th</sup> Grade United States History  
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**Teaching Traditional American History Program**

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Lesson Overview: When historian Tony Mares says that "the mercantile conquest of what would become the southwestern part of the United States was the real conquest," the implication is clear. The U.S. march to fulfill Manifest Destiny in western North America was not achieved by the military alone, but also by business people who explored what were then Mexican territories and served people and markets that were being ignored by the far-away Mexican government.

In this activity, students will learn about the commercial conquest of this region via readings and video clips. Then the students will create their own "commercial conquest." They will work in groups to write hypothetical commercials that could have been made by U.S. entrepreneurs of the time to reach out to their potential Mexican customers or by Mexican entrepreneurs encouraging the local population to "Buy Mexican."

Essential Questions:

- What role did commerce play in the expansion of the United States into the Southwest?
- How did American entrepreneurs fill the material needs of Mexican citizens?

Objectives: After completing this lesson, students should be able to:

- Describe and evaluate the evolution of United States domestic and foreign policies, including Manifest Destiny (MO GLE: SS 2a.D.(4));
- Describe the historical development of the American economy, including changing relationships between government and the economy (MO GLE: SS 2a.C.(3)).

Materials: Students will need access to the internet to conduct their research. If students do not have access to a computer lab, a single classroom computer with web access, connected to a projector, can be used instead.

Class Time: One to two 50-minute periods.

Teacher Input: Begin by giving students some background information about the Santa Fe Trail (see the Teacher Notes page).

Explain that the Santa Fe Trail was different from the Oregon and California Trails in a key way: the Oregon and California Trails were mostly one-way routes of migration, while the Santa Fe Trail was a two-way route of commerce. The traders who travelled this trail did so primarily to make money.

Activities: Ask students to consider how they think Manifest Destiny actually became real for the United States. After all, we know that in the early 19th century, the U.S. did not extend west of the Mississippi; now, though, it reaches the Pacific Ocean and beyond. How do the students think this happened? Was it all a matter of military conquests? Ask students to brainstorm some potential answers.

Have the students read the article [Manifest Destiny](#) by Sam W. Haynes from the U.S.-Mexican War site. Ask the students to discuss some of the issues the article raises: the importance of technology in the U.S. spread to the Pacific; the concern about Britain and Mexico working together and keeping the U.S. from gaining lands it wanted; the belief of many in Manifest Destiny.

Briefly go over the questions on the Commercial Conquest worksheet with students before they watch the video clips:

- Why were New Mexico and California considered so important by the U.S. government?
- How did the central Mexican government treat its citizens in the outlying territories of New Mexico and California?
- What was U.S. President James Polk's attitude toward acquiring New Mexico and California from the Mexican government?
- How did the U.S. first gain influence in the territories of New Mexico and California?
- What was the main trade route that the Americans used to reach New Mexico? What kinds of products did they sell to the people who lived in New Mexico?
- Mexico had invited U.S. settlers to come to Texas and then ultimately lost control of that territory to those very same settlers. In the videos, there is discussion about how some of the Mexicans in New Mexico and California distrusted the new U.S. businessmen who were coming to their territories. They may have feared that history would repeat itself and the Americans would take their territories as well. What do you think may have been some strategies that the U.S. entrepreneurs used to reach out to their potential Mexican customers?

Tell students to go to "The U.S.-Mexican War" website to access the video clips "The United States declares war on Mexico," "Kearney's army marches west to conquer New Mexico and California," "American entrepreneurs and the 'mercantile conquest' of the Southwest," "American settlers head west to seek prosperity in California" (or display the videos with a projection device in your classroom). Explain

to students that the clips will give them some insights into how commerce and military power combined to help the U.S. ultimately gain the lands of New Mexico and California from Mexico. Have students answer the questions on the Commercial Conquest worksheet after they have watched the videos.

Break the class into groups of 4-5 students each. Tell the students that they are to assume the role of the mid-19th century U.S. entrepreneurs trying to ply their wares to the Mexican settlers in New Mexico... in a television commercial. Each group will work together to:

1. Identify a product that real Mexican settlers would have been eager to buy.
2. Develop a sales pitch that will reach out to potential Mexican customers who, for some very good reasons, may not have trusted the new American settlers/businessmen.
3. Use the above to write a 30-second TV commercial for their product.
4. Create a 30-second TV commercial urging Mexican customers to "Buy Mexican" instead of "Buy American"

The students should have fun with this activity; encourage them to be creative with it while displaying their knowledge about the topic. When the students have written their commercial scripts, have them read and/or perform them for their classmates. Have the students give each other feedback on their work.

Assessment: To assess the students' work, consider the following:

- Did the students show an understanding of the commercial conquest of America in their answers on the worksheet?
- Did the students show an understanding of these issues during the classroom discussion?
- Did the students work well together in their groups?
- Did the students' scripts show a grasp of the content?
- Did the students' scripts exhibit a creative approach to the material?

Questions for review: Read the previously mentioned quote from historian Tony Mares to the students:

*"The mercantile conquest of what would become the southwestern part of the U.S. was the real conquest."*

Ask students to discuss what they think that quote means and whether they believe it to be true.

Closure: Ask students if they can draw any modern parallels to U.S./foreign trade relations today.

Extension: If you have access to video production equipment, follow up on this activity by having the students videotape the scripts for their commercials.

Students could also use the interactive timeline on the U.S.-Mexican War site to do map work on the Santa Fe Trail and/or to look at the great distances between

Mexico City and some of Mexico's territories, particularly New Mexico and California. These great distances, and Mexico's relative neglect of its territories, gave U.S. entrepreneurs the opportunity to get a commercial foothold in these areas.

Reference:

Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education's Grade-Level Expectations for Social Studies:

<http://www.dese.mo.gov/divimprove/curriculum/GLE/SSgle.html>

Mexican War website:

<http://www.pbs.org/usmexicanwar/>

Manifest Destiny article:

[http://www.pbs.org/kera/usmexicanwar/prelude/md\\_manifest\\_destiny.html](http://www.pbs.org/kera/usmexicanwar/prelude/md_manifest_destiny.html)

Links to video clips:

[http://www.pbs.org/kera/usmexicanwar/resources/video\\_library.html](http://www.pbs.org/kera/usmexicanwar/resources/video_library.html)

## **Commercial Conquest Worksheet**

*Answer the following questions after you have watched the videos for this activity.*

1. Why were New Mexico and California considered so important by the U.S. government?
2. How did the central Mexican government treat its citizens in the outlying territories of New Mexico and California?
3. What was U.S. President James Polk's attitude toward acquiring New Mexico and California from the Mexican government?
4. How did the U.S. first gain influence in the territories of New Mexico and California?
5. What was the main trade route that the Americans used to reach New Mexico? What kinds of products did they sell to the people who lived in New Mexico?
6. Mexico had invited U.S. settlers to come to Texas and then ultimately lost control of that territory to those very same settlers. In the videos, there is discussion about how some of the Mexicans in New Mexico and California distrusted the new U.S. people who were coming to their territories. They may have feared that history would repeat itself and the Americans would take their territories as well. What do you think may have been some strategies that the U.S. entrepreneurs used to reach out to their potential Mexican customers?