

Manifest Destiny's Underworld: Filibustering in Antebellum America

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Review

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May, Robert E. *Manifest Destiny's Underworld: Filibustering in Antebellum America*. University of North Carolina Press, \$45.00 ISBN 807827037

The American Way

Incidents of private conquest detailed

Robert E. May, professor of history at Purdue University and author of a prize-winning book, *John A. Quitman: Old South Crusader*, has written an exhaustive account of filibustering in antebellum America. His book is well researched and detailed, and it will be the standard work on this subject for many years. He defines filibustering as a private endeavor by individuals to organize their own military expeditions to invade a country that is at peace with the United States. These men were outlaws, for they violated the Neutrality Act of 1818, which specifically forbade such private military expeditions. This definition excludes all military operations that were authorized by the government, although some historians today like to include them. Antebellum filibusters attacked Canada, Mexico, Ecuador, Honduras, and Cuba, and were dreaded throughout the Western Hemisphere. Even the Hawaiian Kingdom was uneasy about them, and the British government feared that Ireland might be invaded. Antebellum filibusters were looked upon by many Americans as being little better than pirates.

Other Americans, however, believed that the filibusters epitomized the romantic, muscular spirit of American adventure in an age of "manifest destiny" when the United States was on a mission to take over all of North America. "Ironically, as May shows, the filibusters may have impeded American expansionism by fostering hostility against the United States among Canadians and Hispanic-Americans. There were immediate diplomatic ramifications to the expeditions, as the State Department was compelled to deal with objections from Great Britain and the Hispanic nations of Central and South America. One thing was clear, as May shows: there was an intimate connection between

filibustering, Southern slavery, and the secession movement of the 1850s. John A. Quitman, for instance, wanted to take Cuba as an area for potential expansion of slavery, just as William Walker, the "gray-eyed man of destiny," had taken Nicaragua.

These men were giving concrete shape to an idea deeply held among many antebellum Southerners that the destiny and survival of pro-slavery interests lay in American expansion into the Caribbean and Gulf of Mexico. For example, when Texans organized parties in the antebellum period to invade Mexico, they campaigned to make the future of slavery more secure. Not only would the Texans eliminate Mexico, which had abolished slavery in 1829, as a haven for runaway slaves, but they would also vastly increase slave territory by conquering Mexico and using Tampico as a base for invading Cuba. When northern abolitionists criticized these filibusters, Southerners responded defensively, and became ever more convinced that their future security lay in secession from the United States. Justice John Archibald Campbell of the United States Supreme Court asserted these views six days before Abraham Lincoln's election in November, 1860, damning the filibusters for the tragedy that was befalling his country. May believes that Judge Campbell's "nightmare" was not his own private hell, but that it was a correct assessment of the filibusters' motives and actions in antebellum America.

May's research for this book is impressive, and his writing style is attractive. He conclusively demonstrates his major themes, while describing the colorful characters that inhabited the underworld of antebellum filibustering. For May, these men are not heroes, but flawed characters with questionable motives. The author has researched and written an excellent book, and the University of North Carolina Press, living up to its usual high standards, has presented this work in an attractive format.

Paul David Nelson is professor of history at Berea College, Berea, KY, where he has taught for the past thirty-four years. He is the author of seven books and numerous articles and essays on the America Revolutionary era.