

**Teaching American History Project**  
Analyzing Primary Sources to Develop Opinions on Historical Issues  
Westward Expansion and the War with Mexico  
By: Karen Diaz

**Grade:** 9-12

**Length of Period:** 1-2 class periods

**Inquiry:** Students will analyze a painting of “American Progress” by John Gast and speeches made by President James K. Polk and Congressman Abraham Lincoln to determine the arguments given for Westward Expansion and the eventual War with Mexico. Students will be answering the essential question: ”Would you have been a supporter of expansion and why?”

**Objectives:**

Students will know and be able to:

- Detect the symbols artists use to convey a particular point of view
- Determine the intended audience of the sources
- Analyze President Polk’s request to Congress to declare war against Mexico
- Analyze Congressman Lincoln’s speech in which he challenged President Polk’s claims for declaring war on Mexico
- Identify the arguments made for and against westward expansion by various groups

**Materials:**

- Painting of “American Progress” by John Gast
- James K. Polk on the War with Mexico (1846)
- Abraham Lincoln on the Mexican War (1847)
- Picture Analysis Worksheet
- Written Document Analysis Worksheet  
<http://www.archives.gov/education/lessons/worksheets/document.html>
- Pro /Con Expansion Chart

**Activities:**

- Brainstorm about existing student knowledge of westward expansion and the War with Mexico
- Project the “American Progress” painting in class
- Handout the Art Analysis Worksheet
- As a class we will do the first three questions of the worksheet together
- With a partner, chosen by me, they will finish answering the questions on the worksheet.
- Class will reconvene after approximately 10-15 minutes where we will discuss their analysis of the painting

- Handout the Polk and Lincoln readings (Note: the entire Polk speech is provided but students are only required to read excerpts which are denoted with [brackets].)
- Handout the Document Analysis Worksheet
- Students will read the both document and complete the Document Analysis Worksheet.(May need to finish for homework)
- Discuss documents
- Closure: Ask students “What did they learn regarding opinions of westward expansion and the war with Mexico?” To help them reflect on these differences of opinion Hand out the Pro/Con Expansion Chart for homework. Fill out the chart using past information and the additional knowledge gained from this lesson. We will use the chart as a topic for discussion the next day where they will begin to be asked to formulate their own opinion regarding this topic.

**Assessment:**

- Informal assessment comes from observation of students working with partners and then individually on analyzing the painting and written documents.
- Participation in partner and full group discussion
- Individual questions from students
- The worksheets and charts will be collected at the end of the lesson for a formal assessment

**CT State Standards:**

- Analyze the influences of sectionalism on American life
- Analyze man-made factors that cause human movement
- Cite evidence from a source to determine as author’s purpose and intended audience
- Analyze and explain multipurpose visual materials
- Compose a thesis statement using primary and secondary sources
- Ask relevant questions related to social studies/history to initiate, extend or debate a point of view during a discussion
- Use evidence to form an interpretation of a historical event
- Evaluate primary and secondary interpretations of a historical event



•The title of this picture is called America Progress. It was painted by John Gast c.1872 as a representation of Manifest Destiny.

### Picture Analysis Worksheet

1. Describe what is happening in the picture.

2. What does the woman represent?

3. What does the dark and light imply?

4. What does the author want you to notice, think, and feel?

5. What does this picture imply about the time period?

6. What is the painter's opinion about westward expansion?

### **Pro/Con Expansion Chart**

Expansion	Pros	Cons
American Public Northerners  Southerners  Westerners		
Government		
Other Groups (Native Americans, Mexican government etc.)		