

# America expands once again -- digitally, this time

May 19 2012, By TED ANTHONY , AP National Writer

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This undated file photo shows artwork showing the Oregon trail in 1844. In the 19th century, Americans expanded into a physical frontier \_ a geographic edge of society brimming with opportunities and dangers and challenges and setbacks. Today, American expansionism is playing out vigorously at society's latest cutting edge: the social space of the Internet. On Friday, May 18, 2012, the \$16 billion IPO of the global juggernaut that is Mark Zuckerberg's Facebook became, for better or worse, the most recent example of how the new frontier has been cultivated, colonized and commanded by entrepreneurial Americans. (AP Photo, File)

(AP) -- The metaphor is an easy one, overused and perhaps even a bit overwrought. We are forging forward into a digital frontier, leaving convention behind, traveling without guides into an uncharted virtual land where progress and profits are forever around the next bend.

Sound familiar?

In the [19th century](#), Americans expanded into a physical frontier - a geographic edge of society brimming with opportunities and dangers and challenges and setbacks. So began the notion of manifest destiny: the idea that, no matter what, the United States pushes outward to the farthest edge of the most distant place possible.

Today, almost two centuries after that term was coined, American expansionism is playing out vigorously at society's latest cutting edge: the social space of the Internet. Friday's high-octane, \$16 billion IPO of the global juggernaut that is Mark Zuckerberg's Facebook is, for better or worse, the most recent example of how the new frontier has been cultivated, colonized and commanded by entrepreneurial Americans.

As the manufacturing economy reconfigures, you often hear the lament that "America doesn't make anything anymore." But then there's this: Most of the world's digital centers of gravity have been, and remain, American. Apple and Microsoft. Google and Yahoo. YouTube and Amazon and eBay. Facebook and Twitter and Instagram. Kickstarter. Netflix. PayPal. Akamai, the content-delivery behemoth. Intel, the internal combustion engine of the whole shebang. And for that matter, the Internet itself and the organization that regulates its domain names were both born and raised in (you guessed it) America.

A digital manifest destiny is playing out, built upon the notion that the United States' outward expansion continues apace on the virtual frontier. What the self-defined sense of American exceptionalism built in the physical world, it is now building in the digital one.

"It's a projection of American values - what international experts would call soft power," says Lee Rainie, director of the Pew Research Center's Internet and American Life Project.

Look at what the digital space disseminates, he says: freedom of the press, of information and of assembly; knowledge and scientific advancement; free-market mechanisms and entrepreneurialism. "It's hard to think of a cluster of ideas and architectures that would more allow basic American cultural values to propagate," says Rainie, co-author of the new book, "Networked: The New Social Operating System."

Technological progress has always walked hand in hand with American expansion. Where would the settlement of the West have been without Robert Fulton's steamboat, Samuel F.B. Morse's work in telegraphy and, later, the inventions of Thomas Edison and Henry Ford? Not to mention the old-time data pipelines themselves - the postal system, the railroads and eventually the interstate highways?

In those cases, innovation helped drive development and physically shape the frontier; now innovation itself is the frontier. And the American tendency to glorify the inventor's spirit remains a key engine. As Alexander Graham Bell went, so goes Mark Zuckerberg.

"In this country, you're a hero if you invent something. To be an inventor in America, that's as good as being an explorer," says Julie Fenster, author of "The Spirit of Invention: The Story of the Thinkers, Creators and Dreamers who Formed Our Nation."

"The notion that 'I can invent my way out of problems' - that always fueled a sense of hope and expansion in this country," she says.

That parallel between the frontiers of the road and the mind has not gone unnoticed by politicians and leaders looking to cast America's newest progress in the context of the old. President Barack Obama, speaking to Carnegie Mellon University's National Robotics Engineering Center last year, called for tech innovation this way: "That's the kind of

adventurous, pioneering spirit that we need right now. That's the spirit that's given us the tools and toughness to overcome every obstacle and adapt to every circumstance."

The nation's digital innovators have been placing virtual progress into the context of American expansionism for years. Sometimes they're oblique about it, sometimes they're explicit. "There is never a reliable map for unexplored territory," wrote Microsoft co-founder Bill Gates, who in 1995 likened the early Internet to the Oregon Trail. Apple co-founder Steve Jobs put it this way in 1985: "In a society where information and innovation are going to be pivotal, there really is the possibility that America can become a second-rate industrial nation if we lose the technical momentum and leadership we have now."

Manifest destiny and its first cousin, American exceptionalism, aren't popular notions everywhere. The idea of U.S. domination in everything from cultural frontiers (Hollywood) to geographic ones (outer space) can set the world on edge. Just as irritatingly to some, America's ability to occupy these spaces rests upon not only actual innovation but the oomph to amplify it on a global level - in effect, to shout the loudest in a crowded, if now virtual, room.

"Manifest destiny justifies a certain behavior. One could call it rapaciousness on one end, but someone else could call it being an entrepreneur, being a founder," says John Baick, a historian at Western New England University in Massachusetts. That reflects back upon the original manifest destiny imperative to push outward at all costs; expansion, on any frontier, can also mean overrunning the people who are already there.

What has helped this dominance along? Is it the American penchant for R&D, which fuels innovation? The rise of venture capital over the past half-century, particularly in places like Silicon Valley? Is it the

combination of creativity and Barnum-style snake oil that matured into the marketing culture that helps define America today? Is it the nation's higher-education system, which has vigorously pushed the relationship between technological innovation and entrepreneurialism?

Or - and this is where it really gets interesting - is it the ability and willingness of an increasingly connected planet to adopt American innovation and take it to a global level, encouraging U.S. digital expansion in the process?

"We might look at our contributions . and fail to see that what really helped them to take off in many cases was the participation of other people globally," says Joel Kline, an internet developer and digital strategist who teaches business technology at Lebanon Valley College in Pennsylvania.

Last year in southwestern China, long a hotbed of brand-name electronics knockoffs, a fake Apple Store turned up - an entire store. A blogger's photos depicted an elaborate lookalike operation complete with Genius Bar, hardwood floors, Helvetica-typefaced signage and sales associates in blue T-shirts who apparently actually thought they were working at the real thing.

Think about that. It wasn't enough to fake the gadgets. The counterfeiters wanted to fake the FEEL of innovation that Apple markets so adeptly. The entire process, exported by an American digital company, had been swallowed whole. It was the idea that was being sold. Something intangible, but very real - the foundation of the virtual economy.

"People say, 'Oh, you've got to invest in the tangible things - land, gold and silver, other precious metals.' They're solid," says Rich Cooper, vice president for research and emerging issues at the National Chamber

Foundation, the U.S. Chamber of Commerce's think tank.

But, he says, "In this new era of exceptionalism, you're now on an entirely different plane. You're not holding dirt. You're not holding a piece of real estate in your hands. You can't touch it and taste it. It's an entirely different medium, and that's hard for people to understand and accept."

The American frontier's most renowned historian, Frederick Jackson Turner, made his name writing about the end of it. In 1893, he proclaimed the frontier closed, finished, conquered, settled. But he hardly thought that meant the end of manifest destiny.

"He would be a rash prophet who should assert that the expansive character of American life has now entirely ceased," Turner wrote. "Movement has been its dominant fact, and, unless this training has no effect upon a people, the American energy will continually demand a wider field for its exercise."

That remains the case, even if that field is now composed of an endless stream of ones and zeroes and Zuckerbergs that, to Americans, represent the latest evidence of the old story of exceptionalism - the desire to lead the world, now from a shining SimCity upon a hill.

"People seem to think there are no other frontiers for America to explore and that America's sitting on the bench now," Cooper says. "But there are a whole set of frontiers we don't even know about yet."

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