



## Senate speech on the “Oregon Question” Thomas Benton (1846)

*In 1818, Britain and the United States agreed to jointly occupy a territory along the northern Pacific that was known both as the Oregon Country and the Columbia District. In 1846, the two nations signed a new treaty that partitioned the territory along what is now the western border between the United States and Canada. The speech excerpted below shows long-time US senator Thomas Benton, of Missouri, arguing in favor of ratifying the 1846 treaty. Benton sketches a quasi-millennialist historical narrative in which US occupation of the Columbia territory is a close-to-final step in the white race’s ages-long expansion westward around the globe. As whites advance, they fulfill the divine command from Genesis that human beings should subdue and replenish the earth. Lesser races either are transformed by white civilization, or resist and go extinct.*

The trade of the East has always been the richest jewel in the diadem of commerce. All nations, in all ages, have sought it; and those which obtained it, or even a share of it, attained the highest degree of opulence, refinement, and power. [...] Phoenicia, Egypt, Persia were among the ancient thoroughfares of this commerce; Constantinople and Alexandria [were] among its modern channels; and Venice and Genoa in the south, and Bruges and Antwerp in the north, [were] the means of its distribution over Europe. All grew rich and powerful upon it, and with wealth and power came civilization and refinement. The Cape of Good Hope became the recent route, with wealth to its discoverers, the Portuguese, and to all their rivals and followers—the Dutch, English, French, and others.

The commerce of Asia, always dazzling to the Oriental nations, became the intense object of desire to the western Europeans from the time that the crusaders visited Constantinople, and Vasco da Gama doubled the Cape of Good Hope. The dazzling attraction of this commerce was the cause of the discovery of the New World. Columbus, going west to Asia, was arrested by the intervention of the two Americas. From his day to the present, skill and power have exerted themselves to get round or through this formidable obstacle. All the attempts to discover a northwest passage were so many attempts to discover a western road to India. All the discoveries of the French among the interior lakes and great rivers of North America were with the same view. [...]

Mr. Jefferson, [...] whose fertile mind was always teeming with enterprises beneficial to his species [...], following up the grand idea of Columbus, [...] early projected the discovery of an inland route to the Pacific Ocean. The Missouri River was to be one long link in this chain of communication; the Columbia [River], or any other that might serve the purpose on the other side of the mountains, was to be another. Lewis and Clark were sent out to discover a commercial route to the Pacific Ocean; and so judiciously was their enterprise conducted that their return route must become, and forever remain, the route of commerce [...]

This is the North American road to India, [...] made ready by [...] the designs of nature [...] There is an order in the march of human events which the improvidence of governments may derange but cannot destroy. Individuals will accomplish what governments neglect, and events will go forward without law to guide them. So it has been already with this Columbia. [...] In

1806, Lewis and Clark returned from the Columbia; the government sent no troops there to occupy and retain the domain which they had nationalized. The seat of a future empire lay a derelict on the coast of its rich and tranquil sea. [...] A quarter of a century, the British have held the Columbia, the [American] government doing nothing. Four years ago, the people began to move. They crossed the Rocky Mountains; they have gone down into the tidewater region of the Columbia. Without the aid of government, they are recovering what government lost and renewing the phenomenon of mere individuals exploring the bounds of distant lands and laying the foundation of distant empires. The question of American colonization of the Columbia is settled! The people have settled it; they are now there and will stay there. The trade with India will begin. [...] The rich commerce of the East will find a new route to the New World, followed by the wealth and power which have always attended it [...]

The effect of the arrival of the Caucasian, or White, race on the western coast of America, opposite the eastern coast of Asia, remains to be mentioned among the benefits which the settlement of the Columbia will produce; and that a benefit not local to us, but general and universal to the human race. Since the dispersion of man upon the earth, I know of no human event, past or present, which promises a greater and more beneficent change upon the earth than the arrival of the van of the Caucasian race (the Celtic-Anglo-Saxon division) upon the border of the sea which washes the shore of eastern Asia. The Mongolian, or Yellow, race is there, four hundred millions in number, spreading almost to Europe—a race once the foremost of the human family in the arts of civilization, but torpid and stationary for thousands of years. It is a race far above the Ethiopian, or Black; above the Malay, or Brown (if we must admit five races); and above the American Indian, or Red. It is a race far above all these but still far below the White and, like all the rest, must receive an impression from the superior race whenever they come in contact.

It would seem that the White race alone received the divine command to subdue and replenish the earth! for it is the only race that has obeyed it—the only one that hunts out new and distant lands, and even a New World, to subdue and replenish. Starting from western Asia, taking Europe for their field and the sun for their guide, and leaving the Mongolians behind, they arrived, after many ages, on the shores of the Atlantic, which they lit up with the lights of science and religion and adorned with the useful and the elegant arts. Three and a half centuries ago, this race, in obedience to the great command, arrived in the New World and found new lands to subdue and replenish. [...] The venerable Mr. Macon<sup>a</sup> has often told me that he remembered a line low down in North Carolina, fixed by a royal governor as a boundary between the Whites and the Indians: where is that boundary now? The van of the Caucasian race now top the Rocky Mountains and spread down to the shores of the Pacific. In a few years, a great population will grow up there, luminous with the accumulated lights of European and American civilization. Their presence in such a position cannot be without its influence upon eastern Asia. The sun of civilization must shine across the sea; socially and commercially, the van of the Caucasians and the rear of the Mongolians must intermix. They must talk together, and trade together, and marry together. Commerce is a great civilizer, social intercourse as great, and marriage greater. The White and Yellow races can marry together, as well as eat and trade together. Moral and

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<sup>a</sup> Nathaniel Macon, a white North Carolinian born in 1757, who served for nearly four decades in the US Congress, including a stint as speaker of the House.

intellectual superiority will do the rest: the White race will take the ascendant, elevating what is susceptible of improvement, wearing out what is not.

The Red race has disappeared from the Atlantic coast: the tribes that resisted civilization met extinction. This is a cause of lamentation with many. For my part, I cannot murmur at what seems to be the effect of divine law. I cannot repine that this Capitol has replaced the wigwam, this Christian people replaced the savages, White matrons [replaced] the Red squaws; and that such men as Washington, Franklin, and Jefferson have taken the place of Powhatan, Opechancanough, and other Red men, howsoever respectable they may have been as savages. Civilization or extinction has been the fate of all people who have found themselves in the track of the advancing Whites; and civilization, always the preference of the Whites, has been pressed as an object, while extinction has followed as a consequence of its resistance. The Black and the Red races have often felt their ameliorating influence. The Yellow race, next to themselves in the scale of mental and moral excellence and in the beauty of form; once their superiors in the useful and elegant arts and in learning, and still respectable though stationary—this race cannot fail to receive a new impulse from the approach of the Whites, improved so much since, so many ages ago, they left the western borders of Asia. The apparition of the van of the Caucasian race, rising upon them in the east after having left them on the west, and after having completed the circumnavigation of the globe, must wake up and reanimate the torpid body of old Asia. Our position and policy will commend us to their hospitable reception; political considerations will aid the action of social and commercial influences. Pressed upon by the great powers of Europe—the same that press upon us—they must in our approach see the advent of friends, not of foes; of benefactors, not of invaders. The moral and intellectual superiority of the White race will do the rest; and thus the youngest people, and the newest land, will become the reviver and the regenerator of the oldest.

It is in this point of view, and as acting upon the social, political, and religious condition of Asia, and giving a new point of departure to her ancient civilization, that I look upon the settlement of the Columbia River by the van of the Caucasian race as the most momentous human event in the history of man since his dispersion over the face of the earth.

**Source:** *Speech of Mr. Benton, of Missouri, on the Oregon Question [...]* (Washington [DC]: Blair and Rives, 1846), 25-30, <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/aeu.ark:/13960/t2h71hg65>. Public domain.

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