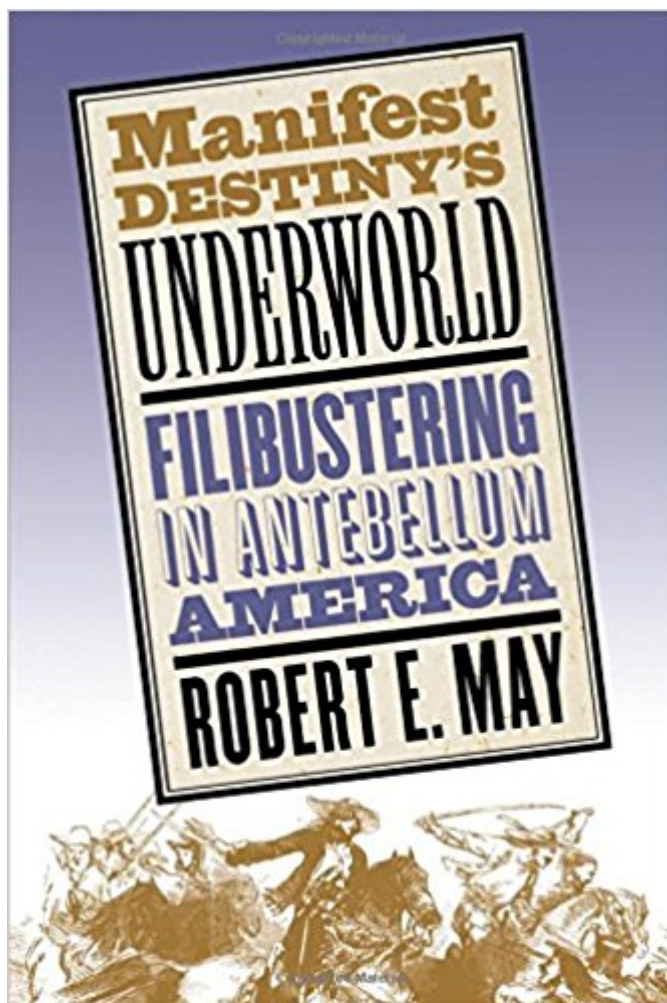


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# Manifest Destiny's Underworld: Filibustering In Antebellum America



## Synopsis

This fascinating study sheds new light on antebellum America's notorious "filibusters"--the freebooters and adventurers who organized or participated in armed invasions of nations with whom the United States was formally at peace. Offering the first full-scale analysis of the filibustering movement, Robert May relates the often-tragic stories of illegal expeditions into Cuba, Mexico, Ecuador, Nicaragua, and other Latin American countries and details surprising numbers of aborted plots, as well. May investigates why thousands of men joined filibustering expeditions, how they were financed, and why the U.S. government had little success in curtailing them. Surveying antebellum popular media, he shows how the filibustering phenomenon infiltrated the American psyche in newspapers, theater, music, advertising, and literature. Condemned abroad as pirates, frequently in language strikingly similar to modern American denunciations of foreign terrorists, the filibusters were often celebrated at home as heroes who epitomized the spirit of Manifest Destiny. May concludes by exploring the national consequences of filibustering, arguing that the practice inflicted lasting damage on U.S. relations with foreign countries and contributed to the North-South division over slavery that culminated in the Civil War.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

"This is one of those rare books that combines an interesting topic and excellent writing. ("Choice") "Manifest Destiny's Underworld" is a well-researched and thoughtful analysis of a neglected yet important topic of American history. ("North Carolina Historical Review") "This book uncovers issues largely ignored by previous scholars and connects filibusterism with the

war with Mexico and the Civil War.("Hispanic American Historical Review")""This is one of those rare books that [combines] an interesting topic and excellent writing.("Choice")""[This book] uncovers issues largely ignored by previous scholars and connects filibusterism with the war with Mexico and the Civil War.("Hispanic American Historical Review")""May has produced his magnum opus. . . . Unquestionably the finest volume yet written on the subject of filibustering." -- "Civil War History"

[May] explores nearly every aspect of the private military expeditions that brought notoriety and dreams of empire to generations of adventurers. . . . May's book will be the definitive work on filibustering for years to come.--Journal of the Early RepublicManifest Destiny's Underworld is a well-researched and thoughtful analysis of a neglected yet important topic of American history. This volume, with its unshakable interpretation, pertinent maps and illustrations, copious notes, and engaging style, should emerge as the definitive work on American filibustering.--North Carolina Historical ReviewThis, of course, is Robert E. May's essential point: the filibusters, who had a critical impact on contemporary American culture and politics, have largely vanished from our historical memory. . . . No one has heretofore synthesized the filibusterers' activities and analyzed who served, their motivation, ideology, funding, and role in the broader milieu. The author thus provides not only an overview of major and minor expeditions but also a colorful and interesting look at their identities and the consequences of their actions. . . . May has provided a major contribution toward our understanding of the 'underworld' of filibustering.--American Historical ReviewThis is one of those rare books that combine all the elements of an outstanding work of history by blending an interesting topic, thorough research, and excellent writing to present the best portrayal of antebellum filibustering to date. A new look at pro-slavery expansion into Latin America has long been overdue, and May presents a thorough updating of a misunderstood activity. . . . This outstanding book is appropriate for those interested in the antebellum period, Latin American history, or foreign policy of the era.--ChoiceIn this balanced, judicious, and readable account of U.S. filibustering from the 1820s to the 1860s, Robert E. May . . . redesigns the study of filibustering. . . . [An] impressive book.--Journal of Southern HistoryThis exhaustively researched book carefully describes the roots and legacies of military adventurism. May judiciously weighs difficult and conflicting evidence in this unfailingly interesting treatment of filibustering that offers the reader few genuine heroes but a large cast of colorful villains. With a superb eye for the telling detail and the revealing quotation, May convincingly demonstrates how the most fanatical advocates of Manifest Destiny also did the most to discredit territorial expansion.--George C. Rable, University of Alabama May has produced his

magnum opus. . . . Unquestionably the finest volume yet written on the subject of filibustering.--Civil War HistoryManifest Destiny's Underworld is the fullest, most detailed, most thoroughly researched book ever written on the antebellum filibuster movement. Robert May has conclusively demonstrated the importance of the drive for slavery's expansion in driving the filibusters. This book will become an essential reference work on its subject.--James M. McPherson, Princeton UniversityExhaustively researched and comprehensive in scope, Manifest Destiny's Underworld is the first book successfully to integrate filibustering into the antebellum American experience. Equally important, the book will be of immense value to scholars interested in the larger, geopolitical role that the United States played during the nineteenth century. As such, it serves as a telling reminder that American aggression against hemispheric neighbors has had a long history, one that predates the emergence of the United States as a world power.--Military History of the West[This book] uncovers issues largely ignored by previous scholars . . . and connects filibusterism with the war with Mexico and the Civil War.--Hispanic American Historical Review[Manifest Destiny's Underworld: Filibustering in Antebellum America] is an important and well-written book that restores to its proper place a little known but significant topic in American history.--Manhattan Journal of the WestThis is a major new book that merits the close perusal of anyone concerned with mid-nineteenth-century America.--Pacific Historical ReviewWell-researched and intelligently argued . . . expressively take[s] up the imperial mindset in American history.--American Studies

Americans have always had a longing for the frontier. There's something intellectually satisfying about adventuring into a region which remains relatively pristine, free of the civil society that modern institutions create. "Great men," or those men who liked to fancy themselves great, were attracted to the places in the Americas that remained legally and politically vacuous. Dreams of financial gain, political power, or adventure attracted a rough-hewn sort of leader. Those leaders are the subject of this book.As was the case with their post-Civil War western brethren, most of these leaders' actions were illegal and, at times, atrocious. They enjoyed blurring the line between what was considered lawful and what was considered criminal, because it allowed them to exploit the legal void created by this instability. Many a filibuster became the head of his own puppet state, and many were celebrated as heroes for their exploits even if they were little more than gangsters.So here you have your Jesse James and Wyatt Earp of an earlier generation, but more than just the names changed. The Antebellum and post-war Americas, particularly within the United States (of course) were vastly different places. Before the Civil War, the post-Spanish republics were very weak because their social and political institutions had lost the unifying elements of Church and Monarchy. The United

States, however, was enormously powerful, benefitting from vast foreign immigration and industrial development. Ambitious Americans had a "big attitude" about what they believed they could do, anywhere the winds would carry them. This book is, more than anything, about Manifest Destiny run amok. The Civil War drew Americans back into their own internal affairs, and foreign expansion was permanently subordinated to sovereign preservation. Now, the impresarios weren't fighting for Cuba, but for Arizona. The author claims that a seething Anti-Americanism that exists in the Americas to this day can be attributed to the actions of filibusters. Whether you believe this or not, it's a compelling argument. Basically, this book is a biography of some of the greatest filibusters, broken down into chapters dedicated to each of the chosen characters. The Preface, Chapter 1, Chapter 2 and Epilogue place the characters in greater historical and cultural context. This book is exhaustively researched and includes 100 pages of annotated end notes.

This book was the basis of my undergraduate history thesis. May certainly shows how energetic people were in the 1850s to expand the United States' borders with or without Uncle Sam's help! Very compellingly paints a picture of a less than effective government and a devoted population of the United States who were interested in expansion.

If you're looking for relaxing weekend reading and a well-spun tale then avoid this book. I imagine that it is excellent source for academic historians of the period. There are scattered references to a few critical incidents all through the book so it is not easy to follow. I was also disappointed that the book is written only from a US-centric perspective with no coverage of the victims of filibustering: did nothing of note happen in Costa Rica, Nicaragua, Honduras, Panama, etc during the period? How were the coalitions built that finally disgorged Walker and other filibusters from their Central American footholds? The epilogue finally addresses some of the damage that these pirates did to US reputation in the rest of the Americas, but a lot more could be said.

Manifest Destiny's Underworld, a book written by Dr. Robert E. May of Purdue University, offers an in depth look at mid-19th Century filibusters. Dr. May first gives a detailed history of the filibusters. First, he details the origins of the name and then describes the roots of filibustering. Then, he details all the prominent attempts to filibuster. He goes on to explain why Americans filibustered, why the United States government was unable to stop the filibusters, and the logistics involved in financing a filibuster attempt. Lastly, he deals with the consequences of the filibuster movement; specifically, how it affected United States foreign policy and the War Between the States. Dr. May's goal in

writing this book was to give the filibuster movement its proper place in history. He thought that too few historians had studied what the filibuster movement was, who was involved, how it came about, and its consequences. Dr. May wished for people to get a better understanding of the filibusters and what they meant in the history of America. Dr. May did an excellent job in making his arguments and conclusions. Every time he makes a proposition, he backs up the statement with numerous facts. At the end of the book are 107 pages of notes, showing the amount of detail Dr. May gave to the book. I had always thought filibusters sought the expansion of slavery, and were few. This book taught me how widespread the filibuster movement was, and how much United States officials hated it. I never before realized how much the filibuster movement affected antebellum life in America. Previous lessons about filibusters never taught me as much as this book; after reading this book, I feel that I have read *The Complete Idiot's Guide to Filibusters*, only written in words that do not insult my intelligence. The author could not have done a better job at illustrating his points. The best feature of the book is how well organized it is. Everything is logically discussed at the appropriate time. The voluminous notes guarantee the academic reliability of the book. The only thing wrong with this book is that some details were skipped over in order to give further impact of other subjects. The epilogue was rather rushed; more detail about filibusters adjusting to life after the War Between the States would have been welcomed. A comparison between the filibusters and the gold miners of the California Gold Rush and the Yukon Rush would have been welcomed. The legacy of the filibusters in the annexation of Hawaii in the 1890's would also have been welcomed. Also, the Monroe Doctrine was curiously absent throughout the book; how it was impacted by the filibuster movement seems necessary, but absent. Still, it is easy to overlook these deficiencies. Still, I am glad that I have read this book. As an American historian, I feel now that I had missed out on an important aspect of antebellum American society. I never before realized how necessary it was for an American historian to have knowledge of the filibusters.

I had the honor of studying under Professor May as a graduate student in the early 90s. May had the well earned reputation of being a tough task master, especially when it came to our research skills and proper citation of sources. This work lives up to my memories of the author as being exacting, an exceptional writer, and "deep" in his examination of a fascinating and little known phenomena in the pre-war South. Highly recommended to serious students of the period and the more general reader wishing to explore the activities of proponents of slavery and American expansionism prior to the advent of the war.

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