Take a map of the westward expansion of the United States and what do you see? Some would say that expansion was a necessity toward Manifest Destiny. Others would say that the ambition to be prosperous and wealthy played a huge role in how the map slowly begins to stretch westward. The truth is both are part of a much larger picture in how the U.S. expanded in the post-Civil War era. We can sit here and go on and on about why, but there are reasons based on facts, events, and uncontrollable circumstances. Expansion happened the way it did for a number of reasons. We start with geographical factors that include the availability of water, fertile land, and population disbursement. Another reason is the expansion of those transportation systems and terrain features that limit transportation of vital and valuable resources. Finally we come to personal motives that sparked national interests in expansion toward the Pacific Ocean. So we can now concur that westward expansion was necessary as the population increased in the east and ambition created the drive toward the west.

Geography has always played a critical role in the disbursement and expansion of people.

Usually for the same reasons all over the world throughout history. Water is a necessary resource that we as humans need to survive. This explains the paths and clusters of U.S. citizens on the map. You can see from any map that displays this data that the majority of Americans live near water sources. Expanding to the West you can still see that same pattern. Water also holds the key to plant life and fertile land. As the population increases in a specific area, the resources in that area become tied up. The populous then proceeds to venture out in search of new vital resources. In the United States case the only unexplored area at the time was westward. West of the Mississippi River water sources become scarce in a more arid environment. The further west you get the less vital recourses you can find. Land improvements do not change that much as pioneers head west because of this factor. Populated areas spread out from all of these water sources. Once you pass the Rocky Mountains we see the land improvements pick up again. Rivers are introduced into the continent from the Pacific Ocean on the western front. Once again water being the prevalent factor.

Next we have the transportation aspect of the expansion. In the 1860's the country is pretty well established and the rivers and constructed rail systems make moving resources a bit easier. (Dobson) Once again the population disbursement keeps the majority of our transportation systems more available in the most populated regions. As we begin expansion slowly in the second half of the 19th Century the rail systems do not change much until the last decade of the century. There are a couple of reasons for this. Industry was positioned in the north, and in order to maintain an industry you need an abundant and constant supply of resources. Railroads were abundant in this area because of this. We also have the issue of terrain restrictions. Engineering was not at the level that exists today so only certain areas were passable, especially in the Rocky Mountains. Earlier in the 19th century was the migration of many citizens to the west because of the rumored Gold Rush. (Henkin) Once the rumors were found to be true after a large migration of citizens the nation took interest in the prospect of gaining much needed wealth. This introduced the concept of a rail road that stretched from Missouri all the way to the western coast in Sacramento, California. (Haycox) It would be known as the Transcontinental Rail Road. This opened the avenue to the west. Migrants have an easily accessible way to reach the west and claim their wealth. With this migration we begin to see the rail systems expand through the west but not much due to the Rocky Mountains and lack of natural resources, or undiscovered resources for that matter.

With the Transcontinental Railroad in place we move into the "Gold Rush". This is what truly brought U.S. citizens to the west in great numbers. After the days of the Oregon Trail and the notion of abundant gold was passed back to the east the railroad was built. (Haycox) Not only were they traveling by foot and wagons; they had trains. (Henkin) This led to the mass migration to the west in search of personal gain. The reaction was more rail systems put in place and land improvements to keep up with the growing population's needs. The western frontier was slowly being explored for both habitable areas and more gold and silver. Government interest was sparked by these events and quickly began annexing these territories into the Union. The 1890's saw the largest expansion of rail system in the entire 19th century.

In summary expansion to the west in the United States had many variable and initiating circumstances. It can also be concluded that the expansion was necessary for the U.S. to progress into the modern era. Geography played a large role in the expansion with the dependency on water, fertile land, and the overall location of the majority of U.S. citizens. Transportation and industry pushed the drive toward the discovery of more resources which created the vast expanse of transportation systems on both land and rivers. Most notably the Transcontinental Railroad. Finally valuables such as gold and silver triggered the migration of hundreds of thousands of U.S. citizens to strike wealth and claim fertile land in the further stretches of the west coast. This allowed the west to progress and become more habitable to sustain the ever growing population in the east. Thus the great Western Expansion becomes a fight for personal gain and wealth for both settlers and the country itself.

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