Interpretation of the Battle of the Alamo and the Texas Revolution

By: Dr. Richard Bruce Winders, Alamo Historian & Curator

Why were there so many revolts in the world after the American Revolution?

• The world was experiencing a shift in the relationship between government and the individual.

• The events in Mexico were an outgrowth of the Enlightenment ideas of finding an alternative to the monarchy—that alternative was the republic.
  o The notion of the Divine Rights of Kings was ended by a shift in ideology that began in the Protestant Reformation, was furthered in the Renaissance, and culminated in the Enlightenment.
  o Monarchy vs. Republicanism
    ▪ Monarchy
      • Social hierarchy determined by bloodlines
      • Members of the Kingdom called subjects
      • Power flows from the top downward
    ▪ Republicanism
      • Removal of restrictions of bloodlines & property
      • Members of a Republic called citizens
      • Power flows from citizens to elected representatives
  o The Rise of Republicanism
    ▪ The American Revolution enabled the new republican ideology to be put in place.
- The ideology spread throughout Europe and the Western Hemisphere.
- It benefitted the newly rising professional and business class.
- It threatened the established social order.
- The federal system (federalism) created a republic with a central national government as well as individual state governments. This provided unity for national problems and autonomy for local problems.

  o Resistance

  - Resistance stemmed from threats (real and perceived) to those segments of society who had traditionally enjoyed special privileges such as governing, controlling access to the upper tiers of society, etc.
  - Wanted to keep the old bureaucracy in place with them retaining their traditional position in society.
  - Centralists: “The Good Men” or *Hombres de Bien* (These were men who had been raised to govern: the national military, the catholic church, and landowners).

A standard academic and political interpretation of the Texas Revolution is that it was a land grab by ungrateful American colonists. Is there a better explanation that makes more sense?

- The Texas Revolution was an event that occurred within an ongoing Mexican civil war.
  - In 1824, Mexican Federalists/Republicans ascended to power and adopted the Federal Constitution of 1824.
  - Started a series of events that that led to revolt and counter-revolts between the Monarchists/Centralists and the Federalist/Republicans.
Santa Anna’s alliance with the Centralists led to the revocation of the Federal Constitution of 1824 and the abolition of the federal system.

State governments were converted to federal districts to be run from Mexico City.

Revolts broke out in various states with strong federalist factions.

- The Department of Texas in the State of Coahuila y Tejas was just one region that revolted against the Centralist takeover.

People are puzzled as to why a battle took place at San Antonio de Béxar. Is there an interpretation that explains this?

- San Antonio was an important place—so important that there were two battles here.
  - San Antonio de Béxar was more than 100 years old at the time of the Texas Revolution.
  - It had a population estimated at 2,500 in the early 1830s.
  - Besides a population center, it was a military garrison town, a seat of political power, a commercial center, and a crossroads.
  - The rebels captured the town in December 1835. (Battle of Béxar.)
  - The government’s response was to recapture it. (Siege & Battle of the Alamo.)

- The battles were not over control of the Alamo—they were over control of the town.

What is the relationship between the town of San Antonio de Béxar and the Alamo?

- The Battle of the Alamo was over control of the town—not the Alamo itself.
  - There were defenses in the town as well as the fortified mission compound.
  - The actual post was the town of Béxar, not the Alamo.
Despite Houston’s *recommendation* to destroy the fortifications in the town and bring the cannon to Gonzales, Governor Henry Smith continued to support the defense of the town by ordering Travis’ there.

**Why did the Mexican government allow Americans and Europeans to colonize Texas?**

- Colonization was an immigration policy.
  - Governments institute immigration policy in order to regulate who enters their borders.
  - For years the policy had been to keep foreigners out of Texas.
  - The years between 1810 and 1820 saw a decrease in the population of Texas.
  - Spain, and then Mexico, chose to open the region to immigrants as a measure intended to build up Texas’ population.
  - The *empresarios* were to screen who came in.
  - The intention was to allow in only law abiding, people of means as colonists.
  - These people were to make Texas prosperous.
  - The government would then use their prosperity to help cover the cost of administering Texas. (i.e., Taxes)
  - Immigration was and still is difficult to control.
  - Immigrants came in greater numbers than anticipated, overwhelming the system of check and balances.
  - The more resent the immigrant, the less loyal to the Mexican government.
    - Peace Party = Older Colonists
    - War Party = Newer Colonists
Why did Béxar and Goliad play such a prominent role in the Texas Revolution?

- There were two main routes into Texas: one went through Béxar, the other went through Goliad.
  - Both Béxar and Goliad were strategic crossroads.
  - The road from Monclova (and adjoining area) led to Béxar.
  - The road from Matamoros (and adjoining area) led to Goliad.
  - Mexico lacked the naval resources to initiate the campaign from the coast.
    - The Texas Navy, although small, posed a serious threat to Mexican shipping.
  - Denied access to the sea lanes, the Mexican Army’s only real choice was to go overland via the Béxar and Goliad roads.

What was Texas’ status within the Mexican Federation?

- Texas was a department within the state of Coahuila y Tejas.
  - The writers of the Federal Constitution of 1824 treated Texas as a department/territory because it lacked a sufficient population for full statehood.
  - It was attached to Coahuila to produce the State of Coahuila y Tejas.
  - Citizens of the new state were official designated Coahuitecans; the label, however, failed to bring unity to the new state.
  - Tejanos—especially in Béxar—were disappointed because they saw it as a demotion.
  - The goal—even before the Texas Revolution—was for Texas to be granted separate statehood.
How did events in *Coahuila y Tejas* help bring on the revolt in Texas?

- The Monclova-Béxar faction was at odds with the Saltillo faction.
  - At stake were the political and economic benefits that go with being a state capital.
  - Béxar had historic ties to the area around Monclova.
  - Representatives from Béxar and Monclova forged an alliance against Saltillo.
  - The changing location of the capitals of *Coahuila y Tejas* has to be viewed in the context of this ongoing feud.
    - (1) Saltillo, 1824 to March 9, 1833.
    - (2) Monclova, March 9, 1833 to May 21, 1835.
    - (3) San Antonio de Béxar.
  - Saltillo pronounced in favor of Santa Anna and Centralism.
  - Monclova/Béxar remained Federalist.
  - Governor Viesca, Ben Milam, and others were arrested by Cos as they were trying to reach Texas to set up the state capital in Béxar.

What was the *Tejano* experience in the Texas Revolution?

- The *Tejano* experience was not uniform.
  - Béxar’s *Tejano* elites favored forming economic ties with the incoming colonists.
    They formed business relations. At a greater distance from the colonial settlements, they were not threatened by conflicting land titles. They had an established history as republicans.
In Goliad, the original *Tejano* settlers were the descendants of the areas’ mission Indians and *presidial* soldiers. Its population had just undergone a significant change with the arrival of *empresario* Martín de Leon and his colonists from Tamaulipas. De Leon’s colonists settled in and around Presidio La Bahía. De Leon also founded the town of Victoria. He and his colonists experienced disputes with Anglo colonists over overlapping land claims. Although nominally republican, many supported the Centralist government once the revolution arrived.

Nacogdoches’ *Tejano* population was influenced by its close proximity to the United States. Americans had been slipping over the border for years seeking land even before the implementation of colonization. The area had many Cherokee Indians who settled there after being forced out of the United States. The major concern of the inhabitants of Nacogdoches and the surrounding area (*Tejano*, American, and Indian) was acquiring clear title to land.

**What was the Mexican point of view regarding the Texas Revolution and the Alamo?**

- This is not a simple question and the answer demonstrates the complexity of the Texas Revolution.
- Does the questioner mean Mexican as race/ethnicity or Mexican as a nationality?
  - If Mexican is defined as race/ethnicity, the very vocabulary casts the event as a conflict driven by race and ethnicity.
  - When presenting this version as *fact*, all other aspects of the revolution’s causes are ignored.
• The term Mexican as used at the Alamo refers to nationality—citizens of Mexico.
  o To illustrate the complexity of the situation, all these people were Mexican citizens when the revolution breaks out.
    ▪ Santa Anna: the President of Mexico, Commander-in-Chief, and Centralist leader. His desire and duty are to put down revolts against his government.
    ▪ José María Tornel: Secretary of War and Navy. A supporter of Santa Anna. (Santanista) Author of the Tornel Decree.
    ▪ Enrique de la Peña: Army officer. An ardent Republican/Federalist who opposed Santa Anna yet opposed the loss of Texas more. Blamed Santa Anna and Filisola for losing Texas.
    ▪ Valentín Gómez Farías: Vice President ousted by Santa Anna during the Centralist takeover. An ardent Republican/Federalist. Wanted to unite all Mexican federalists against Santa Anna.
    ▪ José Urrea: General in charge of retaking Goliad. An ardent Republican/Federalist who opposed Santa Anna yet opposed the loss of Texas more.
• Juan Davis Bradburn: A Kentuckian who held a colonel’s commission in the Mexican Army. Arrested Travis in 1832. Loyal to the Mexican government.


• José Antonio Navarro: Nephew of Ruiz. An ardent Republican/Federalist. Supported the republican revolts of 1811-1813. Went into exile. Worked with Austin to bring business to Texas. Opposed Santa Anna and the Centralists. Signed the Texas Declaration of Independence.

• Juan N. Seguín: Son of Erasmo Seguín, an influential resident of Béxar. Commissioned a captain in the Federalist Army of Texas by Austin. Member of the Alamo garrison who left as a messenger before March 6th. Commanded a company of Tejanos at San Jacinto.

- José Toribio Losoya: Resident of Béxar. Supported the Federalist cause. Killed at the Battle of the Alamo as a member of the garrison.

- Carlos de la Garza: Son of a soldier stationed at Presidio La Bahía (Goliad), Garza led a *Tejano* Spy Company (scouts). He and his men assisted General Urrea in his campaign against the rebels at Goliad and the surrounding area.

- Stephen F. Austin: *Empresario* and naturalized citizen. Urged his and other colonists to be loyal Mexican citizens and work within the Mexican system of government. Only changed his mind after being imprisonment for more than a year in Mexico City. Elected to serve as the commander of the “Federal Army of Texas.”

- James Bowie: Colonist and naturalized citizen. Accepted by the *Tejano* elites of Béxar. Married the daughter of the future governor of *Coahuila y Tejas*. Influential in the State Legislature of *Coahuila y Tejas*. Republican/Federalist.

- William B. Travis: Colonist and naturalized citizen. A leading member of the War Party.

- Sam Houston: Colonist and naturalized citizen. A vocal leader in War Party. Commanded the Texan Army at San Jacinto.