

## **The Rise of Santa Anna**

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Antonio López de Santa Anna remains a villain in three nations: the United States, Texas, and Mexico (I know, technically Texas is not a nation, but it was and many Texans still think of it as such). To Americans and Texans, Santa Anna is a ruthless dictator whose brutal actions at the Alamo and Goliad forever branded him a bloody tyrant. Mexicans blame him for the loss of Texas and the rest of Mexico's northern territories as a result of the Invasion of 1847, the Mexican Cession of 1848, and the Gadsden Purchase of 1853. Critics point to his staggering defeat at San Jacinto as proof of his incompetence, a defect matched by his ego and arrogance. This is the picture of Santa Anna that the public has come to expect and accept.

Who was the real Santa Anna? Historians who study the early Mexican national period have begun to answer this question. True, he will forever be linked with atrocities carried out in the Texas Revolution. Nevertheless, he was a man of his time and a product of the tumultuous change taking place in Mexico as it transformed itself from Spanish colony, to federal republic, to centralist state. The key to Santa Anna's rise is that he was in the right place at the right time. Moreover, his rise was made possible by the personal connections he formed among Mexico's powerful elites. The combination of these two factors propelled him onto Mexico's political stage and into history.

The right place for Santa Anna was Vera Cruz. The name applied to both the political region (province/state) and the city located on the east coast of the Gulf of Mexico. Spanish trade regulations had designated the city the primary port for receiving goods from Spain and shipping raw products to the homeland. This secure trade contributed to Vera Cruz' great wealth and political influence. Although Santa Anna was not born in the city, but further inland at Jalapa, he benefited from being raised in this environment. His father, a Spanish merchant, had

ties with elites who managed the region's affairs. Even though young Santa Anna chose not to join his father's business, but instead pursue a career in the military, his family's connections provided him with powerful benefactors and allies who contributed to his rise. Jalapa, a town on the main road from the port to Mexico City, served as his home base. He and his family owned much of the land that lay on either side of the road leading from the coast. Prior to becoming president, Santa Anna had mastered the art of *caudillismo* - political & social domination, through an informal system of sustained obedience based on a paternalistic relationship between the subordinates and the leader, who attained his position as based on personality - necessary for any successful regional strongman.

The right time was the decline of Spanish power in the western hemisphere. Napoleon Bonaparte's invasion of Spain in 1808 had set in motion events that eventually led to Mexico's independence. Entering the Spanish army on the eve of Father Miguel Hidalgo's revolt, Santa Anna remained loyal to King Ferdinand VII for most of Mexico's war for independence. This phase in his early life brought him accolades, promotions, and positions of authority. It also placed him in the circle of influential military officers whose machinations shaped Mexico's future. Like others of his age and social station, Santa Anna found the appeal of Iturbide's Plan de Iguala with its promises of equality, independence, and religion too appealing to resist. This first change of allegiance established a pattern of political reversals, allowing the former royalist to become first a republican and then a centralist.

In the larger scope of Mexican history, Santa Anna's rise represented not just his political advancement, but the rise of the entire *criollo* class in Mexico. The men in this social class were the sons of Spanish-born fathers who had traditionally been denied leading positions in Spanish society due to their Mexican birth. *Criollos* were essentially second class subjects of the Spanish

king. Spain's reliance on *criollo* officers, such as Santa Anna and Iturbide, built the *criollo's* confidence and convinced them that they should be Mexico's natural leaders, a role they embraced. Although the emerging *criollo* elites mingled with Spaniards and *mestizos*, they remained a separate brotherhood bound together by similar upbringing and experiences. It was the rise of the *criollo* class in Mexico that made Santa Anna's climb to power possible.

### **Antonio López de Santa Anna: A Timeline of His Rise to Power**

February 21, 1794	Born in New Spain at Jalapa, Vera Cruz
June 9, 1810	Appointed cadet in the Spanish Infantry at Vera Cruz
1811	Wounded in left hand in fight against rebels
February 6, 1812	Promoted to 2 <sup>nd</sup> Lieutenant
October 7, 1812	Promoted to 1 <sup>st</sup> Lieutenant
August 18, 1813	Cited for bravery at Battle of Medina in Texas
December 29, 1816	Promoted to Captain
March 1821	Abandoned Royalists and announced support for Agustín de Iturbide
March 29, 1821	Promoted to Colonel of rebel forces
May 1822	Promoted to Brigadier General
December 1, 1822	Turned against Iturbide
February 1, 1823	Supported Plan de Casa Mata, which led to Iturbide's abdication
June 5, 1823	Announced Plan de San Luis Potosí (plan for a federal republic)
1824	Appointed the military governor of the State of Yucatan
December 1828	Assisted in coup against President Manuel Gómez Pedraza

1829	Governor of the State of Vera Cruz
September 11, 1829	Known as the “Hero of Tampico” after defeat of Spanish invasion
1832	Assisted in revolt that returned Pedraza to the presidency
1833	Elected president of Mexico by vote of state legislatures