Forget the Alamo

What’s in it for me? Learn how the truth about the Alamo conflicts with its mythology.

Many of us think we’re familiar with the story of the Alamo. Maybe you sat with your parents and watched the 1960 film starring John Wayne. Or maybe you were taught the story in history class and figure you got the gist. Well, there’s a good chance that what you’ve seen or heard is actually far from the truth. For well over a century, the story many of us heard about the Alamo was little more than a tall tale. A myth that was made to serve a purpose and has lingered on in the public consciousness for far too long. While we’ve been told those who fought in the Alamo were heroes, the reality is a far darker truth about the origins of Texas statehood. In these blinks, you’ll learn

how the cotton business set the stage for a Texian-Mexican conflict; why we may not want to celebrate the likes of Jim Bowie; and how Phil Collins may play a role in the Alamo’s future.

The conflict at the Alamo can be traced back to cotton and slavery.

If you’re a Texan, you know about the Alamo. Or, at least, you know a version of the events that took place back on March 6, 1836. It is, after all, a required subject that’s been taught to seventh graders for generations. But what you may not know, is that teachers are mandated by Texas law to teach kids a “heroic” version of events. This is a version that’s been championed by conservative voices, from John Wayne to Lyndon B. Johnson. But were there heroes at the Alamo? Let’s look at the events that led up to the legendary clash between the Mexican Army and a group of rebels. The key message here is: The conflict at the Alamo can be traced back to cotton and slavery. One of the more questionable aspects of the Alamo legend is what the rebels were fighting for. Those who favor popular mythology would have you believe that Anglo-Americans such as James Bowie, William Travis, and Davy Crockett were fighting for freedom and liberty. But this doesn’t quite track with the real situation that led to the birth of an independent Texas. At the start of the 1800s, a different kind of revolution was already underway. Eli Whitney had just invented the cotton gin in 1794. This revolutionized cotton production, allowing for a massive increase in output and new fortunes to be made. The American South offered the perfect conditions: vast cotton fields and plenty of avenues for exporting the product. The ugly catch was that these fortunes were dependent upon slave labor. This was a huge booming business through the first half of the century. It’s why the number of enslaved people in the US jumped from 900,000 in 1800 to around 4 million in 1860. In the first couple decades of the 1800s, people were already looking for new land to farm. The search led them to Texas where land was cheap. While Texas was under Mexican control at the time, for a while, this wasn’t a problem. The border was extremely porous and Mexico was ruled by Spain, which didn’t object to free people owning enslaved people. Even some of the wealthy Tejanos, the Mexican inhabitants of the Texas region, owned enslaved people.

Mexican independence changed the rules for Anglo settlers.

Believe it or not, there was a time when Spain welcomed American settlers into Texas. The Anglo colonies actually helped Spain push back against the Native Americans that they viewed as troublemakers. Of course, US presidents like James Madison and James Monroe were eager to keep a toehold in the region in case an opportunity arose to redraw territorial boundaries. It was no secret that the Americans were hoping to add Texas to their growing list of territories. The Mexicans also had their reason for inviting Americans to cross the border. They needed help throwing off the yoke of their Spanish oppressors and winning their independence. However, when Mexicans put out the call, there were a large number of smugglers, pirates, and soldiers of fortune who answered. The key message here is: Mexican independence changed the rules for Anglo settlers. By 1813, Mexico had already declared its intentions for independence and there'd been clashes in Texas between the joint forces of Anglo and Tejano rebels versus the Spanish. In the Battle of Medina, not far from the Alamo, the Royal Spanish Army took no prisoners – it was a rebel massacre. But Mexico eventually achieved its independence from Spain in 1821, and many in Texas were unprepared for the fact that the abolition of slavery would be one of the founding principles of the new government. Maybe it shouldn't have come as a shock. After all, Mexican independence was all about breaking free from colonial oppression and declaring all people equal. Nevertheless, a shock is exactly what it was to the Anglos who'd moved to Texas in order to seek their fortunes in cotton farming. Their whole business model was reliant on slavery. Immediately, there was concern. Fortunately for the Texians, they had a strong leader and powerful diplomatic ambassador of sorts in Stephen F. Austin. Austin would go down in history as the "Father of Texas" and on more than one occasion he traveled the long distance to Mexico City to plead the case of the Texians. The new Mexican government never bent on legalizing slavery, but in the years leading up to the Battle of the Alamo, the government proved willing to compromise time and time again. For the most part, though, the vast distance between Mexico City and Texas meant that the government was always going to be relatively hands-off. Still, as long as Mexico took an abolitionist stance, the Texians felt like their livelihood was at stake. Plus, no new settlers were going to arrive if they weren't allowed to bring a crucial kind of property: enslaved people.

Some of the Alamo rebels weren't so morally upstanding.

By its nature, Texas was a place for rebirth. If you'd struck out in the US territories, Texas offered a second chance with a clean slate. This was a good option for honest, hardworking families who needed a break, but it was also a tempting opportunity for scoundrels, con men, and grifters who'd reached the end of their rope in the US. Two of the best-known scoundrels were Pierre and Jean Lafitte. Through their base on Galveston Island, off the coast of Texas, they sold stolen goods and flaunted the rules of slave trading, selling people for a dollar a pound. For cotton farmers looking to get started, it was an enticing bargain. The key message here is: Some of the Alamo rebels weren't so morally upstanding. In the popular mythology of the Alamo, the Anglo rebels were paragons of virtue and morality – the last line of defense against a morally corrupt

and bloodthirsty bunch of savages. This wasn't the case. For years, the Mexican government proved willing to compromise on the central issue of slavery. And for years, the settlers were allowed by the government to keep the enslaved people they had. When looking at the facts, it's hard not to see Mexico as going above and beyond the call of diplomacy in trying to placate the unruly Texians. The historical record also shows that the holy trinity of Alamo "heroes" – Bowie, Crocket, and Travis – weren't in Texas for heroic reasons. Jim Bowie was perhaps the most glaring example of a dubious individual being labeled a hero. Bowie was a violent, drunken brawler and illegal slave trader who'd been behind so many phony land speculation deals in the US territories that he was forced to try his luck south of the border in Texas. Davy Crocket rode tall tales of frontier escapades into a failed political career. After being voted out of office in 1835 he said, "I told the people of my district that I would serve them as faithfully as I had done; but if not, they might go to hell, and I would go to Texas." William Travis was also running out of options. Broke, with mounting debts and an arrest warrant hanging over his head, he fled for Texas in 1831. These three unlikely misfits weren't in Texas to defend freedom and liberty. Like many others, they simply had no other place to go.

Between 1832 and 1835, Texians and Mexico inched closer to war.

For a while, the Texas settlements thrived. But their future was uncertain. It was proving increasingly difficult to attract new settlers so long as Mexico held to its abolitionist stance. The sentiment was, as Stephen Austin wrote to a friend, "Texas must be a slave country." In his view, it was a necessity of circumstances. So, it wasn't long before talks of rebellion were brewing among the Texians, as well as the Tejanos. It all led up to a series of events that culminated in the bloodbath at the Battle of the Alamo. But it needn't have happened at all. The key message here is: Between 1832 and 1835, Texians and Mexico inched closer to war. At the start of 1834, relations between the Texians and the Mexican government were still salvageable. There'd been some violence at Fort Velasco in 1832 when a few Texians were taken prisoner by Mexican troops. But since then, Austin had still been able to negotiate with the Mexican government and persuaded it to ease immigration restrictions against Americans entering Mexico. But in January 1834, on the way back from Mexico City, Austin was arrested. He'd written a letter about the possibility of preparing a state constitution for Texas. This letter was intercepted and seen as evidence of treasonous intent. Austin remained behind bars for just shy of a year. The ones who were really itching for revolt were a small group of a dozen or so men known as the War Dogs, which included Jim Bowie and William Travis. Travis was one of the rebels arrested at Fort Velasco. In reality, few of the ordinary citizens of Texas were on their side. These were the kind of loud and rowdy troublemakers that tended to make things worse, not better. And indeed, the more the War Dogs barked, the more Mexican troops began to show up and check in on things. Eventually, the Mexican presence began to be pointed at as evidence of intent on breaking up the Texas settlements, even when they were actually trying to keep the peace. Soon, it was deemed by the War Dogs that the Mexicans were launching an all-out invasion. Certainly, the new Mexican president, Santa Anna, wasn't happy. In 1832, rebellious Texians were on his side. Santa Anna was seen as a federalist, which meant he was in favor of a decentralized government, one in which different states had a measure of autonomy. But the longer Santa Anna stayed in power, the more authoritarian his interests became. Mostly, though, he just saw the rebellious Texians as ungrateful, law-breaking immigrants who needed to be taught a lesson.

The end of 1835 left a ragtag group of militiamen in a vulnerable position at the Alamo.

In 1835, things began to seriously escalate. That year, Santa Anna officially abolished federalism in favor of a centralist approach. For Texians, it was as if all hope was lost. Tejanos were also up in arms over Santa Anna's increasingly authoritarian style of government. Then, on August 1, 1835, Mexican Army General Martín Perfecto de Cos was handed an arrest warrant for William Travis, following Travis's unprovoked attack on a few dozen Mexican troops in Anahuac. At the time, Texians were aghast at Travis's behavior, but when news of General Cos's impending arrival reached them, they rallied behind the claims that a Mexican invasion was underway. The fact of the matter is that Cos had no intention of provoking a war. For him, it was a simple matter of justice. Travis broke the law, and he was going to get arrested. But instead, Cos found that a small army was waiting for him. The key message here is: The end of 1835 left a ragtag group of militiamen in a vulnerable position at the Alamo. In a moment that has gone down in history, the arriving General Cos ordered that all arms in the area be seized. There was a cannon in the nearby town of Gonzales. But getting the cannon proved to be a challenge. Two hundred Mexican troops arrived in Gonzales and squared off against some Texas militiamen who made a flag with a cannon on it, along with the words "COME AND TAKE IT." To this day, this remains a popular phrase found on t-shirts across the state of Texas. At this time, the Mexican military couldn't understand why the Texians were so eager for a fight. They retreated to San Antonio where they added more men to their ranks. But the militiamen didn't let up. From November to December 1835, they laid siege to San Antonio. Once again, Mexico retreated, this time to the Alamo, where Cos surrendered and agreed to leave Texas. Once again the militiamen celebrated a victory. Only this time, it was more of a Pyrrhic victory. Many of the soldiers, some of whom only joined up for a brief adventure, decided this was enough. Winter was beginning to set in and it was time to go home. This left a small mix of Texian and Tejano soldiers sitting in an extremely vulnerable place. The Alamo was an old Spanish mission – a small compound with low walls located in the open, exposed on all sides. The Mexican Army had left the Alamo because it knew it couldn't be well defended. So, even though it retreated, that didn't mean Santa Anna had any intention of giving up the fight.

The Battle of the Alamo was a military disaster that could have been avoided.

Some folks will try to tell you that no one knows what really happened at the Alamo since everyone died. But that's not really the case. Sure, just about everyone who was trying to defend the Alamo from the attacking Mexican Army, led by Santa Anna himself, did die a violent death. But over the years, a clearer picture of what happened has emerged, thanks in part to accounts written by Mexican soldiers that have only come to light in recent decades, as well as the initial accounts from the sole survivors. The key message here is: The Battle of the Alamo was a military disaster that could have been avoided. While many of the Texian and Tejano men recruited in 1835 had left the militia, in January and February of 1836, a handful of new men did answer the call for

reinforcements, among them were the 49-year-old Davy Crockett and Jim Bowie, who was around 40 years old. By this time, William B. Travis had already been made the chief recruiting officer. Though none of these men had much, or any, military training or experience, it was decided that Travis, who was only 26 years old at the time, would be in command of the Alamo. For his part, shortly after his arrival, Jim Bowie proceeded to go on an epic drinking bender with some of the other militiamen. During that time he likely contracted a bout of venereal disease that soon caused him to be bedridden and unable to help in the battle that would shortly ensue. The siege began on February 23, 1836. For weeks, Tejano scouts had been warning Travis and Bowie that thousands of Mexican soldiers had arrived at Presidio, an old Spanish town along the Rio Grande river, and were steadily making their way to the Alamo. Travis wrote a series of letters begging for reinforcements but to no avail. So, as it was, Travis had around 150 men. The question is, why did they stay? Were they overconfident, ego-driven, stubborn? It's possible that Travis believed his letters would get a response – that reinforcements would show up. But even after his letters calling on more recruits to come to the rescue were printed in local newspapers, that help never showed up. Sam Houston, the head of the Texas Army, was skeptical of Travis's desperate letters. Once the siege began, word reached American colonel James Fannin, who ordered over 300 soldiers, along with a few cannons, to march to the Alamo. But it was a 90-mile journey – few men even had shoes, wagons broke down, oxen broke free. Others likely understood that the Alamo was simply undefendable, a lost cause. The march was called off.

The Battle of the Alamo was a decisive victory for Santa Anna's army.

On March 5, 1836, the siege was on its 12th day. Every day, cannon fire and bullets had been steadily chipping away and ripping holes in the outside walls, which on their own stood only 12 feet tall. Those inside the Alamo compound could see the Mexican Army building ladders to scale the Alamo's poor defenses. On this day, according to two separate accounts from men in Santa Anna's army, Travis recognized the certain doom they were facing. He sent out a Tejano woman to negotiate a surrender with Santa Anna. Travis's terms were that they'd surrender, as long as no lives were taken. But Santa Anna wouldn't have it. The time for negotiations had long passed. The only terms he'd accept now was unconditional surrender. The key message here is: The Battle of the Alamo was a decisive victory for Santa Anna's army. One of the most enduring parts of the Alamo myth is that everyone, but especially Travis and Crockett, fought with unhesitating bravery to the very last breath. As the reports of Travis's attempt at surrender show, this is very likely another bit of fabrication that's come to define the Battle of the Alamo. What eventually happened was, in the predawn hours of March 6, 1836, around 1,800 of Santa Anna's troops finally began their assault. While the men at the Alamo were caught off guard, the initial attack was well defended. The ladders collapsed under the weight of the soldiers, and once they were by the walls, many were shouting "Viva Santa Anna!" All of this made them easy targets for gunners at the top of the walls. But in those first few minutes, Travis, who was up on the northern wall, was fatally wounded. Soon enough, another wave of Mexican soldiers arrived, and the Alamo was taken over. Once the defenses had been breached and the soldiers flooded in, some tried to escape the compound but were easily cut down by men on horseback. Bowie was killed in his bed. And according to a report by a Mexican soldier, Crockett had survived the initial onslaught only to be captured and executed in front of Santa Anna himself. It's another eyewitness account that suggests not every man at the Alamo went

down fighting. Nevertheless, there were no prisoners. The only survivors were Tejano women and children; an enslaved person that Travis owned by the name of Joe; Susanna Dickinson, a wife of one of the soldiers; and her infant child. They were released by the Mexican Army and it's their stories that painted the first pictures of what happened at the Alamo.

The myth of the Alamo began not long after the battle ended.

Both Joe and Susana Dickinson reached Sam Houston's camp in Gonzales around March 11, 1836, having been found on the road by scouts on their way to San Antonio. Their stories confirmed the worst rumors General Houston had already heard about what happened at the Alamo. It was hard to see it as anything but utterly demoralizing. Houston retreated, burned Gonzales to the ground and came up with another idea. He set up camp in a safe area and began running drills, training the volunteers that were now streaming into the army's ranks. Fourteen hundred men were now ready to fight, all they needed was inspiration, and this is where the myth of the Alamo was born. The key message here is: The myth of the Alamo began not long after the battle ended. Houston saw the Battle of the Alamo like a modern day Thermopylae, the battle where outnumbered Spartans fought against an invading Persian Army. On March 24, 1836, this is the version that appeared in the Telegraph and Texas Register, a newspaper and well-known propaganda outlet. In the article, every man died fighting and at least one even blew himself up in order to take as many Mexican soldiers with him as possible. Here, we find Travis still fighting after taking two bullets and using his last ounce of strength to kill a Mexican officer. In this printed version, Crockett lay dead on the ground, but there's a circle of dead Mexican soldiers around his body and he still has Jim Bowie's knife clutched in his hand. In reality, it was a foolhardy idea for Travis and the other men to stay and fight at the Alamo. It was a disaster on every level. But just weeks later it would be a glorious, heroic tragedy that white Americans would never stop celebrating. This is the story that quickly swept across America, with some newspapers adding further embellishments and others calling for swift vengeance against Santa Anna and the "vile scum" that made up the Mexican Army. As inspiration for his troops, the story certainly did its job. On April 21, 1836, Sam Houston outmaneuvered Santa Anna's troops and this time caught them by surprise in the area of San Jacinto. The Texas Army was practically on top of the Mexican camp before the shouts of "Remember the Alamo" were heard coming from Houston's men. Eighteen minutes later, Santa Anna was captured, and some Texas soldiers proceeded to slaughter, rape, and pillage their way through the camp.

Only recently has factual history caught up with the enduring myth.

Upon Santa Anna's defeat, Texas became an independent state for ten years before joining the US. Naturally, the mythology surrounding the Alamo became a vital part of the Texas origin story. It also continued to serve leaders as a go-to analogy for drumming up motivation. President Lyndon B. Johnson, a Texas native, used it frequently when referring to the early days of the Vietnam war. George W. Bush wasn't afraid to invoke the Alamo, either. Over the years, however, this popular myth meant

that contributions of the Tejanos who were there fighting alongside the Anglo “heroes” got lost. Not only that, but in the late 1800s and early 1900s, non-white rebels were lumped in with the enemy. Derisive terms like “greasers” began to be used to describe all Mexicans, along with broad degrading attacks on their characters. All of this can be found in the early literature that helped solidify the Alamo myth. The key message here is: Only recently has factual history caught up with the enduring myth. No one has felt the dark side of the Alamo myth more than the Latino population of Texas, who will soon become the state’s majority population. To this day, seventh graders in public schools are taught a course on Texas history. Often, these classes visit what’s left of the Alamo. For generations of Latino kids, when teachers tell the story of the Alamo, this is the day they suddenly became outsiders among their white classmates. However, starting in the sixties, more critical and scholarly looks at the Battle of the Alamo began to emerge. Walter Lord’s book A Time to Stand was one of the first twentieth-century books to look at the events with an eye toward accuracy and being unafraid to unravel the myth. It started a serious trend toward what has been called revisionist history. In the 1990s this trend really took off with Jeff Long’s book Duel of Eagles, which, in its own way, took no prisoners in exposing the moral dubiousness of characters like Travis and Bowie. For his efforts, Long received so many death threats from proud Texans that it was some time before he felt comfortable walking in front of a window in his house.

Although a more accurate story is being told, the fight over the Alamo’s meaning continues.

Despite the pushback from those committed to the Alamo mythology they grew up with, progress has been made. While teachers are still mandated by state law to tell a “heroic” version of events, it’s one that now includes Tejano representation. Books challenging the myth have continued to be published and a historical consensus is being reached that debunks the idea that it was all about nobility and bravery. In general, Texas is indeed reckoning with the fact that the revolt had more to do with preserving the business of slavery than with stemming Mexican oppression. Even the historical site of the Alamo, which used to be a shrine to the myth, has begun to tell a more accurate version of the tale. Though, once again, the Alamo has found itself becoming the focal point of a heated battle. The key message here is: Although a more accurate story is being told, the fight over the Alamo’s meaning continues. For years, the Alamo site was under control of a group known as the Daughters of the Republic of Texas. This was a group of women who could trace their lineage back to founding Texas families, and they were intent on keeping the heroic myth alive and well. But eventually, the Daughters were exposed for mismanaging money and letting the site literally fall apart from neglect. State legislature officially ended the Daughters’ role as Alamo custodians and put control back in the hands of the state. Since then, George P. Bush, commissioner of the Texas General Land Office, has been at the helm of recent efforts to transform the Alamo site into a world-class destination. These initial plans also involved telling an inclusive and accurate version of events. Of course, this has been met with some resistance. Already people with automatic rifles have been holding vigil, preventing old Alamo monuments to the “heroic” trio from being touched. But perhaps more interesting is the proposed centerpiece of the new site: a collection of Alamo artifacts owned by musician Phil Collins. Despite being thoroughly English, Collins is what’s known as an Alamo-head, and has amassed a huge collection of artifacts. The problem

is, many of these artifacts come with a very sketchy provenance and have been authenticated with nothing more than a “gut feeling” by friendly collectors working on behalf of Collins. Like the popular Alamo myth, the Collins collection doesn’t bear close scrutiny. But time will tell if such details will get in the way of it being celebrated in Texas. Or, maybe it’s just another reason why the Alamo is perhaps best left forgotten altogether.

Final summary

The key message in these blinks is that: Generations of Americans have been taught a pretty simple story about the Battle of the Alamo. This traditional tale involved heroic figures who fought valiantly to their last breath in order to fight back against Mexican oppression and help liberate Texas. The historical facts present a far different picture. The Battle of the Alamo can be traced back to the conflict created when Mexico gained independence from Spain and made slavery illegal. This threatened the Anglo-American immigrants who relied on slavery for their lucrative cotton plantations. Tensions continued to rise, with Texians unwilling to accept Mexico’s new laws and led to a revolt that culminated in the Battle of the Alamo. While the battle was a catastrophic defeat for the Texians and Tejanos at the Alamo, the story was altered and used as inspiration to achieve independence from Mexico. That story has been harmful to generations of Latino-Americans living in Texas but is finally being revised to reflect a more historically accurate narrative that is perhaps best left to the dustbin of history.