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# The Texas Revolution

Mexico, in the nineteenth century, was very busy coming to terms with its newly found statehood. Since the country's independence from Spain in 1821, Mexico had been existing in a state of continuous civil strife. Quickly after the war of independence, Agustín Iturbide was named Emperor by conservative military groups. His rule was not to last, however, as the people revolted again after he tried to abolish the civilian congress that had been elected immediately after the war. Iturbide was forced into exile in Europe, and in his stead rose an internally divided republican government left to remedy the horrible finances of the nation. With its economy in shambles after the expulsion of the skilled, capital-holding Spainards and a lack of sector diversity, Mexico sunk deeper and deeper into debt. Military officers would frequently take the capital to try to negotiate foreign loans to stimulate the ailing economy. Amidst this backdrop of bankruptcy, two competing political factions emerged that further handicapped the nation: the Centralists and the Federalists. The conservative former favored a strong national government with authority over the states, with a national standing army to enforce it. The Federalists, on the other hand, wanted to decentralize the government and give significant autonomy to the states. They also advocated for a secular national government, in stark contrast to the Centralists' aims to make Roman Catholicism the official religion of Mexico. These two groups furiously contested seats of power: from 1824 to 1836 there were no less than 6 transfers of the presidency. Neither side was opposed to violent rebellion as a means to displace the other. Weakened by partisan division and the dying economy, Mexico struggled within itself.

A particular thorn in Mexico's side was its northern territory. Previously, in Spanish occupied Mexico, Americans had been allowed to settle in the northernmost provinces of

Coahuila and Texas. Soon after, Spain was overthrown in the Mexican war for independence, but the policy persisted. The Southwest was largely empty, dry desert, inhabited by the native Comenche, Apache, and Navajo tribes. Settlers were frequently attacked, and with little natural resources, most Mexicans were hesitant to settle there. Mexico figured that by allowing "Anglos" (the term for the American immigrants) to settle there, a buffer zone between the dangerous Indians and Mexicans would be created, encouraging people to move there and protecting them from the frequent border raids conducted by the Indians. Their plan backfired. The Americans, instead of taking the harsh Indian land in western Texas, settled in the eastern parts, where the land was more fertile and safe, and failed to create any sort of buffer. Furthermore, the Anglos frequently didn't become citizens or Catholics, as they were theoretically required to do. With these problems in mind, and with an alarmingly large population of Anglos in Texas growing due to the extreme efforts of Texans like Stephen Austin (who had originally been granted huge spans of land by Mexico for American colonization), Mexico repealed their American immigration policy in 1830. Regardless, Anglos continued to immigrate to Texas illegally, and both they and many Tejanos (Spanish Texans) grew increasingly unhappy with Mexican tariffs, anti-smuggling laws, and the legal system. These grievances eventually increasingly caused unrest, and led to a series of altercations known as the Anahuac disturbances. They led to the Battle of Velasco in 1832, where Texans successfully took a Mexican fort after authorities arrested civilians for suspicions of crimes. This, however, was not the start of the revolution, but a testament to the Anglo Texans' dissatisfaction with the Mexican government. Tensions were high, and any spark could ignite a flame.

That spark was Antonio López de Santa Anna. A skilled and ambitious military officer who had fought for independence and against both Spanish invasion and Emperor Iturbide, he was loved by the public and, as a federalist politician, promised greater autonomy to the states, making him popular with anti-centralist Texans. He, however, was two faced. Upon being elected president, he proclaimed himself the *cudillo* (dictator) of Mexico in 1834, replacing the constitution with his own and creating property requirements to vote to keep power in the hands of the aristocracy. His attitude toward provincial autonomy reversed, and Mexico became much less lenient with Texas. When he heard of some Texans' ambitions to become a U.S. state and the great unrest developing in the territory, he ordered troops to go to Texas and enforce Mexican law and order. The surge of troops into their territory did not sit well with the already angry Texans. A small dispute over a loaned Mexican cannon in the town of Gonzalez broke out, Texans fired on Mexican troops, and the Texas Revolution began on October 2, 1835. Stalling the Mexican demands for the return of their cannon long enough to get reinforcements, the Texan forces had surrounded Mexican General Perfecto de Cos in the night and, outmanned and outgunned, he surrendered. Victorious in this first "Battle of Gonzales" and the subsequent Grass Fight, the Texans united under the elected military leadership of Stephen Austin. They laid siege to San Antonio where General Cos had retreated. Taking houses one by one and digging trenches to connect them, the Anglos eventually took the city, and by extension, had control of most of Texas.

Santa Anna was furious. The treacherous Americans, little more than pirates in his eyes, in Texas had defied him. He used his power as cudillo to raise an army of seven thousand men, and marched into San Antonio determined to get revenge and to squash the Revolution. Rather

than retreat, the Texans stationed in San Antonio decided to stay and fight, to slow the army down and give Northern Texas a chance to prepare. Bunkering down in the Alamo mission, 150 men with 20 cannons between them were determined to hold off the Mexicans for as long as possible. This is by far the most famous battle of the Texas Revolution, featuring such famous names as Davy Crockett and James Bowie fighting to their deaths. In total, the defenders managed to keep the Mexicans at bay, under heavy bombardment and vastly outnumbered, for 12 days, falling on March 6, 1836. During the siege, on March 2, the Texans officially declared their independence from Mexico. The document, heavily based on the American declaration, espouses that "the Mexican people have acquiesced in the destruction of their liberty...they are unfit to be free, and incapable of self government". It lists the Texans' cause for grievance: the "military despotism" of Santa Anna, there being no right to a trial by jury, the lack of a public education system, the dissolution of provincial legislatures, and their forced conversion to Roman Catholicism. At the same convention, the Texan provisional government chose Sam Houston to head the army.

Meanwhile, the Mexican general José de Urrea was pursuing a series of successful military advances in southern Texas, winning the battles of San Patricio and Agua Dulce Creek. Emboldened, Urrea next set his sights on Goliad, where many Texans were stationed under the command of James Fannin. Houston, upon hearing of the planned attack and wary of Urrea's might, ordered Fannin to retreat and fall back to the nearby city of Victoria. Fannin, for unknown reasons, delayed the retreat and stayed in Goliad for five days. In those five days, Urrea's men caught up and his scouts had spotted Fannin. Only hours behind, Urrea began the chase to hunt down Fannin's men. Luckily for the Mexican general, Fannin failed to grasp the urgency of his

situation. In his march to Victoria, the colonel stopped for a full hour to let the army's oxen graze, forced his men not to leave any item or carriage behind, and chose to move through open plains rather than sheltering woods. The afternoon of that same day, the Mexicans caught up to and surrounded the Texans in open country, with reinforcements on the way. Low on supplies and outnumbered, Fannin and the army agreed to surrender, expecting to be taken as prisoners of war, with the usual military clemency offered to defeated armies. Santa Anna had a different plan for them. Santa Anna, enraged at the "perfidious foreigners" and a megalomaniac, with grandeur visions of what he could make Mexico into, offered no mercy. He ordered Urrea to kill everyone he had captured. Urrea protested, urging him to reconsider and allow the men to be prisoners of war. In response, Santa Anna ordered another commander, Jose Nicolas de la Portilla, to kill the 400 surrendered Texans. Portilla, torn between Urrea and Anna, chose to obey his superior. The majority were executed by firing squad on March 27. Those who survived the initial shots and tried to escape were hunted down and murdered with bayonets. Only a couple of skilled professionals were spared to work in the Mexican army, and approximately 10 managed to escape. James Fannin himself was the last to die. His final requests were to be shot in the chest, given a Christian burial, and have his watch sent to his family. The commander shot him in the face, buried him with the rest, and kept his watch.

After suffering a long string of losses in southern Texas, the new Texan general Sam Houston ordered a strategic retreat of all troops into the northeast. The Mexican forces, led by president Santa Anna himself, pursued. Moving northward, the general took every city and seaport he came across. A decisive battle was sure to come. With his forces together and roughly equal to the approaching Mexican Army, Houston knew that this was perhaps his only chance to

strike first, fast, and be rid of *el presidente*. In his preparations, Houston received intelligence that Anna had crossed the San Jacinto river by a bridge at Lynch's Ferry - a bridge he would have to cross again to make any progress northward. After a small skirmish that had almost provoked the rest of the Texans into attacking, Houston encamped in a forest a mile from the bridge and waited for the Mexicans to come to him. After learning that the Santa Anna had crossed and was receiving reinforcements from General Cos across it, Houston dispatched a team to go and burn it, ensuring the enemy did not get stronger and that neither side could retreat in the soon-to-come battle. After a discussion with his military officers, Houston decided to surprise attack Santa Anna and his army. This was a risky move - all together the Texans had 900 soldiers, while Santa Anna had approximately 1,200. Nevertheless, Houston proceeded, scheduling for the afternoon of that same day - a traditional time for a Mexican *siesta*. Due to the nature of the sloped terrain, the Texan army was able to sneak right up to the resting Mexican force without detection. The battle commenced. Amidst cries of "Remember the Alamo!" and "Remember Goliad!", the full force of Texan revolutionaries charged, catching Santa Anna and his army completely off guard. The battle barely lasted 20 minutes: The Texans won.

The next morning, Houston sent out a search party to try to find Santa Anna. He was found shivering cold, hidden in the dirt and mud, dressed as a common soldier (they had been able to identify him because Mexican soldiers insisted on calling him *el presidente*). The general captured, Texas forced him to sign the Treaties of Velasco on May 14, 1836, which consisted of two parts: public and private. To the public, Anna promised to end the war with Texas once and for all, that all Mexican troops would withdraw south of the Rio Grande, and all stolen property and prisoners of war would be returned. Texas agreed to let Santa Anna return to Mexico with all

Texan troops at least 17 miles away at all times. In private, the Texans forced Santa Anna to agree to recognize Texan independence back in Mexico City, to order Mexican troops to leave from Texas, to welcome a Texan diplomatic mission in Mexico City, and to sign a later treaty of commerce that would set the border somewhere north or at the Rio Grande. There were some practical complications to the implementation of this second treaty, however. In his extended leave of absence, Santa Anna had been overthrown in Mexico City and the new government refused to accept the terms of the secret treaty he had signed - and thus continued to claim that Texas was just a wayward province. Even though there would be small skirmishes between the two sides in the years to come, the Treaties of Velasco had effectively just made Texas into a sovereign state. The Texan Revolution had been won.

The next step for the fledgling Republic of Texas was to be annexed into the Union. Texas, predominantly white Americans, who had based their Declaration of Independence off of the United States', were almost unanimous in their desire to join the Union. Unfortunately, the U.S. was not ready to admit them. The debate over slavery was still raging on, and Whigs claimed that the annexation of the new state was unconstitutional and would provoke a war with Mexico. On the second point, at least, they were right - the prevailing Mexican sentiment was that annexation justified a war. Nevertheless, the primary issue was slavery - northern Whigs didn't want to upset the Congressional balance of power between free and slave states. Handicapped by Congress, the president in 1837, Martin Van Bueren, was not able to annex Texas. Throughout his presidency, Texas suffered border raids from the Mexicans and fear that Mexico would try to retake their "province" in another war continued to fester, strengthening the desire for protection from a much higher power. The next American president, William Harrison,

was a Whig, and was opposed to the notion of Texan statehood. He, however, only lasted a month in office before he died of pneumonia, allowing the first transfer of power to the Vice President in American history: John Tyler. John Tyler, though a Whig, was an unusual one: a born-and-raised Virginian like his predecessor, but an ardent supporter of state's rights. He had, controversially, vetoed Whig legislation to create a federal National Bank, which had led to a failed movement to impeach him. It was under Tyler's presidency that, in 1843, nearly a decade after the Texan Revolution, the U.S. finally started to seriously consider annexation. This change in attitude was brought about by an alarming British conviction that the U.S. should not take Texas. Wary of the young nation's breakneck-pace expansion and of their institution of slavery, Great Britain had actively been increasing their prescence in Texan trade to counteract American influence. Though the relationship never caught on (Britain, a friend of Mexico, had aided them in the revolution, and refused to formally recognize Texan independence), Tyler and much of Congress was greatly alarmed at the prospect of such a nearby country becoming a satellite of such a world power. Tyler was nearing the end of his term, but nevertheless became an outspoken proponent of annexation. After some debate, Congress issued a joint resolution allowing Texas admission into the Union under some basic conditions. Britain, alarmed and desperate, advised Mexico to make a deal to  Teas: keep your sovereignty, and we will recognize your independence. The Texans didn't take it. Though hardened and skeptical from a decade of being overlooked and neglected by the U.S., they were still eager to join the United States of America. Texas signed the joint resolution, and were admitted into the U.S. as the twenty-eighth state on December 29, 1845, under the presidential administration of Democrat James K. Polk. In

the words of the last Texan President Anson Jones, “The final act in this great drama is now performed; the Republic of Texas is no more.”

James K. Polk, a fifty year old lawyer from North Carolina, had had no experience in federal government before. Mocked by Whigs for being an outsider, he labelled himself as the protégé of Andrew Jackson, the expansion candidate, a disciple of Manifest Destiny who would serve only one term and in it, “re-annex” Texas and “re-occupy” the disputed Oregon territory. He entered his presidency wholly determined to make good on those promises. In 1846, after much pressure and the threat of a third war between Britain and the U.S., Polk managed to bring about the Oregon Treaty, extending U.S. land in the Oregon territory up to the 49th parallel. Somewhat successful, Polk turned his attention to California, the acquisition of which would be the crowning jewel of his administration. Unlike Texas, mostly desert and cactus. California was lush, fertile, with a beautiful window on the Pacific ocean. And so, eager to take it, Polk sent New Orleans diplomat John Sidell to Mexico City to try and purchase California and anything else Mexico could offer for the price of $40 million dollars. Of course, this was not a deal any Mexican leader could actually make - selling half of your country would not be a good move for those who like their heads on their shoulders- and so Sidell was not allowed to negotiate. Polk, determined, ordered General Zachary Taylor to move an army between the Nueces River and the River Grande (a region American and Mexico disputed), for Captain Robert Stockton to take a naval fleet to the coast of California, and for a blockade to be positioned at the mouth of the Rio Grande (an act of war under international law). This act of aggression prompted Mexican general Mariano Paredes to overthrow the president and assert that the territory was theirs. Further attempts at diplomacy from Sidell were rebuffed. The tension was high, tempers were rising, and

again, after just a decade, the Southwest was dry tinder. A spark would be all it would take for war to erupt.

Once again, part of that spark was Antonio López de Santa Anna. Though exiled to Cuba and far removed from any semblance of power, he had a plan. Through a friend, he contacted Washington to let them know that Paredes was willing to sell parts of California and recognize the Rio Grande border. All they had to do, he said, was apply more pressure so Paredes would have a reason to contact them. This was a lie. In no way shape or form would the United States ever get either of those things from Paredes without a war. But by provoking Mexico and America to go to war, Santa Anna stood to gain - in the chaos he could make his return to Mexico City and proclaim himself *cudillo* once more. Truth be told, however, the war would have most likely started even without this provocation. On April 25, 1846, a couple days after the ten year anniversary of the end of the Texas Revolution, a group of Mexican cavalry attacked and killed a dozen Americans at Matamoros, just off the shore of the Rio Grande. President Polk made a speech to Congress, exclaiming that “Mexico has passed the boundary of the United States, has invaded our territory and shed American blood upon the American soil.” Two days later, after fierce and heated debate and dealmaking in Congress, the United States declared war on Mexico. That would go on to be the Mexican-American War, winning the U.S. humongous tracts of land in the Southwest and California.

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