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Tejanos and the Texas War for Independence: Historiography's Judgment

ARNOLDO DE LEÓN

That Texas-Mexicans (Tejanos) fought at the Alamo and that they were part of the independence movement in 1835–1836 is common knowledge to students of Mexican-Texas.¹ Still, historians have not yet agreed on how to interpret the role of Tejanos at the Alamo, Washington-on-the-Brazos, or San Jacinto. Ambiguity and disagreement mark their writings on the subject so that in this sesquicentennial year, no consensus has been reached and the debate continues.

Early Texas historiography was the domain of Anglo publicists and patricians who wrote romantically and with grandiloquence of the Texas experience. Expectedly, the participation of Tejanos in the war for independence was almost totally omitted from the few works being published in the 1840s and 1850s. Though authors of this school occasionally mentioned the more prominent Tejanos of the independence era, identifying Lorenzo de Zavala and José Antonio Navarro as "strong friends

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1. Two recent works are George O. Coalsen, "Texas Mexicans in the Texas Revolution," Terrence J. Barragy and Harry Russell Huebel, eds., *From Colony to Republic: Readings in American History to 1877* (Houston: Cayo del Grullo Press, 1983); Thomas Lloyd Miller, "Mexican-Texans at the Alamo," *Journal of Mexican American History*, 2 (Fall 1971).

of the Texans," they were so preoccupied with the meaning of the so-called "Texas Revolution" that Tejano contributions seemed anomalous.

In the eyes of these romantic historians the struggle had been a moral victory over Mexicans veiled as decadent Spaniards. To them, Mexican civilization represented immorality, superstition, barbarism, and despotism. White men were the heroes of the war and represented morality, enlightenment, industry, and liberty. At a time when histories were filled with deprecations of the Mexican national character, the Tejanos who joined the independence movement seemed at best Mexicans converted to Anglo righteousness. Even in the last quarter of the nineteenth century, with the rise of historical professionalism, the new histories remained ethnocentric, glossing over the Hispanic role in the events of 1835–1836.

In the first half of the twentieth century, able historians such as Herbert E. Bolton and Eugene C. Barker did much to bolster the image of Spanish-Mexican civilization in New Spain's far north. Their books and articles made it obvious that Spaniards and Mexicans had played significant roles in the Texas past. Nevertheless, attention to Tejano participation in the Texas war remained cursory. Bolton said little since his studies dealt principally with the colonial era. Even Barker, who digressed from the traditional emphasis on Stephen F. Austin and Anglo-American colonization to consider the Texas-Mexican involvement in the cause of independence, did not delve deeply.² A disregard for Tejanos in the war for independence remained the norm in Texas history.

Moved by this neglect, Mexican Americans writing in the 1930s endeavored to give recognition to what they perceived as a significant role played by their ancestors in the war for independence. This push to restore the Tejanos' forgotten contribution came in conjunction with the war's centennial and coincided with an incipient rise in South Texas of a Tejano petit bourgeoisie comprised of lawyers, businessmen, teachers, and other professionals. Members of this group, most of them United States-born, desired full integration into the United States. They gloried in the contributions of their ancestors to the fight between Texas liberty and Mexican tyranny and demanded that history pay attention to the role of Texas-Mexicans.

It is difficult to specify leaders in the movement to publicize the role of Texas-Mexicans in the war. Lawyers such as Alonso Perales, Ruben Rendón Lozano, and the ex-Brownsville legislator J. T. Canales were men devoted to improving race relations. A way to bridge the gap between Anglos and Tejanos was to show that Texas-Mexicans had helped

2. Stephen Stagner, "Epics, Science, and the Lost Frontier: Texas Historical Writing, 1836–1936," *Western Historical Quarterly*, 12 (April 1981), 165–81.

in the cause of democracy. Also concerned with proving Tejano Americanism were the members of the League of United Latin American Citizens (LULAC).

In 1929, LULAC emerged as the most significant organization articulating the ideology of middle-class Mexican Americans. The League had as its goal the amelioration of conditions for Hispanics, including elimination of discrimination. It also stressed total commitment to the American ethos, a resolve emphatically put forth in its constitution. According to the document, LULAC intended to develop "within the members of our race the best, purest, and most perfect type of a true and loyal citizen of the United States of America; to see that the members and their children acquire the English language; and to define with absolute and unmistakable clearness our unquestionable loyalty to the ideals, principles, and citizenship of the United States of America."³

Given this orientation, it is not surprising that LULAC, through the initiative of José Tomás Canales, invited the eminent historian Eugene C. Barker to present his findings on Tejanos and the war for independence before the LULAC convention scheduled for Harlingen, Texas, in June 1935. Barker's paper entitled "Native Latin American Contribution to the Colonization and Independence of Texas" contained what the Mexican American generation desired to hear.

Among the most knowledgeable scholars in Texas history in that period, and recognized today as more objective than the historians that preceded him, Barker still saw the Texas War as a struggle against Mexican oppression. Tejanos, he declared, had contributed significantly to the cause of Texas freedom. Since the beginning of American colonization of Texas, Barker told the assemblage, Texas-Mexicans had been friendly toward Anglo immigrants helping them colonize the region. When the Texans struck for the Constitution of 1824, "the fact probably made it easier for Mexican inhabitants of Texas to join in the movement." In Barker's view, and those of his listeners, both peoples fought for the common cause of preserving the natural rights of mankind. In so doing, Barker concluded, the Tejano patriots were expressing "truly heroic resolution by staking their fate with the colonists."⁴

Barker was not alone in the "revisionist" campaign. Beginning in 1936 and continuing until the 1970s, amateur historians from the new Mexican American middle class industriously gathered the facts about

3. Richard A. García, "Class, Consciousness, and Ideology—The Mexican Community of San Antonio, Texas: 1938–1940," *Aztlan*, 9 (Spring, Summer, Fall 1978), 42, 53, 55. See also Mario T. García, "Mexican Americans and the Politics of Citizenship: The Case of El Paso, 1936," *New Mexico Historical Review*, 59 (April 1984), 187–204.

4. J. T. Canales, ed., *Bits of Texas History: In the Melting Pot of America. Part II: Latin American Contribution of the Colonization and Independence of Texas* (San Antonio: Artes Gráficas, 1957), 7.

Tejano participation in the war. Their commitment was not so much to an interpretation of historical events, as it was to a resurrection of those Tejanos who had contributed to the war. Such individuals might then stand alongside William Barret Travis, Jim Bowie, and Davy Crockett.

The most ambitious work produced by a Mexican American in the 1936 centennial year was a book authored by Ruben Rendón Lozano entitled *Viva Tejas: The Story of the Mexican-born Patriots of the Republic of Texas* (San Antonio: Southern Literary Institute, 1936). Lozano criticized previous writers of Texas history for doing an "injustice to the heroes of Texas by almost ignoring the Latin, or Spanish-speaking element." He was certain that the "Saxon leaders" of that era considered Tejanos as part of "an oppressed people who had thrown their fortunes, lives and lot in life into one common cause, the cause of independence." Logical reasoning, he argued, would show that the "Latin element must have comprised a large percentage of the revolutionary armies of Texas." He described the participation of Tejanos in several battles and wrote brief biographical sketches of the most significant participants.⁵

This view of Tejanos as patriotic allies of Anglo Texans held sway among LULAC and middle-class Mexican Americans for decades. During a LULAC meeting held in San Angelo, Texas, in March 1941, a resolution calling on LULAC to place a wreath in San Jacinto monument in memory of "Latin Americans" who fought with General Sam Houston at the Battle of San Jacinto and Latin Americans who signed the Texas Declaration of Independence received overwhelming support. According to newspaper accounts, the sponsor of the resolution, Mauro Machado, a publisher and historian from San Antonio, felt the need to re-educate Anglo Americans to the fact that all Latin Americans were not opposed to Texas independence and that many had fought for freedom in 1836. Reportedly Machado was then writing a book about San Antonio in which he debunked the belief that Anglo Americans were the only men to have fought in the rebellion.⁶

In the same vein as the works of Lozano and Machado were two books produced by the lawyer and legislator J. T. Canales of Brownsville. It was Canales who had invited Eugene C. Barker to address LULAC in Harlingen in 1935 and who still desired to see the Tejanos receive fair space in the histories of the war for independence. Canales offered little that was new. He took works previously published on the Mexican contribution to the war, edited and annotated them, and released them as *Bits of Texas History: In the Melting Pot of America*. Printed by Artes

5. Ruben Rendón Lozano, *Viva Tejas: The Story of the Mexican-born Patriots of the Republic of Texas* (San Antonio: Southern Literary Institute, 1936), 50, 5.

6. San Angelo *Standard-Times*, March 11, 1941, p. 12A; *ibid.*, March 10, 1941, p. 1A.

Gráficas in San Antonio, Volume I was published in 1950 and Volume II in 1957. The earlier book criticized Anglo-Texans for having omitted Mexican Americans from Texas history and expressed the hope that its contents would help mend past differences between the two peoples.⁷ The second volume noted that great strides had been made in race relations in the intervening seven years, and gave credit to the contribution of historians like Eugene C. Barker who had enlightened Anglo society about the mutual interests Mexican Americans and Anglos had in freedom and democracy.

While the 1960s did not bring forth comparable revisionist works by Mexican Americans, the image of the Tejanos as patriots persisted among the middle class Tejanos who comprised organizations such as LULAC. It is not surprising then, that when Jacob I. Rodriguez, a prominent member of LULAC, made a public speech to one of the league's councils in 1960, he reiterated that the contribution of Tejanos to the Texas cause had been neglected. Rodriguez expressed hope that the newly released John Wayne film *The Alamo* would credit the fact that there had been Mexican heroes in the war for independence.⁸

The participation of Tejanos in the war has also been considered from another and quite different perspective. Mexican historians have not been kind toward the Tejano participants in the war. The longstanding animosity between Mexico and the United States in part explains the negative characterization. For generations Mexican scholars have viewed the United States as an imperialist state responsible for the Texas rebellion and the military takeover of Mexican national territory in 1848. Additionally, the United States has colonized Mexican Americans, adhered to a policy of exploitation of Mexican nationals who migrated to this country searching for work, and has meddled in Mexican political and economic affairs. Those who have conspired with Americans against Mexico, therefore, are viewed contemptuously as traitors to the mother country.

At the same time that Hispanics in Texas undertook to place Tejanos at the Battle of the Alamo alongside Travis, Bowie, and Crockett, Mexican historian Rafael Trujillo Herrera in *Olvidate de "El Alamo": Ensayo Historico* (México: Impreso en los Talleres de Editora de Periódicos, S.C.L., "La Prensa," División Comercial, 1965) asserted that Texas-Mexicans within the Alamo walls were probably not there as co-defenders of liberty against Mexican tyranny as Anglos and Mexican Americans contended.

7. At the same time, José Tomás Canales chided Anglos for misrepresenting another Tejano, Juan Cortina. To revise the traditional portrayal of this south Texas "bandit" of the 1850s and 1860s, he published *Juan N. Cortina: Bandit or Patriot?* and *Juan N. Cortina Presents His Motion for a New Trial*.

8. Jacob I. Rodriguez Papers, LULAC Archives, Nettie Lee Benson Library, University of Texas, Austin.

In fact, he says, their presence therein may be accounted for by reasons other than ideology. Alamo commander Travis, after all, hated Mexicans and considered the Bexareños enemies for not siding with the volunteers. It is indeterminable how many of the Texas-Mexican defenders were convicts freed by Bowie, Trujillo notes, or which, like José María (Brígido) Guerrero, were prisoners. Moreover, some of the Mexican women and children, who survived the carnage, apparently decided to seek refuge inside the Alamo instead of opting for the countryside as had so many of the Bexareños upon learning from couriers that a bloody battle would ensue once Santa Anna arrived in San Antonio de Bexar. A few of the Mexican non-combatants were relatives of Bowie, by his marriage to María Ursula de Veramendi. He had taken them into the Alamo with him. Moreover, Trujillo suggests, Mexicans in San Antonio had little to do with the Texas rebellion. After all, Enrique Esparza, brother of Alamo victim Gregorio Esparza, stormed the fortress as part of Santa Anna's attackers. Those Tejanos like Lorenzo de Zavala, José Antonio Navarro, José Francisco Ruiz, and Juan Seguín who openly allied with the Anglos were "*traicioneros en alianza con los filibusteros*."⁹

Among the most vociferous advocates of the view of Tejanos as traitors is Manuel Medina Castro in *El gran despojo* (Mexico: Editorial Diogenes, 1971). As far as he is concerned, those who helped out at the Alamo and Washington-on-the-Brazos amounted to nothing less than collaborators with foreign colonizers. In discussing the Texas declaration of independence Medina Castro observes:

En seguida las firmas: 48 norteamericanos, 10 europeos, 3 traidores: Lorenzo de Zavala, ex ministro, ex gobernador, etc. y gran concesionario de tierras en Tejas, J. Antonio Navarro, y Francisco Ruiz.¹⁰

Buttressing this accusation is the fact that no prominent liberal from Mexico aided the Texas cause.¹¹ Politicians from Coahuila, who often agreed with the ideology of Navarro and the Seguíns, avoided the politics of separatism. Thus, it is not the Tejanos' beliefs that earn them harsh condemnation, but rather it is their co-operation to sever Texas from the Mexican union.

9. Rafael Trujillo Herrera, *Olvidate de "El Alamo": Ensayo Historico* (Mexico: Impreso en los Talleres de Editora de Periodicos, S.C.L., "La Prensa," Division Commercial, 1965), 156, 192-93. For the development of the Alamo myth, see Susan Prendergast Schoelwer and Tom W. Gläser, *Alamo Images: Changing Perceptions of a Texas Experience* (Dallas: DeGolyer Library and Southern Methodist University Press, 1985).

10. Quoted in Raymond V. Padilla, "A Critique of Pittian History," *El Grito: A Journal of Contemporary Mexican American Thought*, 6 (Fall 1972), 42.

11. David J. Weber, *The Mexican Frontier, 1821-1846: The American Southwest Under Mexico* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1982), 250.

As recently as 1970, no American historian, either Anglo or Hispanic, had presented an assessment departing from that of the Tejanos as patriots. But this traditional interpretation came under attack in the 1970s from a post-war generation that came of age in the turmoil of the 1960s. During the time, unprecedented numbers of Mexican Americans with roots in the working class of the Mexican American community enrolled in college and there debated the war in Vietnam and American treatment of minorities. The atmosphere of controversy and contention fueled a new consciousness and a rising militancy that produced what is generally referred to as the "Chicano Movement."

This college-educated generation emerged as the first group of professionally trained interpreters of Mexican-American history. By the early 1970s Chicanos were presenting an interpretation of Tejanos at the Alamo and Washington-on-the-Brazos which diverged from the position held by the older generation of Mexican Americans. To be sure, the Chicano historians did not constitute a monolithic group, but as a school of thought they echoed the detractions of Mexican writers. At their head was historian Rodolfo Acuña, who repeatedly painted the Tejanos who fought for Texas independence as a "bunch of *cabrones* who sold out their own people."¹² In a controversy arising from the portrayal of Juan N. Seguín in the 1981 PBS film entitled *Seguín*, Acuña inveighed: "To make heroes of the Mexican people defending the Alamo is like making heroes of the Vichy government." Seguín was part of "a small group of wealthy Tejanos supporting the Anglo American cause of Americanizing Texas while the poor people of Tejas always remained strongly nationalistic," he noted as a member of the panel of experts advising film director Jesús Treviño. "Juan Seguín was interested in protecting his interests, not his nationality or the rights of the people."¹³

Supporting such an interpretation is the fact that Spanish-Mexican society in 1835–1836 consisted of *ricos* and *pobres*. This division, derived from the Spanish social order, had been established in Texas during the colonial period. By the late 1700s, degrees of wealth separated a small but influential elite from the majority of poorer Tejanos. Government officials and military commandants with secure incomes (though hardly enough to claim prosperity), entrepreneurs in towns, and *rancheros* working peons as slaves constituted the upper order. The working class made up the lower order. During Mexico's war for independence in 1810, this class difference was apparent as the peninsular Spaniards and the Mexican-born criollos supported the royalist forces

12. Tatcho Mindiola, ed., *Occupied America: A Chicano History Symposium* (Houston: University of Houston, Mexican American Studies, 1981), 23.

13. Paul G. Levine, "Remember the Alamo?" *American Film*, 7 (January–February 1982), 48.

while the poorer soldiers and civilians of the lower stratum sided with the Hidalgo rebellion. In Texas in the 1820s, it was land owners such as José Antonio Navarro, Erasmo and Juan Seguín, plus Lorenzo de Zavala—all future participants in the war for independence—who most closely associated themselves with the interests of Stephen F. Austin. They had encouraged slavery and Anglo colonization as a way of advancing the cotton industry for Coahuila y Tejas. At the moment of decision, they fought on the side of their political and economic allies, the Anglo colonists.

Acuña's strident stance has been assumed by other Chicano scholars who see the Tejano participants in the war as men with special interests. To Ray Padilla, the Tejanos—notably Navarro, de Zavala, Seguín and those of their sort—were political opportunists who had much to gain by way of land speculation, commercial opportunities, and political aggrandizement.¹⁴ Most recently in a critique of Treviño's *Seguín*, Rosa Linda Fregoso labeled the film's hero an opportunist who could accommodate "to whatever side of a movement he would profit from the most." Fregoso reminds us that Seguín's role in no way typifies the experiences of most Tejanos. "Countless others fought with the Mexican forces or remained loyal to the Mexican government."¹⁵ José Antonio Navarro is held with similar low esteem.¹⁶

By no means, however, is this portrayal the consensus of opinion among Chicano historians today. There are those who treat their subjects more evenhandedly. The historian Andrés Tijerina in his dissertation "Tejanos and Texas: The Native Mexicans of Texas, 1829–1850" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Texas, 1977), sees the Tejanos as caught in the web of Mexican politics and Anglo American economic intentions in Texas. Liberal Tejanos (or Federalists) with connections to interests akin to the Austin and other Anglo factions sought to encourage Anglo American colonization and capitalist growth. But simultaneously, ethnic conflict surfaced around Goliad and Victoria which augured the ominous type of relations that would later develop. While they shared the liberalism of the Anglos within the Mexican political spectrum, high ranking Tejano officials resented the Anglos' conduct and remained nationalistic in regard to the foreigners. By 1836, the Tejanos had been alienated from both the government in Mexico City and Anglo Americans who outnumbered them in Texas. When it came time to take sides, the Federalists

14. Padilla, "Critique of Pittian History," 35.

15. Rosa Linda Fregoso, "Seguín: The Same Side of the Alamo," *Bilingual Review/La Revista Bilingüe*, 10 (May–December 1983), 150–51, 146.

16. John R. Chávez, *The Lost Land: The Chicano Image of the Southwest* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1984), 34.

divided along political lines that placed them against Santa Anna and with the Anglos.¹⁷

There is, however, another perspective. The Tejanos of 1836 should not be thought of as one-dimensional personalities driven by selfish motives. As with other historical characters, the Tejanos were complex figures who moved freely within the political spectrum according to the contingencies they faced. The upper class in the Tejano community was diverse. It is true that the Navarros, Seguíns, and the de Zavalas delivered people of their own nationality into the domination of Anglos. But whether they did so selfishly, or unwittingly, or with good intentions, is a point yet to be proven. No good biographies of any of these men yet exist. In the years following the Texas war for independence, some, such as José Antonio Navarro, did come to the defense of *la raza* even if they perceived the lower classes as standing beneath their own upper class ranking.¹⁸ Historians should avoid too strict a definition of social class within the Tejano community. Chicanos, as other Americans, have historically aligned themselves with varied ideologies reflective of their heterogeneous makeup.

While the establishment in Texas history has paid little attention to the Tejanos at the Alamo and Washington-on-the-Brazos, some efforts have been made in recent years to incorporate the Mexican-American minority into the annals of the Lone Star State. This is evident in the invitations issued by scholarly associations to Mexican Americanists to read papers at symposia, in requests made to the same researchers by groups commemorating the Texas sesquicentennial, and in new materials in recent scholarly books dealing with Western or Southwestern history or revised editions of public school texts.

Today there is considerable diversity in the ways in which Tejano participants in the war of 1835–1836 are portrayed. In spite of the revisions made by the Chicano historians, interpretations traceable to Barker's patriotic depiction persist. Seventh grade books, which must run the gauntlet of public meetings attended by those interested in preserving patriotic idealism, portray Tejanos as imbued with motives as virtuous and unselfish as those of Bowie, Travis, and Crockett. The Mexican American generation of Lozano, Canales, and Machado would be pleased with such a characterization.

Finally, there is the historical understanding of Tejano history held by the general Mexican American population which would have more of a stake in seeing the revision of Texas history reflect their long historical

17. Andrew A. Tijerina, "Tejanos and Texas: The Native Mexicans of Texas, 1820–1850," (doctoral dissertation, University of Texas, 1977), chapter 6.

18. Arnolde De León, *The Tejano Community, 1836–1900* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1982), xvi.

presence in the state. With what interpretation discussed in this essay would they side?

Here we face a significant problem. How well do intellectual elites, whether they be the Mexican American generation of the 1930s or the Chicanoists of present day, mirror the views of the masses? The Tejanos of today, like the American public at large, probably do not know their history. Pollsters would probably find that most Mexican Americans in Texas are unaware that Mexicans in 1836 signed the Declaration of Independence on March 2, that they fought at the Alamo on March 6, and that they aided Sam Houston at San Jacinto on April 21. If they were told these things, then asked to volunteer an opinion as to the causes for Tejano participation, it is doubtful that their answers would contain anything about Federalism clashing with Centralism, or Manifest Destiny, or internal colonialism.

Their response would likely be guided by the impact that entities outside historical scholarship have on the public mind. Governmental bodies which seek to instill the virtues of "good citizenship" upon the student population by presenting history in simplistic form have an important impact. Television and Hollywood films, with their portrayal of good against evil, hero versus villain, and victory over defeat without regard to correct history, play an important role in shaping public opinion.

The presence of false historical perceptions within the general populace should not be taken lightly. It is that popular understanding of history that must be contended with. Scholars need to redouble their efforts to influence those sources which exercise such formidable power over popular conceptions of history. Though scholarly interpretations might clash, academic inquiry and debate are essential to overturning the misrepresentations of historical events. The failure of scholars to have much impact on formulators of popular perceptions of history is why the story of the Tejanos in the Texas war for independence remains so little known and so confused.