

ALL STATES ARE NOT CREATED EQUAL
or
Why Texas is More a State of Mind than a Locale

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The origin of this paper grew out of my curiosity about the inordinately strong loyalty that the State of Texas seems to inspire in its sons and daughters. It occurred to me that I have been in San Francisco for thirty years, and from my first day here, I have felt much more at home with the social values and mores, the architecture and style of San Francisco than with those of Houston, my home town. And yet, though I shall always be an expatriate one, I am firmly and ineluctably a Texan. Of course, that sort of blind loyalty applies particularly to those who, as I did, grew up before the homogenizing affect on the population of the Second World War and the nationalizing role of commerce and industry. When I was a boy, the term "up North" generally referred to Dallas.

I was born in Texas and attained my majority there in that peaceful, and seemingly unchanging world that existed in the lull between the two world wars, and I remember thinking of myself first as a Texan, then as a Southerner, and finally, in a vague way, as an American. I still have a feeling of bonding with anyone from Texas, and to a lesser extent, to anyone from any of the Southern States. Every Texan, in those days, was constantly aware that the Lone Star flag is the flag of the Republic of Texas, not merely a state flag like that of the other states. After all, Texas was not annexed into the Union, instead joining the United States through a treaty that gave Texas some exclusive rights, one of which is the prerogative of dividing into four separate states. Of course that will never happen, because then we would lose our bragging rights to being the largest state - without a glacier.

I remember a particular example of the Texas provincialism involving my youngest son. After I had graduated from the Seminary of the Southwest in Austin, my family and I moved to Connecticut for a year, and my youngest son was entering the Fourth Grade at the time. He came home after his first day in school nonplussed because they didn't teach Texas history as they were supposed to in the Fourth Grade.

Texans also take pride in being the only state to have had six national flags. But of course Texans take pride in almost everything, from having the largest state capitol building in the country to our appalling climate, and the ferocity of our own native Comanche Tribe, who terrorized even the warlike Apaches. We even brag about the eccentric governors we have had, such as having the first woman to be elected governor of a state, Miriam A. (Ma) Ferguson, elected in 1924. That circumstance was not due to forward thinking on the women's issues, but rather to the fact that her husband, Jim Ferguson was impeached as governor for stealing from the textbook fund, and the Texas voters, in their infinite wisdom, elected her to replace him in the governor's chair. The banks and government offices, and more importantly to me, the schools, were closed on March 2nd, Texas Independence Day, as well as on April 21st, San Jacinto Day, the importance of which will be revealed later on.

The southern identity was strong also; the banks were also closed on Jefferson Davis' birthday, but not the government offices nor the schools, unfortunately. I remember one of my mother's friends who could think of nothing better to give her

daughter as a wedding present than an enormous painting of Jefferson Davis. I don't recall July 4th as being much of a festival, although the African American community had quite a celebration on the day known as Juneteenth. June 19th is Emancipation Proclamation Day, though I doubt if many of those celebrating realized why they were doing so.

Anyway the question remained, and after giving the matter a great deal of thought, I came to the conclusion that the strong hold Texas has on those of us lucky, or unlucky, enough to have been born there arises from the way the State of Texas came into being and the legends surrounding that rather unusual revolution. There is no denying that the Texas revolution was a blatant land grab by a somewhat unsavory collection of adventurers and misfits. I was reading Isabel Allende's, Zorro, her latest swashbuckling tale of the early days of the American West when I came upon a sentence that aptly described the heroes of the Texas Revolution. In the book, the pirate Jean Lafitte was contemplating a change of venue, and he said to himself, "Yes, we will go to Texas, that is a place that offers many possibilities for a man of flexible morals and an adventurous spirit." I think many of the army of the Texas Republic shared Lafitte's views.

Parenthetically, I should point out that the entire country, with the possible exception of the Louisiana Purchase and Alaska, has been a series of blatant land grabs, some of it under the Doctrine of Eminent Domain, which was an obvious fabrication meant to justify sheer piracy.

The improbable revolution that spawned all that Texas vainglory is a tale of larger than life men and larger than life events. It was a war that lasted a mere six months and yet produced two highly revered shrines and one towering figure who is to Texas what George Washington is to the United States.

One of the most colorful and enigmatic figures in American history, Samuel Houston, or the Raven, to use the name given him by the Cherokees, was president of one republic, governor of two states, senator from one state and congressman from another, military hero and founding father of the Texas Republic. He was born March 2, 1793, on his family plantation in Rockbridge County, Virginia. His father died when Sam was thirteen, and shortly thereafter his mother with Sam and his eight siblings in tow moved to Marysville, Tennessee. Houston studied at a nearby academy, where he is reputed to have fed his fertile imagination in the study of the Classics, in particular, the Iliad. He showed his rebellious spirit early. Refusing to help his brothers with farm work, at the tender age of sixteen he ran away to live among the Cherokees. Chief Oolooteka adopted him and gave him the name of *Collonneh*, or the Raven.

After three years with the Cherokees, Houston returned, and when war broke out with the British he enlisted as private in the U. S. Army. Within four months he had been promoted, and at the Battle of Horseshoe Bend he received three near-fatal wounds. His valor in that battle won him the attention of General Andrew Jackson, who became his mentor and benefactor. In return Houston remained a staunch Jacksonian Democrat for his entire career. In 1818, the young Houston studied law, and within six months he had opened a practice. With Jackson's backing he rose rapidly in Tennessee politics, being elected to the House of Representatives in 1823, and governor in 1827.

Then a strange turn of events that shall ever remain a mystery interrupted his political career, and brought the Tennessee phase of his life to an end. Two years into his

governorship, Houston married the nineteen-year-old Eliza Allen on January 22, 1829. Eleven weeks later, an extremely distraught Eliza returned to her parents' home in Gallatin, while Houston abruptly resigned his office and fled across the Mississippi River to Indian Territory. During a three year exile, Houston drank heavily, married an Indian woman, and became involved in intertribal politics. By 1831 Houston had reentered white society where he met Alexis de Toqueville, who dubbed him "a man of great physical and moral energy, the typical American in perpetual motion."

Perceiving an insult by William Stansbury, a U. S. Representative from Ohio, Houston thrashed the unfortunate congressman with a hickory cane. Tried before the House of Representatives, Houston was defended by Francis Scott Key. Though he lost his case, the incident was his reentry into politics, and on December 2, 1832, he crossed the Red River into Mexican Texas where his destiny lay in wait for him. Whether he entered Texas as a land speculator, agent provocateur or with a scheme to establish a new nation, in the words of Jean Lafitte he saw Texas as a land that "offered many possibilities for a man of flexible morals and an adventurous spirit."

He immediately became involved in politics, serving as delegate at the Convention of 1833 where he predicted the inevitability of war with the Mexican government. By 1835 he was appointed major general of the Texas army. That he received such a position after less than three years residence shows the power of Houston's personality, as well as the fluid state of the Texas political situation. After the defeat of General Santa Anna at the Battle of San Jacinto, the Texans gained their independence and Houston was elected president. He served two terms as president, and when Texas joined the United States became one of its first senators. In 1859 he was elected governor, but he was forced to resign because he was adamant in his stand against Texas seceding from the Union. He warned that the North would win any war between the states and that the South would be destroyed. In his own words, Houston predicted that, "If she does not whip you by guns, powder and steel, she will starve you to death."

His warning went unheeded, and Houston retired from public life, refusing to sign the Articles of Secession, saying, "I refuse to take this oath. I love Texas too well to bring civil strife and bloodshed upon her." With his third wife and five children in attendance, he died of pneumonia at the age of seventy in 1863 and is buried in Huntsville.

The beginnings of the conflict that was to wrest Texas from the Mexican government, and in which Houston played a pivotal role, like most insurgencies, began with an increasing number of skirmishes. It is generally believed to have become a full-fledged revolution in October, 1835. There is however no doubt about the end; it was on April 21, 1836, at the Battle of San Jacinto, when Sam Houston and his largely volunteer army of Texans overwhelmed the numerically superior Mexican forces, capturing the Mexican president and generalissimo, Antonio Lopez de Santa Anna Perez de Leon.

Santa Anna, another of the colorful figures of the 18th Century, was a Mexican hero in their wars of liberation against the Spanish. He was twice elected President, and each time, assumed dictatorial control of the Mexican Government. Undoubtedly his arrogance and pride led him to make several fatal military blunders that cost him the State of Texas.

His first mistake was in his determination to capture the Alamo in San Antonio, perpetrating a senseless massacre at the expense of depleting his own forces and allowing Houston enough time to assemble and begin training an army. His costly error aroused a

thirst for vengeance among the Texas partisans and created a shrine that thrills Texans to this day. The cry, "Remember the Alamo," became the rallying cry for the young Texas army. The heroes of the Alamo are some of those adventurers known as frontiersmen, Jim Bowie, the eponymous creator of the Bowie Knife, Davy Crockett, who was actually a congressman from Tennessee traveling through Texas when he was forced to take refuge in the Alamo, and William Travis, the Commander of the redoubt, who answered Santa Anna's demand for surrender with a cannon ball.

The diary of a Mexican officer, Lt. Col. Jose Enrique de la Pena, tells of the Texans' heroism. He writes of Travis, "He fought like a true soldier. Finally he died, but he died after having traded his life very dearly. None of his men died with greater heroism, and they all died. Travis behaved as a hero." And he tells of Crockett and a few others who were captured. Santa Anna ordered their death, and de la Pena writes, "Though tortured before they were killed, these unfortunates died without complaining and without humiliating themselves before their torturers."

Thus was a shrine born, but there came a time in the 1920's when patriotism was in decline and the untrammelled forces of economic expansion reigned supreme. In that spirit, the City Fathers of San Antonio decided to raze the Alamo to make way for an office complex, but they reckoned not with the power of a formidable group of ladies, the Daughters of the Republic of Texas, who chained themselves to the threatened structure and thwarted the planned destruction of a Texas shrine as well as what was to become an important tourist attraction.

From a military perspective the Alamo was of little strategic importance, and Houston wanted to destroy the building and relocate its 24 cannon, but the Governor would not allow it. Santa Anna, obsessed with punishing the Texan insurgents, invested the former mission with some 1800 soldiers and artillery on February 23rd and continued a constant bombardment for twelve consecutive days. And then, inexplicably, on March 6th, he ordered an all-out assault just as the Texans, low on supplies and ammunition, were at the end of their ability to resist. The attack cost him some 600 troops and ended in the deaths of all 189 Texas combatants.

My mother was fond of telling the story of the heroes of the Alamo, always concluding with, "Thermopile had its messenger; the Alamo had none." That was not true; about thirty women and children were released, including the widow of Captain Almaron Dickinson, who informed Houston of the fall of the post. This bad news was the impetus for a flight of Texas settlers, called "The Runaway Scrape." In the meantime the Texas Convention, at Washington-on-the-Brazos, passed a Declaration of Independence on March 2nd, and Houston was moving his army toward the southeast town of Harrisburg.

In pursuit, Santa Anna made another strategic error. He split his troops into three armies in their march eastward across Texas. Thus, Santa Anna, who in January crossed the Rio Grande with an army of some 6000 to 8000 men, on April 21st, faced Houston across the San Jacinto River with only about 1300, still a three to two advantage over the Texans. And thus the second shrine came into being – the San Jacinto Battleground, now a state park and the home of the battleship, Texas. Santa Anna then made another miscalculation; assuming the Texans were on the defensive, he decided to attack the following day, and ordered his soldiers to rest for the coming battle. That afternoon, Houston overran the Mexicans during their siesta, and the battle was over in 18 minutes,

although the Texans went on a killing rampage for an hour thereafter, shouting “Remember the Alamo.” as they slaughtered the enemy. The entire Mexican force was dead, in flight or captured, including Santa Anna. The Texans lost nine men, and Texas had become an independent nation.

It is a David and Goliath tale, filled with derring-do and heroism, a story of daring and cunning vanquishing a vastly superior force. What lad, growing up on those epic stories would not hold sacred the very soil he stood on? And, of course, it is those tales of heroism and daring that make Texas more a state of mind than a geographic locale and evokes the fierce loyalty and pride of its native sons and daughters.

That is all well and good, but then why, I asked myself, do I shrink from the very idea of residing there. Perhaps it is because of the deplorable state of Texas politics. There is an amusing story of Ann Richards when she was governor – amusing because it is so close to the truth. It seems that during the Christmas season, a crèche was displayed in the rotunda of the capitol building. When the separation of church and state people complained, Governor Richards replied, “Well, I’ll take it down if you want me to. But it will be a shame because it’s the first time that building has ever had three wise men in it at the same time.” Or as her friend, the late columnist, Molly Ivins, put it, “When the [Texas] Legislature is set to convene, every village is about to lose its idiot.”

I have mentioned Ma Ferguson; there is also Governor W. Lee (Pass the Biscuits Pappy) O’ Daniel, who led a country and western group advertising Lightcrust Flour. As governor, he got to be such a nuisance because of his crusades against alcohol that the establishment got him elected to the U. S. Senate where he couldn’t do so much harm. And there was Governor Price Daniel, who was so determined to eradicate the use of marijuana that he wanted to make the possession of any amount a capital crime. And in last year’s election Kinky Friedman got ten percent of the vote for governor. Kinky’s main claim to fame is being the leader of a rock group called Kinky Friedman and the Jew Boys.

But maybe Sam Houston, himself, put his finger on it when he said, “All new states are invested, more or less, by a class of noisy, second-rate men who are always in favor of rash and extreme measures. But Texas is absolutely overrun with such men.”

In any case and for whatever reason, for the rest of my days I will always be a loyal Texan, while happily living in Herb Caen’s Baghdad by the Bay.