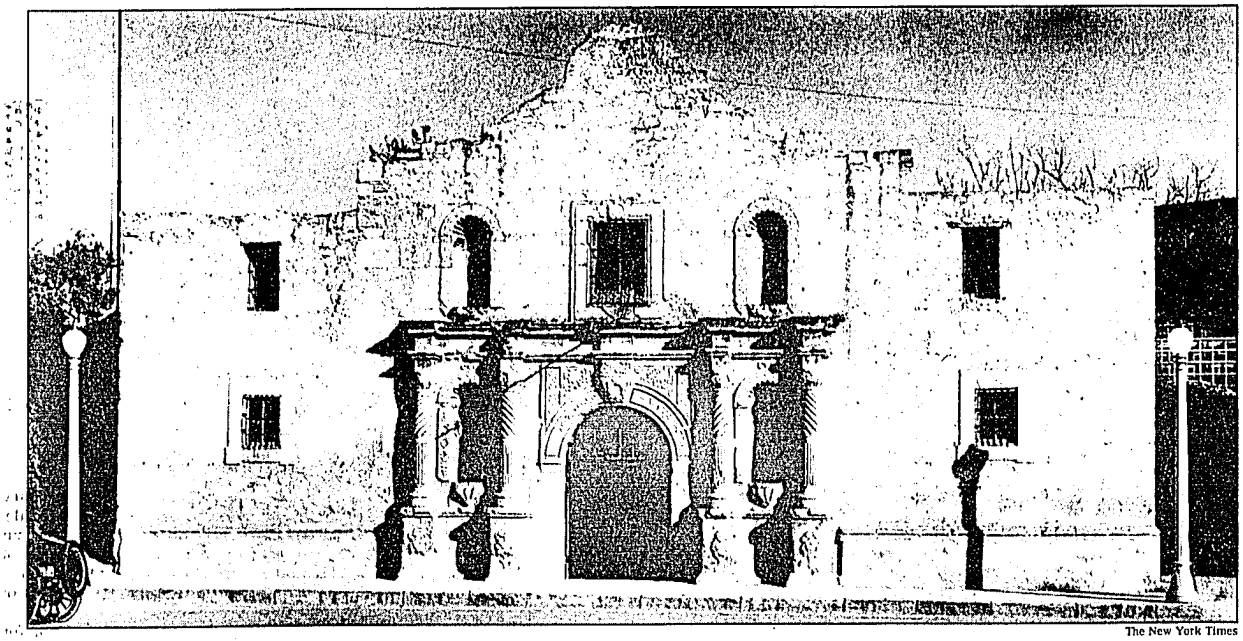
The Nation
ALLEN BARRA
New York Times (1857-Current file); Mar 10, 2002; ProQuest Historical Newspapers The New York Times (1851 - 2002)
pg. D5

The Nation



The New York Times

Did 180 or 250 Texans die in the battle of the Alamo? That's just one of the mysteries 166 years later.

Alamo Redux: A Mission Impossible

By ALLEN BARRA

THE biggest news in San Antonio last week wasn't a conference of scholars ruminating on the anniversary of the battle of the Alamo, which took place on March 6, 1836. San Antonio plays host to Alamo conferences the way Hollywood opens its arms to award shows. The real news is that there is going to be another movie about the Alamo (actually, there may be *three*). Michael D. Eisner, chairman of the Walt Disney Company, recently proclaimed that his studio's film intended to "capture the post-Sept. 11 surge in patriotism."

That should be easy, since the film will be directed by Ron ("Apollo 13") Howard with — or so the gossip has it — Russell ("Gladiator") Crowe as Jim Bowie. What's not going to be so easy is tapping that surge in patriotism while avoiding what the film's producer, Brian Glazer, called "anything controversial."

Mr. Glazer says the movie "won't ally itself with either Mexicans or Texians," as Texans called themselves way back when. Does he mean equal time for the Anglo point of view (oppressive autocratic regime tries to crush liberty-loving colonists) and the Mexican (land-hungry opportunists invade Texas to re-establish the slave culture of the American South)? If the filmmakers think putting both those viewpoints into the same picture will eliminate controversy, they're in for an unpleasant surprise.

The script for the film is being written by John Sayles, who a few years ago wrote and directed a contemporary Western called "Lone Star," in which the Anglo and Hispanic descendants of Texas pioneers quarrel over the continuing significance of the Alamo. At the end, one character decides that the best strategy is to simply "Forget the Alamo." By the time the inevitable dust-up over the new movie has died down, Mr. Sayles may wish he had ended up taking his own advice.

NO doubt all the new Alamo projects — including another theatrical film and a made-for-TV production — will differ from earlier ones by including the Mexican perspective — at least more so than in Disney's 1955 "Davy Crockett at the Alamo," in which the sum total of the political content is contained in Crockett's explanation that he is going to Texas because "Americans are fightin' for freedom." (The Mexican point of view is limited to the 18 or 19 faceless extras storming the Alamo walls.)

But whose idea of fairness will the new films reflect? "The Alamo," John Wayne's 1960 retelling, tried to be fair to the Mexicans, but Mexican-Americans, not to mention Mexican-Mexicans, were not thrilled that the Texans in Wayne's movie were "admirin' " the courage of the Mexican soldiers "even while we were killin' 'em."

Until the last few decades, most popular historians portrayed the Texans who died while defending the Alamo as freedom fighters who were well aware of the risks they were taking in allowing Gen. Santa Anna's army to surround the dilapidated fortress. It was also accepted that they sacrificed themselves in the belief that they were distracting the Mexican Army during the 13-day siege so that Sam Houston, commander of the Texas army, would have time to assemble a resisting force. Beginning in 1961 with Walter Lord's groundbreaking "A Time to Stand," books on the Alamo have become more and more skeptical. We now know, for instance, that many of the soldiers in the Texas army were newly arrived mercenaries, and there are doubts that the Alamo defenders were aware of the precariousness of their situation until it was too late.

Did William Barret Travis really make the famous "line in the sand" with his sword and ask all who wished to stay and fight — and die — with him to cross it? Did Jim Bowie die before the final battle or rise from his sick bed? Did all the Texans die fighting? Did Davy Crockett? Was the Alamo important to the success of the Texas Revolution or did later patriots simply rationalize a military blunder into a moral victory?

The interested reader can find at least a half-dozen sources to argue convincingly, pro or con, on any of these questions. In scrambling for the moral high ground, some Hispanics have cited the Anglo slave traders; angry Texans have pointed to the thousands of Indians pressed into military service by Santa Anna. A Native American might reply that the war was simply a conflict to determine which of two imperialist powers would end up in control of Indian territory.

With the passage of time, it seems clear that Crockett was a failed politician, that Travis and Bowie were slave owners and that Santa Anna did as much to ruin his country as to liberate it. The problem is that both sides view the main figures of the Alamo through a selective historical lens, seeing their heroes through the mist of legend while subjecting the other side to the merciless grilling of modern analysis.

Forget the Alamo? Not likely.

Allen Barra is the author of "Inventing Wyatt Earp" (Carroll & Graf, 1999).