

Randolph Campbell, *An Empire for Slavery: The Peculiar Institution in Texas, 1821-1865* (Baton Rouge: LSU Press, 1989)

A new threat to slavery in Texas appeared, as one historian put it, like “a bolt from the blue” in the fall of 1829. President Vicente Guerrero, influenced by José María Tornel who had been attempting for two years to have the Mexican congress abolish slavery, issued a decree on September 15, 1829, declaring immediate emancipation everywhere in the republic. (It was customary to free a number of slaves in the area of Mexico City on Independence Day, and Tornel persuaded Guerrero to extend this tradition to all slaves in the nation.) Guerrero’s decree first reached Texas on October 16 in a letter from Governor J. M. Viesca at Saltillo to Ramón Músquiz, the political chief at San Antonio. Músquiz reacted in exactly the way Austin and his colonists would have wished. He withheld publication of the decree and appealed to the governor to have Texas excepted from its operation. Settlers in Texas, Músquiz said, had been guaranteed their property rights by federal and state colonization laws. And they could not develop Texas “without the aid of the robust and almost indefatigable arms of that race of the human species which is called negroes, and who, to their misfortune, suffer slavery.” Furthermore, to free the thousand or more slaves in Texas would constitute a serious disturbance to public order. Governor Viesca agreed with Músquiz and, on November 14, 1829, appealed to President Guerrero for an exemption for Texas. He would have made the request, he said, even without prompting from Músquiz because the advancement of Coahuila and Texas depended on it. Viesca also added one other consideration—the possibility of violent reactions by the settlers in Texas. The colonists were not insubordinate, he said, but strong feelings result when men are “in danger of being ruined, as would happen to many of them whose fortune consists entirely of slaves.”³³

The slaveholding interest thus received prompt support from Mexican officials who appear to have been nearly as dedicated as Austin to the rapid settlement and development of Texas. Músquiz informed Austin of the decree and of his actions concerning it. He urged secrecy until a result

32. Frost Thorn to Austin, July 22, 1828, in Barker (ed.), *Austin Papers*, II, 74; Barker, “Influence of Slavery in the Colonization of Texas,” 18; Alleine Howren, “Causes and Origins of the Decree of April 6, 1830,” *Southwestern Historical Quarterly*, XVI (1913), 393, 396 (quotation from General Mier y Terán).

33. Barker, “Influence of Slavery in Colonization of Texas,” 18–21.

was known, but unfortunately a copy of the decree somehow found its way to the alcalde at Nacogdoches and, although it was not published, caused near panic. "In the name of God what shall we do," John Durst, a prominent citizen wrote Austin on November 10, "for God's Sake advise me on the subject by the return of Mail[.] We are ruined for ever should the Measure be adopted." Austin, reassured to some extent by Músquiz's stand, obviously objected to the tone of Durst's letter. "There ought to be no vociferous and visionary excitement or noise about this matter—," he replied. If the decree were published in Texas, he said, the people should use the ayuntamientos to appeal for their constitutional rights. "The constitution must be both our shield, and our arms, under it, and with it we must constitutionally defend ourselves and our property." The course he advised was "a very plain one—calm, deliberate dispassionate, inflexible *firmness*."³⁴

Austin's intention to stand firm was not put to the test because President Guerrero issued another decree on December 2, 1829, exempting Texas from the general emancipation ordered on September 15. Possibly, the president acted in response to a letter from General Terán, now the military chief for Texas, and decided in mid-November to make the exemption before the petitions from Texas arrived at Mexico City. If this were the case, he acted only from general concern about the growth of Texas and the possibility of opposition there and not under any threat of resistance to his decree. In any event, Guerrero's order of December 2 was generally circulated in Texas by the end of that month; slavery had survived another threat, and colonists there were delighted.³⁵