

# Mexico—The Essentials



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## POLITICS OF CHAOS

The Liberals in 1824 created a republic. Guadalupe Victoria became the first president with sufficient prestige to serve his entire 4-year term—it would not happen again for two decades. Of all the politicians who came forward in these early years, the most enduring, capable, and popular, but mercurial, petulant, and at times weak was General Antonio López de Santa Anna. He was caught between Liberalism and Conservatism—but unlike Buriden's donkey between the haystacks, Santa Anna chose first one and then the other, and then did it again and again for more than two decades. Santa Anna, first elected to the presidency in 1833 as a Liberal, turned the office over to his vice-president, Valentín Gómez Farías, and returned to his Jalapa estate to mull things over.

Gómez Farías had an ambitious agenda; he reduced the army, ended its special privileges, closed the clerically dominated University of Mexico, and weakened the Church by making the tithe optional. As acting president, he nationalized the Franciscan mission system in California, a step the Church feared presaged its holdings in the nation's center. Moreover, he promulgated regulations that allowed priests and nuns to renounce their vows. Shocked by these radical changes, Church leaders and army officers demanded that Santa Anna remove Gómez Farías. He did so, after deciding that the republic needed the firm direction of a centralized Conservative government.

Santa Anna installed a new Constitution in 1836 that converted states into departments under the direction of military officers and political bosses appointed by the president. The highly centralized regime provoked revolts in virtually all parts of the republic, and both Yucatán and Texas withdrew from the union. The president decided to make an example of rebels in Texas and led an army to San Antonio. He confronted fewer than 200 men, who fortified the Alamo. The trapped Texans made a vainglorious, although undeniably heroic, defense, and all died in the battle or the executions that followed. In another battle at Goliad, the Mexicans executed 200 more men.

Meanwhile, Sam Houston and his small contingent fled to avoid battle. Santa Anna chased them to San Jacinto, now appropriately part of modern-day Houston. Both sides camped, but Santa Anna failed to post guards. Houston attacked, and in 30 minutes it was all over, including the capture of Santa Anna. A canny Houston traded the prisoners for independence. Santa Anna ordered his army to withdraw south of the Rio Grande River before renouncing the agreement.

That should have ended Santa Anna's career as he went into exile, but luck rescued him. The French, in the so-called Pastry War, blockaded Veracruz and extracted payment for interest on loans. Santa Anna returned, suffering the partial loss of a leg during a French bombardment of Veracruz in 1838. He alleviated this painful wound with a military burial for the dismembered leg and reclaimed the presidency, until he was again overthrown and forced into exile.