

The treaties were signed on May 14, 1836. The meaning of the Texas Revolution has been debated ever since that time. For generations, the most widely accepted view in the United States has held that this was a revolution against tyranny and oppression, waged by a people who found themselves culturally and politically incompatible with their rulers. A variation on this theme holds that the Texans simply lost patience with the factionalism and chronic upheavals of Mexican politics. Neither of these explanations is entirely convincing.

There is no question that Santa Anna was a tyrant, but for the Texas colonists "tyranny" was an uncommonly broad category. It included, for example, the government's efforts to collect tariffs. And yet as General Terán wearily reminded Stephen Austin after colonists attacked the Texas customs houses in 1832, "customs duties [are] paid from Hudson's Bay to the Horn, and only at Brazoria [are] they considered cause for violence."<sup>9</sup> "Tyranny" also included the Mexican government's efforts to eradicate slavery, which the Texans insisted was crucial to their economic survival; efforts to impose a common system of justice throughout the republic; religious intolerance (which was never enforced in Texas); attempts to control immigration into Mexico; and the attachment of Texas to the state of Coahuila.

The Mexican government, eager to see the colonization of Texas work, sought to placate the Texans by giving in to all of their demands except that they be made a separate state. By any reckoning, the Texans were Mexico's most privileged citizens. The notion that the Texans resorted to rebellion only after long years of enduring Mexican oppression is further

undercut by the fact that the most vociferous advocates of rebellion in Texas were people who arrived there after 1830, many of them entering the state illegally. Nearly a third of the Texas independence fighters showed up only after war had already begun. Many of them were, in the words of San Antonio political chief Ramón Múzquiz, "violent and desperate men who have nothing to lose."<sup>10</sup>

The argument that the Texans rebelled because they could no longer endure the chronic factionalism and political instability in central Mexico cannot be glibly dismissed. After all, Stephen Austin did make a sincere effort to be a good citizen of Mexico and to persuade his colonists to do likewise. Only after repeated frustrations and a lengthy imprisonment did he embrace rebellion. And yet it is also true that Texas itself was part and parcel of Mexico's instability. The centrifugal tendencies of Mexico's regions contributed enormously to Mexico's political troubles, and no state agitated more forcefully for its right to ignore the dictates of the central government than Texas. As of 1832, the Texans became full-fledged participants in Mexico's instability by joining Santa Anna's federalist revolt against the central government. Moreover, the Texans' exasperation at Mexico's political instability rings hollow when one considers the government of the independent republic of Texas, which would prove every bit as unstable and riven by faction as that of Mexico. Indeed, bitter factionalism was evident in Texas long before the Texas rebellion commenced.

The issue that finally provoked the colonists to rebellion—the revocation of states' rights under the centralist regime of 1835—was unpopular with most of the peripheral states and provoked several rebellions, but only in Texas did rebellion result in a complete break with Mexico. There were rebellions in the northern states of New Mexico, Sonora, and California, but those rebellions played out with dramatically different results. At least in part because Anglo-Americans

with close connections to the United States participated only marginally in those rebellions, the Mexican government took a more conciliatory approach, even to the point of recognizing an outspoken federalist as governor of California.

Texas was truly a special case, one that cannot be divorced from the general context of U.S.-Mexican relations. The United States gave the Mexicans every reason to fear treachery in Texas, for it did not bother to disguise its wish to acquire Texas by any means. As General Terán had pointed out back in 1832, there was reason to suspect that the United States was engineering a replay of its acquisition of West Florida, with Americans flooding into a coveted territory, then striking up a chorus of complaints, "assuming rights . . . which it is impossible to sustain in a serious discussion," eventually leading to rebellion and a period of independence followed by annexation to the United States. The Mexicans were inspired to take such forceful measures against the Texas rebellion by a well-justified anxiety.

Ironically, it was Santa Anna's cruelty and military ineptitude that hastened the loss of Texas. That loss would become, in the minds of many Mexican leaders, a festering wound, an affront to the national honor that had to be avenged at any cost.