


populations of vagabonds, Indians, and criminals. The rebellions of 1832 and 1833 had left the regular army—a fairly haphazard force to begin with—in disarray, and there had not been time to reorganize and rebuild. So little money was available for the expedition that Santa Anna had to mortgage his own properties and contract ruinous loans to buy supplies. The army had little food, ragged clothing, antiquated equipment, practically no medicine or trained doctors, and primitive weapons left over from colonial times. Although most of the army was comprised of infantry required to march across hundreds of miles of rugged terrain, the soldiers lacked even adequate footwear. There was a shortage of mules, so the army had to make do with lumbering oxen, many of whom perished from fatigue on the long journey and were left to rot, their meat unfit for human consumption. Santa Anna's army had to live off the land, but the land was stingy and capricious. No rain fell in December, and lack of water was a severe problem. The deserts were dry and barren of grass for the horses, and the wild fruits the soldiers devoured caused a plague of dysentery. January and February were bitter cold, something soldiers from the tropics were ill prepared to endure. The Mexican army was further slowed and weakened by the large number of camp followers—wives and relatives of the soldiers—who tagged along. For reasons that are unclear, Santa Anna appears to have assumed that the Indians of Texas would side with the Mexicans, but the Indians favored neither one side nor the other. They attacked frequently, especially in the area south of the Rio Grande, and stole foodstuffs that had been stored for the army on small ranches before the soldiers arrived. Nor did the impoverished local Mexican population provide much support.

The Texas Army of the People was not especially impressive either. Like the Mexican force, the Texan army was poorly supplied, and desertion and indiscipline were chronic problems. But most of the Texan soldiers were highly moti-



In late June 1835 a prominent member of the war party named William Barret Travis, a lawyer who had entered Texas illegally in 1831 after killing a man in Alabama, led an impetuous attack on the customs house and military garrison at Anáhuac. Many of his fellow citizens denounced him as a hothead and reaffirmed their allegiance to Mexico, but rumors swirled that Santa Anna was bent on a military occupation of Texas, and the Texans began war preparations. In September, Colonel Domingo de Ugartechea, who commanded the San Antonio garrison, sent a detachment to the village of Gonzales to demand that the villagers there surrender a cannon that had been provided them to fend off hostile Indians. The villagers refused to surrender the cannon, resulting in a small skirmish on October 2, 1835. The Anglo citizens hurriedly formed a Texas "Army of the People," choosing Stephen F. Austin as commander in chief, and the Texas Revolution was under way.

Santa Anna was determined to make an example of the Texans. Brutality had worked rather well for him in the siege of Zacatecas in May, and a decisive trouncing of the Texans would further burnish his heroic credentials. Upon setting out in November 1835, Santa Anna declared, with typical bombast, that it had been years since he had seen "in the Republic a body of troops more brilliant in their discipline and equipment nor more uniform in their opinion and enthusiasm."⁷ Santa Anna evidently had a monumental capacity to delude himself and others, for in fact the army he led to Texas was made up of the rawest recruits gathered unwillingly from

vated, and they had not endured a forced march through an unforgiving desert. Volunteers were promised at least 640 acres of land as a reward should the Texans prevail, a more powerful incentive than anything the Mexican soldiers could claim. And many of the Texan troops were fighting on their own turf, whereas the Mexicans were six hundred miles from home. The Texans also had an ample supply of long rifles, while the Mexicans had to make do with smoothbore muskets that had less than half the effective range. The Texans were badly outnumbered, but that disadvantage, as it turned out, did not doom their cause.

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[REDACTED] the Alamo was of marginal strategic importance, as the rebels' stronghold was in East Texas, and the Presidio La Bahia at Goliad was the gateway to that region. This wanton recklessness likely was inspired by Santa Anna's desire to avenge the Texans' victory at San Antonio in December, when his brother-in-law, General Cos, had been forced to retreat across the Rio Grande. Santa Anna hoped to take the Alamo and report his glorious feat to Mexico City, where military victories made up so much of his political capital. He also hoped to send a menacing message to the rebels. Apparently he thought this worth the sacrifice of several hundred lives.

The assault began before dawn on Sunday, March 6. About 1800 Mexican troops stormed the fort from four directions, to be immediately decimated and driven back by deadly artillery and rifle fire. But eventually the Mexicans' superior numbers proved decisive. In little more than an hour all of the Alamo's defenders—whose numbers are variously estimated at between 189 and 257—had died in combat or been summarily executed in its aftermath. Perhaps 600 Mexicans were killed in the battle.