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The Santa Fe Expedition's Impact on Texas Annexation

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The Santa Fe Expedition's Impact on Texas Annexation

Daniele Celano

INTRODUCTION

The American Southwest to this day conjures images of burly pioneers and freedom beyond the bounds of established civilization, a unique spirit that harkens back to the era of the Lone Star Republic of Texas. Not only was the state once its own sovereign nation, it gained independence from Mexico through raising a true civilian army comprised overwhelmingly of the classic frontiersmen, live-off-the-land Texan that made up the new nation's population. While depictions of the quintessential Texan against the promotion of its vast lands ripe with unhindered opportunity drew masses of Americans to Texas, the propaganda hid a web of political maneuverings and agendas within Texas politics and between the budding nation and the United States. Behind the changing leadership laid vastly different visions for the future of Texas as a potential U.S. state and the possibility of Texas remaining independent became a grave possibility given the turbulent sectionalism in the states over slavery. It wasn't until the failed expedition along the Santa Fe Trail, which represented an attempt at growing as an independent nation, exposed the true political climate of the Texas government and caused Texas to move beyond being merely a question of slavery expansion in the U.S. While the explosion of American sectionalism and slavery debates halted annexation plans for Texas, the Santa Fe Expedition ultimately reaffirmed the U.S.'s need for Texas statehood in the interest of protecting westward expansion.

LAND OF PROMISE

Texas provided unparalleled opportunity to the lower classes of American society. In the wake of the Industrial Revolution, the immigrant and working class were faced with dire poverty and no legitimate chance of upward mobility. The opening of Texas to American emigrant provided an option for the low class to improve not only economically, but socially as well. Anyone coming from the United States was immediately accepted in society, as it provided a

common link between settlers against the backdrop of various ethnicities living in the area, with one pamphlet of emigration claiming “On this soil they meet as friends, forgetting, in their common name of Texian, all their local feelings, and making no other distinctions than grow out of character”¹. This fostered close-knit communities, as all Texans had a common bond of special and recent ancestry, and all shared in their need to live off the land and defend against attack.

One of the largest appeals heavily emphasized the ease with which land could be bought. Texas had such a vast territory which made the land cheap and plentiful, offering a rare opportunity for the lower classes to become modest landowners. Pamphlets focused on selling the emigration and land acquisition in Texas as an inevitably profitable venture, ensuring that the economy was stable and flourishing². Anyone could come to Texas, and land, status, and economic success was a guarantee.

An essential aspect of the Texas propaganda was the continued assertion that, even through the 1840s, Texas was definitively to become a state, as “The United States is the parent of almost the whole population of Texas”³. “Texan” and “American” were not distinct terms in regard to the Anglos that had emigrated at some point from the states. Texas is essentially spoken of as a U.S. territory and an extension of the American Southwest. Maps as early as 1836 further assert this implication and include the Texas Republic in maps depicting the United States⁴. It was a common belief, and desire, among the emigrants that Texas remained on a straight and clear path to statehood. They further discussed how “There is no part of the policy of

¹ Allen, William W., Lawrence, A. *Texas in 1840, or The Emigrant's Guide to the New Republic*. 229.

² *Ibid.* 233

³ *Ibid.* 228.

⁴ "Map of the United States and Texas." Digital image. University of Texas.

the government of Texas to... carry their conquests beyond the present bounds of the country”⁵, implying that independent expansion was not a goal or foresight for the Republic, which further tied it to the States.

Sam Houston had been the first president of Texas and outspokenly supported annexation, drafting a treaty that was ratified by an overwhelming majority within Texas nearly immediately. While for decades the U.S. federal government had tried to acquire the Texas area from Mexico, Houston’s treaty of annexation was rejected in 1837⁶. The tides of political discourse had shifted through the 1830s in the U.S., and while Texans unwittingly fostered the belief of definite statehood, there became a real possibility of the Lone Star remaining an independent nation.

U.S. POLITICS OF SECTIONALISM

Sectionalism in America began to rise dramatically in the early 1800s with the slavery debate at the forefront of the tension. The idea of “manifest destiny”, or the belief that the U.S. had the divine right and duty to spread their government and cultural ideals westward to the Pacific, had swept the nation, causing an intensely determined drive for westward expansion. The U.S. had an unprecedented volume of states admitted to the Union and great controversy arose over how new states and territories were to regulate slavery⁷. In the late 1820s, the slavery debate further intensified the growing animosity and tension between the North and South, as the abolition movement grew. In an attempt to relieve the vehement sectional arguments in Congress, the Missouri Compromise was passed that established how Maine would enter free

⁵ Allen, William W., Lawrence, A. *Texas in 1840, or The Emigrant’s Guide to the New Republic*. 258.

⁶ Neu, C.T. “Annexation.”

⁷ Varon, Elizabeth R. *Disunion!: The Coming of the American Civil War*, 61.

and Missouri would enter as a slave state.⁸ While this quelled hostilities momentarily, fierce debates erupted when a new state was to be admitted, as neither the North nor South wanted to be underrepresented in Congress.

While Texas had initially been heavily sought after, at the dawn of the new republic, sectionalism was reaching its height, and thus annexation became a highly controversial issue. Texas admission to the Union would again spark disagreement over slavery regulation in new states, yet in this case, there was no Northern counterpart to balance Texas, and it therefore caused a bigger eruption in Congress. Not only was Congress completely divided, the two parties, Democrats and Whigs, were split internally over slavery, and the Texas question worsened those fractions. Texas was a completely agricultural nation, and slavery had been an integral part of the economy and its lifestyle. The pro-slavery South supported Texas as the expansion of the South and its economy, whereas the abolitionist Northerners steadfastly opposed the spread of slavery into the west⁹. While the South ideally supported annexation, neither they nor the North wanted to add more fuel to the ravaging fire of sectionalism. The Texas economy was in shambles, and admitting a new state amidst the violent sectionalist politics would be beneficial to neither side¹⁰. Parties were rigidly divided internally and between one another, and Congress became little more than a place of ineffective vehement disagreements. Although Texas had always assumed eventual statehood, the political sphere within the U.S. was so turbulent that Texas remaining independent seemed a viable and attractive option. Following the rejection of Houston's annexation treaty in 1837, the Texas question had

⁸ Ashworth, John. *Slavery, Capitalism, and Politics in the Antebellum Republic*. 69.

⁹ *Ibid.* 358.

¹⁰ *Ibid.* 142.

effectively been tabled as an issue that could only worsen on the widening crack running down the Union.

SANTA FE EXPEDITION

However, after years of Texas annexation in the background, the Santa Fe Expedition in 1841 had catapulted the topic back into the main sphere of discourse. While Texan President Houston's main prerogative had been statehood, his 1838 successor Mirabeau Lamar had the opposite agenda¹¹. All annexation proposals stopped, as Lamar wanted Texas to remain an independent country, even though Texans believed that "The settlement and occupation of this country, almost exclusively by Americans, made its ultimate reversion sure" and that "She would be glad ... to seek security and repose by falling into the arms of the United States"¹². The Santa Fe Trail presented the perfect opportunity for Lamar to capitalize on his ambitious goals aimed at securing the success of Texas independence. The trail was a lucrative trade network that went from Missouri to New Mexico, cutting through the disputed Mexican territory. Although ideally Lamar looked toward European commercial relations, he eventually considered Santa Fe to be the most viable option for a stable trading partnership. In the hopes of breaking into the extensive trade network that excluded Texas, Lamar drew up a politico-military expedition proposal to travel to Santa Fe and divert part of the trade into Texas territory¹³.

Lamar gathered a group of merchants, civil commissioners and military forces to expedition with the stated goal of merely joining Texas in the flourishing trade system¹⁴. Upon joining, Lamar entrusted the group with his ulterior motive of the expedition: to acquire parts of

¹¹ Neu, C.T. "Annexation."

¹² Jones, Anson. *Memoranda and Official Correspondence Relating to the Republic of Texas*. 87.

¹³ Carroll, Bailey H. "Texas Santa Fe Expedition."

¹⁴ Ibid.

New Mexico for the Texas Republic. One of these members was famous journalist, George Wilkins Kendall, who details how “General Lamar had an ulterior intention—that of bringing so much of the province of New Mexico... under the protection of the government”¹⁵. Attempting to take over New Mexican territory ultimately caused the expedition to be an enormous failure, as the Santa Fe government was tipped off and met the group with military force in Santa Fe. Since relations between Mexico and Texas were hostile following the Revolution, this caused an international incident, and the U.S. had to heavily assist the Texas government in diffusing the situation¹⁶.

Although a failure, the expedition’s legacy was of vital importance to the politics that lead to Texas annexation. When journalist Kendall wrote of his experiences on the journey, and how they so greatly differed from the propaganda’s depiction of Texas, he exposed the underlying agenda Lamar kept for the fate of Texas. Rather than employing the expedition merely to involve Texas in trade, Kendall reveals that the Trail was of absolute necessity. The economy was weak and failing due to Texas’s inability to pay off its war debt and its lack of foreign commercial trade¹⁷. Texas was in such severe debt that it needed some form of control over the Trail in order to stay afloat. He further discussed the extremely poor relations between Mexico and Texas and Lamar’s expansionist tendencies that had been the underlying motive for the trip and the source of its disastrous end¹⁸.

Kendall’s exposition of the true problems facing Texas, as well as the hidden plot of expansion, revealed Lamar’s deeper goals of keeping Texas independent. In the desire to

¹⁵ Kendall, George W. *Narrative of the Texas Santa Fe Expedition*. 209.

¹⁶ Ramos, Raúl A. *Beyond the Alamo: Forging Mexican Ethnicity in San Antonio, 1821-1861*. 181.

¹⁷ Kendall, George W. *Narrative of the Texas Santa Fe Expedition*. 6.

¹⁸ *Ibid.* 41.

continue operating as a sovereign nation, Lamar knew that he needed to establish diplomatic relations with Europe and foster trade. By gaining access to the Santa Fe Trail, Lamar hoped to accomplish both economic security and leverage in future foreign treaties¹⁹. Texas needed extensive trade to strengthen its currency and stimulate its quickly declining economy, or the country would not be able to remain viable without annexation from another source. This was an especially essential goal, as the U.S. had largely forgotten the Texas issue after the denial of annexation in 1837 as well as Lamar's pull away from American politics to establish greater autonomy and separation. If the U.S. did not want to annex, and Lamar could not secure the viability of Texas as an independent nation, the future of the Republic would be in grave danger.

The poor relations with Mexico further shed light on why expansion into New Mexico was integral in retaining independence. Texas needed European diplomatic and financial relations, yet Europe largely overlooked the nation as a trading partner due to their profitable partnership with Mexico. In successfully overtaking Santa Fe, the Texas economy and claim to territory would have strengthened while at the same time weakening Mexico, lifting Texas's appeal as a trade partner and cementing its ability to survive as a country²⁰. Each goal of the Santa Fe Expedition was precisely tailored to achieve and set up the stability and longevity of Texas as a sovereign state. Texans saw the attempted expansion as a contradiction to annexation, and former President Houston was voted back into office in 1842.

IMPLICATIONS OF THE SANTA FE EXPEDITION

Lamar's initiatives, in fruition, had the opposite reaction of his intended objective of Texan independence, as the Santa Fe Expedition's most influential implication was its renewal of

¹⁹ Schmitz, Joseph W. "Diplomatic Relations Of The Republic of Texas."

²⁰ Schmitz, Joseph W. "Diplomatic Relations Of The Republic of Texas."

U.S. interest in Texas. While Congress was still in sectional divide over slavery, the Santa Fe Expedition projected the Texas issue beyond that of slavery and into a question of westward expansion. Although the abolitionist movement was still exceedingly strong in the North and continued to oppose annexation proposals, the attempted acquisition of New Mexico “Formed a basis for Texas’s claim to western territory”, especially in the vastly large sections of disputed Mexican-Texan territory²¹. Should Texas remain independent, westward expansion in the U.S. could come to a halt. The Santa Fe Expedition represented that if Texas remained its own nation, it could potentially expand into New Mexico, or initiate foreign involvement in the American Southwest, transforming the annexation issue in the U.S. into one focused on national goals of westward expansion.

Manifest destiny ideology, or the idea that the U.S. had a right and an obligation to spread their country and governance across North American to the Pacific, permeated the country in the 1840s, the accomplishment of which was a major goal of American politics. The Expedition, in shifting the Texas debate to focus on expansion, then, inherently shifted the debate from disagreement over slavery to the desire to complete American destiny²². While slavery tore apart the factions in Congress, one thing neither North nor South wanted to lose was access to Western territory. This notion began unifying pro-expansion Northerners to the large group of Southern supporters²³. President Tyler began promoted the idea of annexation as a national policy rather than an issue of slavery. Both Tyler and Texan President Houston played on the fear of losing the potential of extending the U.S. to the Pacific should it choose to become a part of another nation, such as Great Britain who was invested in preventing U.S. expansion in

²¹ Carroll, Bailey H. “Texas Santa Fe Expedition.”

²² Ashworth, John. *Slavery, Capitalism, and Politics in the Antebellum Republic*. 137.

²³ Jones, Anson. *Memoranda and Official Correspondence Relating to the Republic of Texas*. 33.

the west.²⁴ Tyler asserted that Texas was “In a state of almost hopeless exhaustion” and that they could either annex or “Force Texas to seek refuge in the arms of some other power”.²⁵ While the Texas Republic alone did not pose the largest threat to the States because of its population of former American citizens, a European power controlling that territory would seriously hinder expansion, and possibly mean that the U.S. would never reach the entire Pacific.

The only threat that could trump sectional ties and the slavery debate was that of losing westward expansion. Mexican territory in the Southwest was unstable, and if Great Britain annexed Texas instead, it would have superior claims to the disputed lands over the U.S. This caused annexation to become a pressing issue, and in 1845 Democrat and pro-expansionist Polk won the presidency on the platform of manifest destiny and solidified the vote in favor of Texas statehood²⁶. Both the North and South wanted expansion, and once the Santa Fe Expedition brought to light the possibility of Texas becoming a bar to the American destiny of “sea to shining sea”, Congress approved annexation in 1845.

CONCLUSION

The Santa Fe Expedition was a failed Texan attempt at garnering control over a part of the profitable Santa Fe Trail. However, the Expedition has a lasting effect on American politics, as it was essential in the renewing American interest in the annexation of Texas. Sectionalism between the North and South caused a division within Congress so volatile that neither party wanted to entertain the discussion on whether or not to annex Texas, as it caused such heated debates over slavery. It wasn't until Texan President Lamar, whose goal was to keep Texas independent, employed the Santa Fe Expedition with the ulterior motive of claiming parts of

²⁴ Neu, C.T. “Annexation.”

²⁵ *Senate Journal*. 28th Cong., 1st sess., 4 December 1843, 425.

²⁶ Schmitz, Joseph W. “Diplomatic Relations Of The Republic of Texas.”

New Mexico for the government, that the question of Texas annexation once again arose in America. The Expedition showed the risk to westward expansion that Texas posed should it remain independent, and the completion of manifest destiny was an issue primarily agreed upon between the North and South, thus leading to the annexation of Texas in 1845. Ultimately, it was the failed Santa Fe Expedition that changed the annexation issue in U.S. Congress from one about slavery to the protection of westward expansion, and therefore was a major influence in the annexation of Texas.

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