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AFTER SAN JACINTO: SANTA ANNA'S ROLE IN TEXAS INDEPENDENCE

RANDALL M. MILLER

On the afternoon of April 21, 1836, Antonio Lopez de Santa Anna, President of Mexico and general of her armies, roused from his siesta to the shrill yells of charging Texans. El Presidente rushed from his tent and seeing his army dissolving before Sam Houston's assault, he stole a mare and charged through the Texans' lines. Santa Anna fled from San Jacinto to a small shack where he traded his military garb for the cotton jacket and pants of the peasant. But within days Santa Anna was captured and easily recognized by the Texans. For him the Texas campaign was over. He now had to think of his own safety and that of his army. For General Sam Houston and the Texas rebels a miracle had occurred at San Jacinto with the defeat and capture of the Mexican president. The Texans had demonstrated the ability to win and now seemed prepared to assume de facto independence.

Santa Anna's imprisonment and its international ramifications provided a curious insight into the nature of the man. At the same time, it also illustrated the vagaries of Mexican-American relations during the Texan crisis. The role that the captured president played in this struggle, perhaps better than any other incident, demonstrated the desperation of the Texan cause and its frustrated international relations.

Initially, Santa Anna's confinement at Velasco was not really burdensome. On May 14, 1836, the Texans convinced Santa Anna to sign two treaties, one private and one public. The public document saw Santa Anna agree to evacuate all Mexican troops beyond the Rio Grande, to exchange prisoners and personally never again to take up arms against Texas. In the private treaty Texas promised Santa Anna's immediate release and return to Vera Cruz on his word to try to influence the Mexican government toward accepting a Texas delegation to discuss independence and the boundary.²

Santa Anna then ordered his generals to leave the area in question and began his own preparations for the return to Mexico. He knew that Texan anger and the volcanic nature of Mexican politics made it highly undesirable to remain long in Texas. President Burnet in an attempt to keep Texas' part of the May 14 treaty, had Santa Anna placed on the *Invincible* which was at Valesco.

As the *Invincible* was about to embark, however, a group of 130 Texas volunteers learned of Santa Anna's presence and promptly kidnapped him from the ship. The volunteers were perhaps ignorant or did not care about any private arrangements Santa Anna had with the Texas government. Santa Anna was soon returned to Columbia, Texas, where he remained for the next month and a half. Unnerved by the ridicule and threats of execution that Texas rowdies cast upon him, El Presidente complained that Texas was defaulting on its agreements. That unfortunate remark prompted Texas President Burnet to reply on June 10, that Santa Anna's bloody history at the Alamo and Goliad did not warrant his freedom. Moreover, the Texan reminded Santa Anna that he would decide when the Mexican had fulfilled his part of the agreements.³

Santa Anna's return to imprisonment occasioned several attempts on his life. Waving the bloody shirt of Goliad, troublemakers found audiences eager to taunt the

hapless general. On one occasion an irate Texan fired a shot into Santa Anna's cell, almost hitting the general's aide, Colonel Juan Nepomuceno Almonte. Santa Anna was further discomforted when the Texans placed a heavy ball and chain around his leg. The real burden, however, was the rumored execution that the Texas government was planning.⁴

Feeling was running high among Texans that Santa Anna be returned to Goliad and executed at the site of the massacre.⁵ The Texas Secretary of War and another Cabinet member sought Santa Anna's death. The Secretary of War, Murabeau B Lamar, urged that the cabinet try Santa Anna as a felon for Fannin's murder and summarily execute him.⁶

By June 30, Santa Anna later wrote most Texans were prepared to effect his murder when Stephen F. Austin, founder of the Texas colony and still its paternal leader, intervened, suggesting that Santa Anna appeal to President Andrew Jackson of the United States to intervene on his behalf. Santa Anna wrote to Jackson on July 4, saying that his abduction from the *Invincible* might prove fatal for Texas if he were not soon returned to Vera Cruz. Santa Anna reminded Jackson that although he had ordered General Filisola to leave Texas, the Mexican government had since sent a large force under General Jose Urrea to reconquer the territory. Unless he, Santa Anna, appeared in Mexico, he would have no control over Urrea. To further his case for Jackson's intervention, Santa Anna also suggested that political negotiations would best serve the interests of all parties and he added the hope that he could negotiate for the Mexican government.

Jackson, writing from the Hermitage, did not reply until September 4, when Mexican-American relations were sufficiently strained to warrant a United States intrusion into the Texas affair. In his letter Jackson gladly accepted Santa Anna's suggestion for mediation of the U.S. between Mexico and Texas. He also noted that Santa Anna was no longer a representative of the Mexican government, but that he would use Santa Anna's letter as the basis for an interview with the Mexican Minister in Washington. Jackson thus opened the door for American interference and the Texans quickly grasped at it.9

Jackson's seeming willingness to intervene was an important victory for Austin and Houston who believed that the Texan's only hope for survival lay in annexation to the United States. The Texan dream of annexation was not a wild fantasy either, for Jackson and the United States had a long history of trying to purchase the area of Texas.

Jackson's first attempt to buy Texas occurred in 1829 when the U.S. Charge de' Affaires, Anthony Butler, sent Jackson two papers praising the geography and character of the region. Jackson wrote his Secretary of State, Martin Van Buren, a memo authorizing Joel Poinsett to represent the U.S. in negotiating for the area. Jackson reasoned that since Texas was being settled largely by Americans, the United States would always have an intense interest in the area. For the same reason the Mexican government would do well to eliminate a potential source of friction and earn some cash at the same time. With the rise of Anastasio Bustamente and Lucas Alaman, however, such proposals fell to the wayside. The anti-American Alaman on February 8, 1830, clearly stated Mexico's opposition to American overtures on Texas and closed the matter. Rather than aggravate Mexican-American relations, Jackson laid the issue to rest until a more advantageous occasion arose. 20

The decline of the Bustamante-Alaman group and the rise of the Santa Anna-Valentin Gomez Farias faction saw Anthony Butler reopen the issue, quite independently of Washington. Butler's offer for cash appealed to Santa Anna who was already irritated by the Texans' clamor for statehood. The outbreak of the Texas revolt in 1835, however, changed Santa Anna's mind. In fact, he accused Butler and the United States of intrigue in stirring up Texan revolution and demanded Butler's recall. The United States responded by replacing Butler with Powhatten Ellis, but it was already too late to erase the odor of American interference. 11

Santa Anna's captors realized that Mexican-American relations had reached their nadir with the Texas revolt. They hoped that Jackson would therefore be less reluctant to apply force and diplomacy on the Texans' behalf. The success of Texan recruitment in the United States and the Mexican charges of American conspiracy only increased the dislocation between the Mexican and American governments. On the Mexican side, the attitude was one of bitterness and hate. El Diario del Gobierno summed up Mexican feelings when it observed, "we are aware that the whole nation, particularly New Orleans, is the parent of all the villains in the world." 12

Mexican-American relations almost suffered a formal break after Jackson dispatched a detachment of troops under General E.P. Gaines to occupy the U.S.-Texas border. Jackson's stated motive was the fear of Comanche incursions into American territory, but Gaines' presence at the border appeared to be an encouragment to the Texans. When the Mexican Minister Extraordinary, Manuel Eduardo Gorostiza, proved unable to garner American assurances not to let Gaines cross the border "in pursuit of Indians," he called for his credentials and left Washington in a rage. Before he departed he published an incendiary pamphlet attacking American policy that did little to smooth Mexican-American relations. 13 This crisis, which occurred late in 1836, left the Texans convinced that Jackson would feel vindictive enough to seek some kind of pro-American solution to the Texan problem. Accordingly, they stepped-up their annexation campaign. 14

The Texans began to gear their entire politics toward achieving annexation. The immediate hurdle, however, was recognition by both Mexico and the United States. On Mexico's part, Houston believed he held the trump card, Santa Anna. 15 But Santa Anna would be of little use unless the United States granted recognition. In order to win American recognition, Houston had to keep the Texan army in one piece (a difficult task with the Mexican troop build-up in the area) and he had to prove to Jackson that Texas enjoyed a de facto government. Hoping to find out to what extent Texas controlled her own fate, Jackson sent a special agent to Texas. 16 At the same time, Texas sent Major James Collinsworth to Washington to plead the Texan case. Texas also elected Jackson's good friend, Sam Houston, to the Presidency as an additional lure for Jackson. 17

The role that Santa Anna was intended to play in the Texas scheme grew larger as each day passed with no hint of American recognition. Santa Anna's influence in Mexico had declined steadily since his capture. In early May the U.S. Charge de' Affaires could report that "The influence of Santa Anna... is still great." 18 But by May 20, the hard-line Bustamante crowd, who took power in Santa Anna's absence, had passed a resolution in the Mexican Congress declaring that any agreement that Santa Anna signed while a prisoner was invalid for the Mexican government. 19 Bustamante and his cohorts did not wish to see Santa Anna return. In fact, as

Powhatten Ellis remarked, "Those in power are exceedingly fearful lest Santa Anna return." Other Mexicans were not even sure if Santa Anna was still alive and expressed a hope that such was the case, for it might help end the tiresome Texan war, 21

With Santa Anna's influence waning, Houston realized that he had to utilize his hostage as soon as possible. Houston therefore defied the will of the Texan Congress, who did not want to release Santa Anna under any circumstances, and moved for the Mexican's release to Jackson's custody.²² One observer rightly noted that Houston desired Santa Anna's release because the Mexican's term as President expired March 1, 1837. Unless he reached Mexico before that date, all shred of legality for Santa Anna's dealings was lost. Moreover, Santa Anna's release to Jackson would technically make any agreements with the United States valid since Santa Anna would no longer be a prisoner bound by the May 20 decree.²³

Using the exchange of letters between Santa Anna and Jackson as a pretext, Houston and Austin prepared for Santa Anna's trip to Washington, believing that El Presidente would effect his promise to seek a negotiated settlement with recognition of Texas independence in exchange for an indemnity and his freedom. Houston also wanted to get Santa Anna out of Texas for public relations reasons. A little humanity on the Texans' part could hardly hurt their case.

More important, Houston wanted Santa Anna back in Mexico as soon as possible. Hopefully, Santa Anna would return to power and honor his verbal and written agreements. At the very least, many Texans believed Santa Anna's return would create enough consternation for the Bustamante government that the Mexican war effort would suffer.²⁴

While Santa Anna was not aware of all of these manuevers, he was confident that he was going to Washington. By November his optimism had erased his earlier despair. Rumors of executions, even after Austin's June 30 intervention, haunted El Presidente. Most deflating was the aborted escape attempt of August 16, which saw the Mexican consul at New Orleans and Santa Anna's secretary, Martinez Caro, reveal the plot to the Texas authorities. Santa Anna and his constant companion, Almonte, were soon placed in chains, but before that disgrace was performed, Santa Anna unsuccessfully attempted suicide with an overdose of some narcotic. He suffered only nausea and embarrassment, but by November, with the hope of freedom, Santa Anna had reaffirmed his faith in life.²⁵

Confident that Santa Anna was sincere in his promise to seek a peaceful solution to the war, Austin, Burnet and Houston prepared the General for his Washington journey. Houston appointed Colonel George W. Hockley of Tennessee, Major William H. Patton who was also from Tennessee, and Colonel Bernard E. Bee of South Carolina to escort Santa Anna. With Santa Anna went his friend and interpreter, Colonel Almonte, who was well-educated, handsome and well-mannered, all qualities needed to impress Washington officials. 27

The party left Orizimba on November 16, determined to reach Washington by early January, despite the winter. After crossing the Texas border into the United States, they boarded the riverboat *Tennessee* and for twenty days steamed up the Mississippi River to the Ohio River before ice finally forced them to disembark fifty miles short of Louisville. Gathering supplies, the small band proceeded to Lexington, Kentucky, where the procession halted. Santa Anna's health was poor at best and the cold air created lung congestion. At Brennan's Hotel a certain Dr. Dudley attended the General until he felt strong enough to continue the journey. After several days the group returned to the road, swinging up through eastern Ohio and Wheeling, Virginia, before arriving in Washington about January 17, 1837 28

Rumors as to the real purpose of the trip accompanied Santa Anna all the way to the capitol. Most onlookers found the General "courteous, intelligent and dignified" Songer accounts believed Santa Anna was really going to seek Texas recognition, and prevent at with Mexico. 30 Others believed that Jackson had made Santel Personally responsible for some secret treaty commitments by Santa Anna. 31 Others still were less sympathetic toward the General and were not convinced that he had changed his demon's cloak. Tennessee, where Texas garnerered the most volunteers, proved the least cordial to Santa Anna. One account even intimated that the Mexican's layover in Lexington was not for health but had been a "contrivance on his [Santa Anna] part to afford time to General Bravo to make eruption into Texas." 32 Whatever the case, all anixously awaited the outcome of Santa Anna's interview with Jackson.

Despite the ill health of both Santa Anna and Jackson, both men sought an interview at the earliest convenience. On January 19, and again on January 20, Santa Anna had private conversations with Jackson, but the content of their discussions remained largely unknown.³³ Santa Anna later reported that he had an extremely favorable impression of Jackson, and he always maintained a respect for the man, so the conversations must have been at least amicable.³⁴

With the interviews in progress, Texas Minister Wharton reached the height of his optimism. He seemed little disturbed that nothing appeared in writing since Santa Anna was so laudatory in his promises of Texas independence.³⁵ Jackson probably discussed little that had not appeared in the exchange of letters, since Santa Anna had no official powers. He certainly gave the Texans cause for hope, however, since he made Santa Anna a proposal to present to the Mexican government, entailing a Mexican cession of the area along the Rio Grande from its mouth through the 38th parallel and then to the Pacific Ocean. For this the United States offered to pay \$3.5 million.³⁶

After a round of dinners, the now much admired Mexican general left Washington on January 26, headed for Baltimore. Meanwhile, the American government prepared the corvette *Pioneer* for Santa Anna's return to Vera Cruz. Taking the steamship *Pocahantas* to Norfolk, Virginia, Santa Anna was able to embark on the *Pioneer* by early February.³⁷ As to the reception he would receive upon his arrival in Mexico, he could only speculate, but he had achieved his most important objective, freedom.

Houston and the Texans awaited news of both Santa Anna's interviews and his reception in Mexico. Houston was confident that "Santa Anna's reception will be hailed with pleasure in Mexico by a large majority." 38 Houston and most Americans believed that as a popular leader Santa Anna would immediately stage a coup and open a new era in Mexican politics. 39

Bustamante, however, held the same fears and prepared for the return of El Presidente. As of January 11, Bustamante had declared Santa Anna an outlaw, to be shot if he ever stepped foot on Mexican territory. 40 Many Mexicans agreed since they thought that Santa Anna's release was an American-Texan plot to stir up dissension in Mexico. 41 According to United States sources, Santa Anna's impending return reached crisis proportions for Bustamante when the governor of Yucatan, General Toro, refused to yield his command to Bustamante, claiming Santa Anna was still El

Presidente 42

Whether by sixth sense or advanced information, Santa Anna was cognizant of the Mexican situation and chose to avoid revolution. He realized that he had compromised his position in the eyes of most Mexicans after his military defeat and seeming collaboration with the enemy. Wisely, he quietly slipped away to the comforts of his hacienda, Manga de Clavo. There he began to rebuild his power.

In order to regain influence in Mexico, Santa Anna had to prove he had not lost his machismo. Santa Anna immediately prepared a Manifiesto (May 10, 1837) describing his campaign and the causes and consequences of his captivity. He also defended himself against allegations of treason. He pointed out that no one, neither Mexico nor himself, was bound by his treaties, which were little more than falsas apariencias in order to safeguard Mexican interests and bide time for Mexican armies. He went on to say that the only promises he ever gave were personal; he had never compromised Mexican integrity.⁴³

In a letter to the Mexican Secretary of War and Navy, Santa Anna went on to explain the Washington trip as a ruse on his part in order to gain his freedom. He stated that he needed a safer route than New Orleans afforded and he wanted an opportunity to sound out the American cabinet on its real attitudes toward Texas and Mexico.⁴⁴ Throughout the remainder of his life Santa Anna would insist that the Texas revolution was an American war of aggression and that his trip to Washington had not only saved his own life, but had placed the burden of conscience directly on the American government.⁴⁵

In the end Santa Anna's tactics worked. Bustamante did not press for Santa Anna's execution, allowing Santa Anna time to regain his *machismo*. Forlornly, the American consul, unaware of the Latin American mind, noted that by April,

Gen. Santa Anna still remains at his Hacienda de Muaya de Clavo, the panick, among his enemies, and the hopes, of his friends, which his return excited, seems to have all subsided.⁴⁶

Most important, Santa Anna's pledge that he did not suborn Mexican integrity earned some credibility when Jackson withdrew the troops from the American-Texas border.⁴⁷ And when Jackson refused to move for Texas annexation, Santa Anna's stock rose higher. Moreover, the delay in American annexation, occasioned more by domestic than international pressures, allowed Benjamin Lundy and his abolitionist friends to organize an effective resistance to Texas annexation. By the time lame duck President Tyler granted Texas annexation in 1845, Santa Anna had regained power in Mexico and was able to refight the Texas issue.

Santa Anna had survived his Texas imprisonment because Texans like Austin and Houston were desperate for annexation. These men were willing to place confidence in the enigmatic Santa Anna because he was their one shred of legality. But Santa Anna was prudent enough not to sign any document too odious to Mexican thinking and he never promised more than personal obligations. He had, through his own inaction, also subverted any Texan or American psuedo-intervention in Mexican politics. Santa Anna, here as he often would do later, proved able to effect the necessary somersaults among his enemies to stay alive. He rarely missed an opportunity for advancement, and in Mexico there were many. For Santa Anna the wait was not long. The French were already plotting their invasion.

FOOTNOTES

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³Antonio López de Santa Anna, "Manifiesto... 10 de Mayo de 1837," in Las Guerras de Mexico con Tejas y Los Estados Unidos (Genaro Garcia, ed., Documentos Inéditos ..., XXIX [Mexico, 1910], 59; Santa Anna to Secretaria de Guerra y Marina, March 11, 1837, ibid., 124-126; Niles' Weekly Register, LI, 191.

4Santa Anna, "Manifiesto," 29-30, 48, 59-60; Santa Anna to Sec. de Guerra y Marina, March 11, 1837, ibid., 124-126; Niles' Weekly Register, L, 361.

⁵Letter of Colonel W.P. Miller reprinted in *Memphis Enquirer*, November 1, 1836.

6Niles' Weekly Register, L, 335.

7Santa Anna, "Manifiesto," 61.

⁸Santa Anna to Andrew Jackson, July 4, 1836, in James D. Richardson, ed., A Compilation of the Messages and Papers of the Presidents (20 Vols., New York, 1897), IV, 1493-1494.

9Andrew Jackson to Santa Anna, Sept. 4, 1836, ibid., 1494-1495.

¹⁰Anthony Butler to Martin Van Buren, undated report, [Aug., 1829]; Anthony Butler to Andrew Jackson, undated report, [Aug., 1829]; Andrew Jackson to Martin Van Buren, [Aug. 13, 1829]; "Project for the acquisition of Texas," [Aug. 13, 1829]; Jackson memo, [Aug. 15, 1829]; Van Buren to Poinsett, [Aug. 25, 1829]; Andrew Jackson to Van Buren, [Oct. 17, 1829]; Van Buren to Poinsett, [Oct. 18, 1829], Martin Van Buren Papers (Library of Congress).

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¹¹Edward Livingston (Sec. of State) to Anthony Butler, March 20, 1833, in William R. Manning, ed., Diplomatic Correspondence of the United States: Inter-American Affairs, 1831-1860 (12 vols., Washington, 1932-1939), VIII, 24-25; Anthony Butler to Andrew Jackson, Sept. 26, Oct. 2, 28, 1833, Jackson Papers; Andrew Jackson to Anthony Butler, Nov. 27, 1833, ibid.; John Forsyth to Anthony Butler, July 2, 1835, Manning, Correspondence, VIII, 32; Jose M. Ortiz Monasterio (Minister of Foreign Relations) to Castillo (Mexican Charge de' Affaires), Oct. 31, 1835, H.R. Doc. 351, 25 Cong., 2 Sess.; John Forsyth to Monasterio, Jan. 29, 1836, Manning, Correspondence, VIII, 39-40.

12Diaro del Gobierno, Feb. 7, 1836, translated and attached to Anthony Butler

- to John Forsyth, Feb. 8, 1836, Diplomatic Despatches, Mexico (National Archives, Record Group 59).
- 13Manuel Eduardo Gorostiza to John Forsyth, Sept. 27, 1836, Manning, Correspondence, VIII, 364-365; Gorostiza, Correspondencia que ha mediado... sobre el paso del Sabina por las Tropas que mandaba el General Gaines (Philadelphia, 1836); Monasterio to Powhatten Ellis, Dec. 21, 1836, Despatches, Mexico, NA; [Washington] Daily National Intelligencer, Jan. 24, Feb. 7, 1836.
- 14P.W. Grayson to Burnet, Nov. 3, 1836, in George P. Garrison, ed., Diplomatic Correspondence of the Republic of Texas (Annual Report of the AHA for 1907 [2 vols., Washington, 1908], 1, 124.
 - ¹⁵[Columbia] Telegraph and Texas Register, Oct. 25, 1836.
- ¹⁶Sam Houston to Richard Dunlap, July 2, 1836, in Amelia W. Williams and Eugene C. Barker, eds., *The Writings of Sam Houston* (8 vols., Austin, 1938-43), I, 431; Sam Houston to Thomas Rusk, Aug. 8, 1836, *ibid.*, 438; Stephen Austin to Burnet, June 10, 1836, Garrison, *Correspondence*, I, 98; George Childress & Robert Hamilton to Burnet, June 10, 1836, *ibid.*, 99-100.
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 - 18 Ellis to John Forsyth, May 19, 1836, Despatches, Mexico, NA.
- ¹⁹Gorostiza to John Forsyth, July 9, 1836, Manning, Correspondence, VIII, 331-332.
 - ²⁰Ellis to John Forsyth, Oct. 11, 1836, Despatches, Mexico, NA.
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- ²⁴Sam Houston to Commander in the Field, July 26, 1836, Williams and Barker, Writings, I, 434-435; Sam Houston to Mexican Minister at Washington, Oct. 25, 1836, ibid., 453-454; Address to Texas Senate, Nov. 6, 1836, ibid., 469-475; Letter of Texas Correspondent to New York Courier and Enquirer, Dec. 4, 1836, reprinted in Daily National Intelligencer, Jan. 3, 1837.
- ²⁵Telegraph and Texas Register, Aug. 23, 1836; Waddy Thompson, Recollections of Mexico (New York and London, 1846), 75; Antonio López de Santa Anna, Mi Historia Militar y Politica, 1810-1874 (Genaro Garcia, ed., Documentos Inéditos..., II [Mexico, 1905], 40; Santa Anna to Sec. de Guerra y Marina, March 11, 1837, "Manifiesto," 126; [Little Rock] Arkansas Gazette, Sept. 27, Dec. 13, 1836.

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- ²⁷Guillermo Prieto, *Memorias de Mis Tiempos* (2 vols., Paris-Mexico), II, 31-32, 63.
- ²⁸Santa Anna, Mi Historia, 41; Lexington Intelligencer, Dec. 30, 1836, Jan. 6, 1837; Daily National Intelligencer, Jan. 12, 19, 1837; [Washington] United States Telegraph, Jan. 18, 1837.
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 - 32[Nashville] The Union, Jan. 10, 1837.
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- 35Wharton to Austin, Jan. 17, 1837, Garrison, Correspondence, I, 176-177; Wharton to John Forsyth, Jan. 24, 1837, ibid., 193.
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 - ³⁷Daily National Intelligencer, Jan. 27, 28, 31, 1837.
- ³⁸Sam Houston to Wm. Hardin, Feb. 21, 1837, Williams and Barker, Writings, II, 58.
- ³⁹Sam Houston to Thomas Toby, Jan. 27, 1837, *ibid.*, 41; Sam Houston to Philip Dimmit, Feb. 16, 1837, *ibid.*, 56; Sam Houston to Anna Raquet, March 7, 1837, *ibid.*, 63-64; Arkansas State Gazette, March 7, 1837; Daily National Intelligencer, Jan. 24, 1837.
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 - 42 United States Telegraph, Feb. 11, 18, 1837.
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 - 45Ibid., 26, 37, 61; Santa Anna, Mi Historia, 32-33, 41.

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