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REGIONAL DIMENSIONS OF THE TEXAS REVOLUTION, 1835

by *Paul D. Lack*

The Anglo Texas colonists who revolted against Mexico in 1835 never tired of linking their cause with the tradition of their forefathers: "We are *the sons* of the BRAVE PATRIOTS of '76 [who] are invincible in the cause of FREEDOM and THE RIGHTS OF MAN."¹ In large part this rhetoric represented an effort to give the Texas Revolution an image both noble and grandiose — of a significant step in the ever-expanding course of human freedom. This simplistic view holds considerable appeal to Texas chauvinists but invites scholarly skepticism. Nevertheless, the analogy with the American Revolution can lead to useful perspectives on the Texas Revolution, even if the insights are quite different from the intended messages of Texas propagandists. One important line of inquiry into the similarities between the circumstances in 1775-76 and 1835-36 should emphasize the importance of regional disharmonies. Historians have long recognized the sectional dimensions of the American Revolution, both as an obstacle to achieving the unity required for independence and as a challenge to the emerging sense of nationalism.²

Diversity rather than uniformity characterized the land and the inhabitants of Texas. The people, generally believed to have numbered about 40,000 (excluding Indians) in 1835, spread out over a vast expanse of geographically varied territory. From San Augustine near the Louisiana border to San Patricio on the Nueces River in southwestern Texas was a journey of approximately 425 miles. Except for 4000 or so Mexicans, who lived mostly near the towns of Goliad and Bexar in the west and Nacogdoches in the east, almost all of the settlers had emigrated during the fifteen years between 1820 and 1835. They came under a variety of circumstances. Especially in eastern Texas many people simply crossed the United States-Mexican border, picked out a plot of unoccupied (though not always unclaimed) land, and went to work. A more regular process occurred for those who emigrated under the auspices of one of the several empresarios who claimed land grants to colonize Texas. However structured the colonization efforts may have seemed on paper, a haphazard quality of competing land claims characterized the settlement process. This attribute carried substantial political consequences. As empresario Sterling C. Robertson noted in October 1835: "Texas is divided into small municipalities unconnected by any bond of union except their common danger."³

This observation could have been extended much further because rivalries and jurisdictional and disagreements placed the different colonies or political units in conflict with one another rather than being merely "unconnected." By 1834, with the establishment of a third department

that divided Texas into the jurisdictions of Bexar, Brazos, and Nacogdoches, the political boundaries stood for real differences. In the west the Department of Bexar contained a population of non-Anglo Americans. Irish colonists settled in and around the towns of San Patricio and Refugio and blended in reasonably well with their Mexican neighbors, except for some land title squabbles at the latter place. The Tejano population of this area increased with the establishment of a colony by Martin de Leon at Victoria; however, indistinct boundary lines made for conflict with colonists brought in by empresarios Green De Witt and Stephen F. Austin to the north and east. Except for this instance and the case of Nacogdoches in east Texas, most Anglo settlements had occurred in places apart from the Tejanos, making for a kind of *de facto* residential segregation. This colonizing pattern helped prevent a rupture during the 1821-1835 period, but it did not encourage a sense of unity when the revolution came.

The region drained by the Colorado and Brazos rivers, organized into the Department of Brazos in 1834, contained mostly Anglo-Americans brought in under the auspices of empresarios Austin, Robertson, or DeWitt. But their relatively homogeneous ethnic origins did not make for placid politics. The frontier municipality of Mina, disputed between Robertson and the potent Austin-Williams partnership, contained many settlers who saw reason to be suspicious of the machinations of leaders in other municipalities. The De Witt colony engaged in rivalry for land and influence with its neighbors in all directions. In the Department of Nacogdoches a colossal confusion prevailed over rights to the land as a result of inefficient government and fraudulent empresarios speculations; few of the people shared a sense of common identity with others outside their immediate community.⁴

Chronic disputes between Texas and the various governments of Mexico helped to bind the people together, but serious intraregional divisions limited the revolutionary potential. No colony, or town, achieved political unanimity during the summer of 1835. Factional jealousies, especially between the Austin and Wharton cliques in the populous Brazos valley, divided many communities. In southeast Texas a long-standing quarrel involving political authority, land titles, and perhaps even ideology created disputes between Anahuac and nearby Liberty. As the triumph of centralism unfolded in Mexico in 1834 and 1835, opinion became mesmerized by the land speculation charges levelled at those involved with the *Coahuila y Tejas* legislature. Leaders who warned most vigorously of the dangers posed by Santa Anna often lost credibility because of their association with the "Mammoth Speculations" that reputedly had occurred in Monclava.⁵ Citing these and other factors, various historians have noted what one called the "almost continuous internal strife" of the revolution.⁶ While leadership jealousies and even ideological quarrels undermined unity to some extent, during the initial stage of the rebellion in the summer of 1835 divisions in Texas took on an essentially geographic dimension.

The Department of Bexar took a separate path in the revolution from the beginning. Briefly it displayed promise of leading opposition to the centralism of Santa Anna. In response to Governor Augustin Viesca's call for troops to defend the federalist cause and the state government, a group of about 100 Bexar militiamen marched out of town toward Coahuila on May 16. This bold move quickly collapsed under the threat of military retaliation and other pressure exerted by the centralist commandant, Domingo de Ugartechea. Jefe Politico Angel Navarro and the Bexar Ayuntamiento ordered the militia unit home only a few hours after it left. A public meeting supported the effort to avoid hostilities; a key ingredient seemed to be that the memory of death from past revolutionary conflicts continued to fill the heads of older citizens. Although residents of this district split their loyalties or showed genuine reluctance in supporting the Santanistas, after this momentary flirtation with rebellion Bexar became a centralist stronghold for the remainder of the summer. Other towns or colonies in the department followed this lead and for the same reasons: the presence of other military garrisons at Lipantitlan and Goliad, the existence of genuine Mexican loyalties among both Tejanos and Irish colonists, and religious ties with Mexico since a majority of the population there remained genuinely Roman Catholic.⁷

With the Department of Bexar opting to acquiesce in the Centralist political order, resistance to Santa Anna's regime came mostly from regions dominated by Anglo colonists. More specifically, the spirit for confrontation in militant-sounding public meetings and militant actions such as the attack on Anahuac led by William B. Travis at the end of June derived mostly from Stephen F. Austin's colony. When settlers from outlying regions of Texas spoke, they did so in protest against being led into rebellion against their will. The first group met on July 4 at Mina on the upper Colorado River, an area disputed between empresarios Austin and Robertson, and declared its determination to "at all times sustain the legal authorities in the exercise of their constitutional duties." Soothed by the assurances of the pacific intentions of the current rulers of Mexico, the citizens who convened there again a few days later attacked the "misconduct" of "designing men" seeking to sow "disaffection to the General Government." This kind of disgruntlement suggested that the Committee of Safety and militia unit organized by the Mina public meetings served to guard local interests, whether challenged by Mexico or by other Texans.⁹ The people of Gonzales in the De Witt colony also condemned San Felician rashness and, in the words of a correspondent of Ugartechea, asserted "their right to live in tranquility and peace with their Mexican brothers."

Much more unequivocally than in Mina, a meeting at Gonzales went beyond an attack on those who sought to precipitate a crisis and declared acceptance of the Santa Anna regime. Its resolutions attacked corruption in the state government, suggested modifications in customs policies to

make them acceptable, expressed confidence in the president and the General Congress, and protested against creation of a provisional government in Texas. The proceedings of this meeting also offered the refusal of the province to heed Viesca's call for armed support as evidence of the Texans' loyalty "towards the Nation." To the southwest of Gonzales the public also expressed an unwillingness to become embroiled in civil war and gave at least qualified support to the regime that ruled Mexico.²⁰

By mid-July sentiments of reaction had swept backward into the municipality of Columbia, which previously had hedged its position. On July 11 Columbia's ayuntamiento criticized the rebellious, "uncautious and unreflecting" minority and joined in the attempt to restore "peace quiet harmony and concord." Soon this body proclaimed that "the citizens of this Jurisdiction hold themselves to be true, faithful, loyal, and unoffending Mexican citizens." Even the local committee of safety assured the people that they need not fear Mexican aggression but should adhere strictly "to the laws and constitution of the land." The voices of harmony and peace in Columbia included that of erstwhile radical John A. Wharton.²¹ In San Felipe political activists either kept a sullen silence or sought a more moderate course.

From July to mid-August the conservative tide from western Texas carried the rest of the province toward peace. The *jefe politico* at San Felipe pursued policies of conciliation that appeared to emanate from both the Mexican government and the people of his department. His counterpart in Nacogdoches used the excuse of distance to avoid a clear commitment either toward or away from rebellion. Substantial pockets of conservatism, with both the native Mexican population at Nacogdoches and the people of Liberty opposing overt resistance to the Centralist authorities, also encouraged caution in this department. Citizens meetings in mid-July in Harrisburg and other places in East Texas suffered from lethargic attendance, disunity, unwieldy or cross-purposeful resolutions, and poor coordination.²²

Several developments in late summer brought about more unity and moved Texas toward revolution. From the beginning of the crisis the political chiefs had adopted such zig-zag courses that public confidence in the established government waned. This collapse left Mexico with enfeebled means of directing public opinion and enforcing its own will. Although many Texans had renounced violence and affirmed conditional loyalty to Mexico, no real progress occurred to build on this framework. Instead, Mexico proceeded with plans for a military buildup that all observers in Texas acknowledged would provoke further opposition in the colonies. News of the dreaded coming of reinforcements began to reach the Brazos department in early August, stimulating a new series of public meetings sponsored by committees of safety¹³ established previously. By mid-August, many of the leaders of these groups sensed a strategy of moderation — of calling a convention to work for peace while preparing

for a possible conflict — that appealed to a sufficiently broad spectrum of public opinion in most Texas communities.

The idea of a convention originated with a conservative faction. In early July the Mina Committee of Safety recommended this procedure to combat the “rash and precipitate measures” of San Felipe. Not even all conservatives supported this proposal, but throughout the month the convention technique gained favor among those looking for a middle ground to promote unity, check radical aggressiveness, and ascertain the majority will.¹⁴ Most believed that public opinion had reached a consensus “to keep peace as long as ([the Centralists keep their] hands off) and when our rights and privileges are invaded to kick like mules all feet at once,” in the homespun language of one leader from southwest Texas.¹⁵

Supporters of a convention presented it as the solution to the internal disunity of Texas, a method of ending “the evils of petty feuds and factions” and restoring “order, peace, and confidence.”¹⁶ At first the movement for a convention grew slowly, but in mid-August it gained the approval of an increasing number of communities. Two factors contributed to the success of the convention campaign: alarm at the arrival of Mexican troop reinforcements, and endorsement by the more radical-minded groups in the Austin colonies. Mass meetings in Brazoria, Columbia, and San Felipe issued calls and developed procedures for a “consultation.” Although some held back for fear that other districts would refuse to cooperate, eastern and northern Texas municipalities soon fell into line. On other questions the different communities continued to be separated. The fiery resolutions adopted in Nacogdoches asserted revolutionary theories and threatened the “Tories,” while the cautious Liberty district passed a set of proposals that continued to reflect a desire to live peacefully in the Mexican nation. Since the Mina municipality had initiated the drive for a convention in early July, it hardly could withhold approval. Altogether this support, though still incomplete with respect to western areas, represented about as much unity as Texas could hope to muster under the circumstances. The committee of safety at Columbia finished setting the stage by issuing a plan with dates for the selection of delegates and instructions for the Consultation to gather on October 15.¹⁷

Other events in September added to this growing sense of purpose and unity. News of the release of Stephen F. Austin meant that he was no longer being held hostage to the good behavior of Texas, and thus freed his reluctant supporters to join the movement of resistance to centralism. The great empresario soon arrived in person. Before he surveyed the Texas scene he continued to think in terms of prudent and defensive policies, but Austin quickly joined the developing consensus. Although a few of his correspondents still wrote of the old theme of disunity from personality clashes and “sectional feeling,” most presented news of cooperation both within and among the various communities. Austin quickly endorsed the Consultation and echoed the hope of other leaders that it would over-

come the "divisions" that traditionally had plagued Texas. Historians generally have repeated the assertion of Austin's partisans that his leadership brought sudden unity to the people of Texas; in fact, Austin only helped to solidify support for a course of action that already had been set in motion.¹⁸ The factor that finally galvanized Texas resolve was the news of Mexican military advances in September; this development led would-be peacemakers to acknowledge their failure even before an actual clash of arms occurred on Texas soil. As broadsides announced the arrival of Mexican reinforcements, more communities — including San Augustine in the east and Matagorda to the west — gave their approval of the Consultation. Even in areas that remained unorganized, individuals reported the existence of support for measure of political and military preparedness.¹⁹

The emergence of a higher degree of political consensus among the various regions and political subdivisions of Texas was of great importance, especially since the initial armed clashes occurred in the western, more conservative region. A sense of unity prevailed through October and November. Volunteers from throughout Texas converged on the scenes of action to form an army that represented a true cross-section of the people. The Consultation, although hampered by the outbreak of war, met in November despite absent delegations and managed to enact enough compromises to give Texas a fledgling, if shaky, government. To arrive at that stage Texas had to overcome the sense of localism and other divisions that initially hampered the movement of resistance to Mexican centralism. These and other forces of internal discord had been repressed temporarily rather than eliminated and would soon rise again to challenge Texas in the growing crises of war and revolution.

NOTES

¹Broadside, "To the People of Texas," February 13, 1836. A.J. Houston Collection, Archives, Texas State Library, Austin, Texas.

²Lawrence Henry Gipson, *The Coming of the American Revolution* (New York, 1959), pp. 11-12; Edmund S. Morgan, "Conflict and Consensus in the American Revolution," Stephen G. Kurtz and James H. Hutson, eds., *Essays on the American Revolution* (Chapel Hill, 1973), pp. 297-306.

³Sterling C. Robertson to Mr. Hunt, October 5, 1835, in John H. Jenkins, ed., *The Papers of the Texas Revolution, 1835-1836*, II (10 vols., Austin, 1973), p. 51.

⁴David J. Weber, *The Mexican Frontier, 1821-1846: The American Southwest Under Mexico* (Albuquerque, 1982), pp. 163-166; Malcolm McLean ed., *Papers Concerning Robertson's Colony in Texas* (12 vols., Arlington, Texas, 1974-1985), has chronicled the Robertson-Austin dispute extensively in a manner critical of the Austin-Williams position.

⁵Eugene C. Barker, *The Life of Stephen F. Austin Founder of Texas* (Nashville and Dallas, 1925), pp. 460-477; Margaret Swett Henson, *Samuel May Williams, Early Texas Entrepreneur* (College Station, 1976) pp. 63 (quotation), pp. 64-75; Brazoria Texas Republican, June 27, 1835; Ayuntamiento of Liberty to (the Public), June 1, 1835, in Jenkins, ed., *Papers*, I, p. 136; Jno. A. Williams to (Henry Rueg), July 3, 1835, *Papers*, I, p. 185; William C. Binkley, *The Texas Revolution* (Baton Rouge, 1952), pp. 48-49.

⁸Binkley, *Texas Revolution*, p. 127 (Quotation); John Henry Brown, *A History of Texas, 1685-1892*, I (2 vols.; St. Louis, 1892-1893), pp. 279-280. Not all historians emphasize the internal conflict factor. David Weber asserts that "when centralist forces marched into Texas in the early summer they met unified resistance." *Mexican Frontier*, p. 250. Actual unity developed very late in the summer and evaporated quickly.

⁹Domingo de Ugartechea to (Angel Navarro), May 16, 1835, in Jenkins, ed., *Papers*, I, p. 109; Angel Navarro to (Domingo de Ugartechea), May 16, 1835, *Papers*, I, p. 110; Angel Navarro to Secretary of State of Coahuila and Texas, May 18, 1835, *Papers*, I, pp. 112-115; (Edward Gritten) to Domingo de Ugartechea, July 5, 1835, *Papers*, I, p. 204; Samuel Rogers to the Political Chief of the Department of Brazos, July 4, 1835, *Papers*, I, p. 191.

¹⁰Address of R.M. Williamson, July 4, 1835, *Papers*, I, p. 195, 199; Antonio Tenorio to Domingo de Ugartechea, June 25, 1835, *Papers*, I, p. 168; Weber, *Mexican Frontier*, pp. 243-244; Binkley, *Texas Revolution*, pp. 48-49.

¹¹Mina Resolutions, July 4, 1835, Jenkins, ed., *Papers*, I, pp. 191-194.

¹²(Edward Gritten) to Domingo de Ugartechea, July 5, 1835, *Papers*, I, p. 204. (1st quotation); Samuel Rogers to the Political Chief of the Department of Brazos, July 4, 1835, *Papers*, I, p. 191; (Gonzales Citizens meeting), July 7, 1835, *Papers*, I, p. 216 (2nd quotation).

¹³Asa Brigham, Circular, July 11, 1835, *Papers*, I, pp. 230-231 (1st quotation); Asa Brigham to San Felipe meeting, July 14, 1835, *Papers*, I, p. 240 (2nd quotation); Committee of Columbia to citizens, July 15, 1835, *Papers*, I, p. 242 (3rd quotation).

¹⁴Wyly Martin to the Ayuntamiento of Columbia, August 10, 1835, in McLean, ed., *Robertson's Colony*, XI, p. 269; Wyly Martin to Domingo de Ugartechea, August 16, 25, 1835, *Robertson's Colony*, XI, pp. 303, 354; (James H.C. Miller to J.W. Smith, July 25, 1835), Jenkins, ed., *Papers*, I, p. 274; Henry Rueg to the Ayuntamiento of San Augustine, July 3, 1835, *Papers*, I, pp. 183-184; John Forbes to James B. Miller, July 21, 1835, *Papers*, I, pp. 269-270; Henry Read (*sic*) to the Political Chief of the Department of Brazos, July 28, 1835, Provisional Government Letterbook (Archives, Texas State Library); H. Rueg to Ayuntamiento of Liberty, August 22, 1835, Alcalde Papers (2 vols., typescript, Archives, Barker Texas History Center, University of Texas, Austin).

¹⁵John J. Linn to James Kerr, July 30, 1835, in Jenkins, ed., *Papers*, I, p. 288; John J. Linn to James Kerr, August 1, 1835, Provisional Government Letterbook; Katherine Hart and Elizabeth Kemp, eds., "E.M. Pease's Account of the Texas Revolution," *Southwestern Historical Quarterly*, LXVIII (July, 1964) p. 82.

¹⁶William J. Fisher to Committee of Safety for Mina, July 4, 1835, Jenkins, ed., *Papers*, I, p. 189 (quotation); Resolutions, San Felipe Citizens Meeting, July 14, 1835, *Papers*, I, pp. 238-239; *Brazoria Texas Republican*, July 18, 1835.

¹⁷James Kerr to Ira B. Lewis, August 3, 1835, Jenkins, ed., *Papers*, I, p. 303.

¹⁸Jonus (pseudonym), "Union," in McLean ed., *Robertson's Colony*, XI, pp. 333-335, 336 (1st quotation); Wm.H. Wharton *et al.*, to (the Public), July 25, 1835, Jenkins, ed., *Papers*, I, p. 277 (2nd quotation).

¹⁹*Brazoria Texas Republican*, July 25, August 8, 22, 1835; (Brazoria Meeting calling a convention), August 1835, Jenkins, ed., *Papers*, I, p. 323; W.B. Travis to (Henry Smith), August 5, 1835, *Papers*, I, pp. 312-313; Benja. F. Smith to Jas. F. Perry, August 15, 1835, *Papers*, I, pp. 346-347; W.B. Travis to Henry Smith, August 24, 1835, *Papers*, I, p. 368; resolutions, Nacogdoches Public Meeting, (August 15, 1835), *Papers*, I, pp. 343-345; B.T. Archer *et al.* to fellow citizens of all Texas, August 20, 1835, *Papers*, I, pp. 355-358; Resolutions, San Felipe Public Meeting, August 26, 1835, *Papers*, I, pp. 370-371; Resolutions, Liberty Public Meeting, August 30, 1835, Records of Citizens Meetings, Secretary of State Pre-Republic Legislative and Executive Bodies (Archives, Texas State Library).

²⁰John R. Jones, Jr., to (Moses Austin Bryan), September 1, 1835, Jenkins, ed., *Papers*, I, pp. 383-384; (F.W. Johnson) to S.F. Austin, September 5, 1835, *Papers*, I, p. 417 (1st quotation), S.F. Austin (speech at Brazoria), September 8, 1835, *Papers*, I, p. 427; S.F. Austin to T.F. McKinney, September 26, 1835, *Papers*, I, p. 491 (2nd quotation); (Henry

Austin) to M.A. Holley, September 10, 1835, *Papers*, I, p. 431; Brazoria *Texas Republican*, September 19, 1835; Moses Austin Bryan to (William F. Hunter), September 15, 1835, Gerald S. Pierce, ed., "Some Early Letters of Moses Austin Bryan," *Southwestern Historical Quarterly*, LXX (January 1967), p. 469; Binkley, *Texas Revolution*, p. 34-35.

¹⁹E.M. Pease to D.C. Barrett, September 15, 1835, Jenkins, ed., *Papers*, I, pp. 447-448; Resolutions, Committee of Safety for the Jurisdiction of Columbia, September 22, 1835; *Papers*, I, p. 478; Philip A. Sublett *et al.*, to Austin Committee of Safety September 22, 1835, *Papers*, I, p. 480; James Kerr to Stephen F. Austin, September 30, 1835, *Papers*, I, p. 509; Resolutions, Meeting of Citizens of Matagorda, September 26, 1835, *Papers*, I, pp. 489-490.