

Texas: Prelude to Civil War

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Contextual Essay

Essential Question:

How did the settling and annexation of Texas impact American foreign relations, politics and the growing sectionalism between North, South and West during the mid nineteenth century?

Contextual Essay:

The story of Texas begins with the Spanish and ends with the first shot fired upon Ft. Sumter in April of 1861. Americans have been interested in Texas' cheap and fertile land since the first pioneers set out to move west of the Appalachians, and American involvement in Texas would reach a fever-pitch by the mid nineteenth century. At first American colonists were welcomed into Mexico, encouraged to immigrate. By the mid 1840s the issue in Texas had taken over a US presidential election and challenged the most experienced diplomats in North America and Europe. The settling and annexation of Texas had a major impact on the course of the United States and its relationship with Mexico and the world powers of the nineteenth century.

Dating back to its Spanish origins, the northern provinces of Mexico have always lagged behind the other provinces in population. Spain worked to promote the settling of its northern land to create a buffer to protect them from American Indians and competing empires. Once Mexico successfully won its independence from Spain in 1821, it followed in her footsteps by passing a colonization law that offered land grants to encourage immigration. Mexico also wanted a buffer zone and welcomed American colonists into its northern lands. Americans, especially in the south and west, emigrated to Texas in droves, attracted by cheap, fertile land that could be bought for a few cents an acre compared to a few dollars for similar land in the US.

Stephen Austin led a group of 2,000 American colonists into Texas in 1824, and by 1835 American immigrants in Texas outnumbered native Mexicans ten to one. The huge increase in American settlers alone was enough to make the Mexican government nervous, and differing views on religion and slavery would ultimately lead to conflict. In 1830, the Mexican government decided to ban all future American immigration and to promote the settling of Texas by native Mexicans and European emigrants. This new policy did not stop Americans from immigrating illegally into Texas. (Hard Road to Texas, n.d.) By late 1834, Americans continued to make their way south of the US border. In the same year Antonio Lopez de Santa Anna declared himself dictator of all of Mexico including Texas, and set about on a course to suppress the rising independence movement that was growing among the American settlers. Texans called conventions in 1832 and 1833 to discuss their options and how to handle the increasing tension with the Mexican government. By late winter 1836, Texans were close to deciding to split from Mexico and declare

independence. In response to the Texan conventions, Santa Anna immediately began mobilizing an army to assert his rule. (Tindall & Shi, 2004)

One of the most important events of the War for Texan Independence occurred at an abandoned mission in San Antonio, the Alamo. Led by the brave Mississippi lawyer Colonel William B. Travis, 189 Texans and American volunteers braced themselves for the onslaught of 5,000 Mexican soldiers. When Santa Anna demanded the surrender of the Alamo on February 23, 1836, Travis responded with a canon shot. The Mexican Army continued to bombard the Alamo for twelve days and were repulsed every time. On the morning of March 6, the Alamo defenders awakened to a bugle playing "Deguello" (no mercy to the defenders). This haunting tune preceded a Mexican assault from all sides. Twice the Mexicans were repelled, but the third time the northern wall was breached. Mexican soldiers swarmed the Alamo, and violent, often hand-to-hand combat followed. Travis was killed, and only 16 women, children and servants survived. Santa Anna immediately declared a victory, yet the Mexican soldiers realized the importance of what happened at the Alamo, as indicated by one of Santa Anna's aides, "One more such 'glorious victory' and we are finished." (Tyndall & Shi, 2004, p.552) Sam Houston, commander of the Texan Army was able to use the bravery exhibited at the Alamo as a rallying point and headed east picking up reinforcements along the way. Houston surprised the Mexicans at San Jacinto on April 21, 1836 and defeated the Mexican army within fifteen minutes. Santa Anna was taken prisoner and forced to sign a treaty recognizing Texan independence in exchange for his life. This treaty marked the border at the Rio Grande River. Mexico refused to recognize Texan independence or the Rio Grande border.

By the end of the conflict, the US had not fully realized how the Battle of San Jacinto, and the War for Texan Independence would impact American politics, economics and diplomacy. A majority of Texans considered themselves Americans at heart and favored immediate annexation to the United States. (Ferrell, 1975) The British also began courting the Texans and attempted to work as a mediator between Mexico and Texas. The annexation of Texas immediately sparked sectional tension that was felt in Congress, national politics and abroad.

British investments in Mexico increased once Mexico won its independence from Spain and lost its mother country's economic support. Britain viewed Mexico as a source for cheap resources like cotton, and a tariff-free market for the importation of manufactured goods. This profitable relationship worried the US, which feared world-wide British domination if it could gain a stronghold in the economies of the western hemisphere. (Roeckell, 1999) Some Texans favored an alliance with Britain, while others feared that Texas could become too dependent on Britain economically. (Hard Road to Texas, n.d.)

Those active in the British abolitionist movement viewed Texas as a key target for the abolition of slavery, which concerned both slave-holders in Texas and the southern US. (Hard Road to Texas, n.d.) Many British holders of Mexican bonds were Quakers and radical abolitionists. Members of the British and Foreign Anti-Slavery Society also sought to end slavery in Texas, and Texas diplomat Ashbel Smith went so far as to accuse the group of stirring up abolitionist sentiment in the American north. (Smither, 1929) Britain chose to offer itself as an intermediary

between Texas and Mexico, and pledged several times to assist the two countries in reaching a peace agreement if Texas pledged to remain independent and refused annexation to the US. British diplomats continued to offer their services, and the powerful Lord Aberdeen worked to get Texas to agree to a “diplomatic act” that would settle border issues with Mexico and take the annexation option off of the table. (Hard Road to Texas, n.d.) Britain underestimated the people of Texas. Most were American transplants who still viewed themselves as America. While president Sam Houston and president-elect Anson Jones appeared to favor a British alliance, most Texans continued to support annexation to the US.

American politicians shied away from Texas immediately following its independence. Andrew Jackson delayed official recognition of the Republic of Texas until his last day in office, anxious about the sectional conflict and potential war that could result from US involvement in Texas. As Britain continued to offer its diplomatic services to Texas, southern slaveholders grew nervous about the burgeoning relationship between Texas and the abolitionist British Empire. The move towards annexation began with President John Tyler. (Tindall & Shi, 2004)

Tyler, who managed to alienate himself from both the Democrats and the Whigs, understood how the annexation of Texas could benefit the US and the institution of slavery. The annexation of Texas was a central issue in the election of 1844. The Whig party decided to pursue an anti-annexation platform, and they cited potential sectional conflict and war with Mexico as two important reasons to leave Texas alone. Leading Whig candidate Henry Clay remarked that annexation was “dangerous to the integrity of the Union,” in his “Raleigh Letter” of 1844. While Tyler continued to work for annexation during his last months as president, leading candidates Henry Clay and James Polk battled over the Texas issue in their campaigns. Polk, the Democratic candidate was backed by former president Andrew Jackson who viewed the annexation of Texas as a necessity by the election of 1844. Jackson advised “obtain it [Texas] the U. States must – peaceably if we can, but forcibly if we must.” (Ferrell, p. 192) Polk entered the campaign with a platform that supported “the re-annexation of Texas at the earliest practicable period.” (Holt, p. 11) Polk’s pro-annexation platform helped him to win eight of thirteen slave states, allowing him to narrowly defeat Clay. Polk also won seven of thirteen Northern states, yet the Whig party did benefit from Clay’s anti-annexation policy and carried the rest of the North.

Lame duck president Tyler continued to draft a treaty of annexation, which ultimately failed in the US Senate. The anti-slavery and Whig influence was too great to pass Tyler’s treaty. (Holt, 2004) After Tyler’s annexation treaty failed in Congress, he decided to try a joint-resolution, which only required a simple majority to pass the annexation bill rather than 2/3rds. (Holt, 2004) After bitter debate in the House and the Senate, the treaty passed by a slim margin (27:25 in the Senate; 120:98 in the House) (Tindall & Shi, 2004). Tyler signed the annexation bill on March 1, 1845 and offered Texas statehood. Texas was admitted to the Union on December 29, 1845.

As annexation picked up support in Congress, the British reluctantly backed away from Texas. Mexico’s dictator Antonio Lopez de Santa Anna realized that his threats of war would no longer be backed up by the British military and resigned

himself to losing Texas to the US. France, which had also demonstrated some interest in Texas backed off with the British, leaving the new republic open to American annexation and influence. The annexation of Texas created sectional and partisan conflict in the US, as well as stressed the relationship of the US and leading European powers and Mexico. The sectional issues that were brought to the surface through the annexation debates would continue to plague the US for decades until the firing on Ft. Sumter in April of 1861. The nation would finally settle these issues with civil war.

WORKS CITED

Ferrell, R. H. (1975). *American diplomacy: A history*. New York, NY: Norton.

Robert Ferrell's classic text takes a diplomatic approach to the subject of Texas in the mid nineteenth century. Ferrell successfully includes perspectives of Mexico, Britain, France, various politicians, international diplomats, and military leaders. Ferrell's text provides varying perspectives while reinforcing the view of American exceptionalism. He addresses expansion from a Euro-centric perspective, not unusual for sources published around the nation's bicentennial.

Holt, M.F. (2004) *The fate of their country: Politicians, slavery extension, and the coming of the Civil War*. New York, NY: Hill & Wang.

Holt's work analyzes the role of westward expansion, territorial acquisition, slavery and diplomacy on American politics in the nineteenth century. His thesis is that Texas ignited more partisan conflicts than sectional, and links the annexation debates to the death of the Whigs and rebirth of the Democratic party. This deviation from sectionalism to party politics represents a more modern view of US expansion in the mid-nineteenth century.

Roeckell, L. M. (1999) Bonds over bondage: British opposition to the annexation of Texas. *Journal of the Early Republic*, 19 (2), 257-278.

Roeckell studies British involvement in Mexico and Texas. The investment of British citizens in Texas and Mexico made the fate of the Republic of Texas a national concern of Great Britain. Roeckell links abolitionism and economics with a thorough examination of who was investing in Texas and what Britain stood to gain from an alliance with the Lone Star Republic.

Smither, H. (1929) English abolitionism and the annexation of Texas. *The Southwestern Historical Quarterly*, 32 (3), 193-205.

Smither also analyzes the involvement of British citizens, leaders and diplomats in Texas and Mexico and details the role of British and American abolitionists in Texas. Smither's analysis focuses on the effects of the abolitionist movement on Texas,

representing the widely held twentieth century thesis that anti-slavery sentiment and sectional tension controlled the politics and diplomacy of American expansion.

Tindall, G.B. & Shi, D.E. (2004) *America: A narrative history*. New York, NY: Norton.

This quintessential survey text in US History provides a detailed background of American immigration into Texas, the War for Texas Independence and the annexation debates that followed. This resource is a good place to begin when learning about the complexities of the American annexation of Texas.

(2011, March 3). Hard road to Texas – Texas annexation 1836-1845.
Retrieved from <http://www.tsl.state.tx.us/exhibits/annexation/index.html>

This special exhibit is presented by the Texas state library and archives. The Hard Road to Texas site provides access to original and transcribed primary source documents relating to Texas and annexation, as well as well-researched secondary analysis on the many factors that went into the decision of the US to annex Texas.

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Barker, E. (1946). The annexation of Texas. *The Southwestern Historical Quarterly*, 50 (1), 49-74.

Barker, N. (1967) The Republic of Texas: A French view. *The Southwestern Historical Quarterly*, 71(2), 181-193.

Narrett, D.E. A choice of destiny: Immigration policy, slavery and the annexation of Texas. *The Southwestern Historical Quarterly*, 100(3), 271-302.

Schroeder, J.H. (1985) Annexation or independence. *The Southwestern Historical Quarterly*, 89(2), 137-164.

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