

THE RELATIONS BETWEEN THE TEXAS REPUBLIC AND MEXICO. THE SANTA FE EXPEDITION*

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Abstract: The Texan Santa Fe Expedition was a commercial and military enterprise. It was unofficially initiated by Mirabeau Buonaparte Lamar, second President of the Republic of Texas, in the summer of 1841. His aim was to gain control over the lucrative Santa Fe Trail and to establish Texas jurisdiction over the area. The expedition included twenty-one wagons carrying merchandise and was accompanied by businessmen, Lamar's commissioners, and a military escort of some three hundred volunteers. The members of the expedition expected a warm welcome by the citizens of New Mexico, but instead, were "welcomed" by a detachment of the Mexican Army. The Texans, reduced in number and broken in health and spirit, were forced to surrender, and then to march 1,600 miles from Santa Fe to Mexico City. They were held prisoners for almost a year and released only in the spring of 1842. In my paper I propose to discuss the organization, course, and consequences of the ill-fated expedition. My most important primary sources will be the official documents and the diplomatic correspondence of the Republic of Texas, the correspondence and addresses of President Mirabeau Buonaparte Lamar, and the accounts of the participants of the Santa Fe expedition.

Keywords: Texas Republic, Sam Houston, Mirabeau Buonaparte Lamar, Santa Fe Expedition, Annexation.

2016 marked the 180th anniversary of the birth of the Texas Republic, which meant the end of Mexican rule in the region. The Texas Revolt of 1836, just like many other separatist movements in the borderland provinces of Mexico was a reaction to the shift in Antonio López de Santa Anna's policy. In 1835 the Mexican president carried out a conservative turn, which threatened the inhabitants with a more centralized government and stronger control. The American settlers, most of whom immigrated to Texas after the Mexican Congress had passed liberal colonization laws in 1825, cooperated with the *Tejanos* (Mexican Texans) in defense of the federalist constitution of 1824, which was based on the democratic principles of the American constitution, but which, because of the deep impacts of the Spanish colonial rule and institutions, was very difficult to put into practice.

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One of the greatest concerns of the inhabitants of Texas was that they could not make decisions about their own affairs. The weakness and inadequacy of local government, the differences in legal and judicial systems, the different principles and practices of government (self-government, sovereignty, republicanism, individualism as opposed to traditions of strong monarchical control and central government), and the conflicting interests on the issue of slavery were all sources of conflict. When the Mexican army marched against the province, the Texans' declared independence on March 2, 1836 (Wallace – Vigness, 1963: 99). They fought a series of battles and on April 21, the Texas army, commanded by Sam Houston, defeated Santa Anna's troops in the battle of San Jacinto. After the surrender, the Mexican president was forced to acknowledge the independence of Texas in the Treaty of Velasco. The Mexican government, however, never recognized it (Wallace – Vigness, 1963: 117-118; Fehrenbach, 1968: 229-233, 239-241; Weber, 1982: 251).

The Texas Congress immediately applied for statehood in the United States, but the American Congress rejected the application – most probably because the Northern states opposed the extension of slavery. After the failure of annexation, the representatives of Texas needed to stabilize and consolidate the independent state. The Texas Congress drafted a constitution for the Republic and called for the election of a president (Wallace – Vigness 1963: 100-106). Sam Houston, the hero of San Jacinto won with a great majority. He received 5,119 votes, 77% of the total (Fehrenbach, 1968: 245-246; Perrigo, 1971: 124).

The First Congress of the Texas Republic divided the country into twenty-three counties, which more or less corresponded with the previous Mexican municipalities. The representatives also defined the boundaries of the new state on December 19, 1836 (Fehrenbach, 1968: 252; Weber, 1982: 266). The Republic of Texas claimed that its boundaries extended to the Rio Grande, following the river north into present-day Colorado and including New Mexican communities such as Santa Fe and Taos that stood on the east side of the river (Wallace – Vigness, 1963: 125). To defend the borders against a possible Mexican invasion and Indian attacks the Texan Congress established an army of 3.500 soldiers and 280 mounted rangers and proposed the building of forts and commercial stations as well as the establishment of a fleet (Richardson, 1943: 133).

The young Republic had to face numerous difficulties. The treasury was empty, so it was almost impossible to pay the army and control the adventurers who arrived in Texas during the war. Even though the income from different taxes and duties was considerable, and the number of immigrants grew steadily, during the two years of Sam Houston's presidency the national debt reached almost two million dollars, which weakened his position (Richardson, 1943: 135; Perrigo, 1971: 126).

Texas' second national election was held on September 3, 1838. As the provisions of the constitution of the Texas Republic did not allow consecutive terms for presidents, Houston could not run for re-election. The inhabitants' choice for president was his vice president and political opponent, Mirabeau Buonaparte Lamar. He arrived in Texas in

1835 and joined Sam Houston's army in the spring of 1836. He fought in the battle of San Jacinto, and then was appointed as the Secretary of War in the interim Texian government. He had a colorful personality, and his reputation as a poet, newspaper publisher and war hero made him an appealing candidate. His approach was the opposite of Houston's cautious policy, who tried to bridge the split between the conservatives who longed for stability and close relations with the United States and the expansionist radicals who wanted Texas to build its own empire in the West. Lamar ran on a ticket calling for vigorous efforts to secure a foreign loan that Houston had failed to obtain and on a platform of Texan greatness and future glory. On December 1, 1838 he won a landslide victory with 96.5% of the votes. In his inaugural address he laid emphasis on gaining Mexican recognition – obtained by force, if necessary –, and advocated the establishment of a strong nation that would extend to the Pacific Ocean (Wallace – Vigness, 1963: 125; Fehrenbach, 1968: 254; Nevin, 1975: 210). Less than two weeks later, in his message to Congress he outlined his policy towards Mexico:

With Mexico, our position is unchanged. – She still seems to cherish the illusory hope of conquest, without adopting any means for its realization. [...] It may become the duty and interest of Texas, to reduce the question of her right to Independence, to a more summary adjustment than our adversary seems inclined to give it. While we would meet with alacrity, the first indication of a desire, for a just and honorable peace, we should compel a more active prosecution of the war. If peace can be obtained only by the sword, let the sword do its work (Wallace – Vigness, 1963: 125).

Between 1839 and 1841 Lamar sent three envoys (Barnard F. Bee, James Treat, and James Webb) on three different missions to Mexico to negotiate for the recognition of the independence of the Texas Republic and the acceptance of the Rio Grande as the boundary between the two republics and offered to pay 5,000,000 dollars in exchange, but each attempt failed. At the same time, he also threatened the Mexican government with offensive action and aimed at gaining control of the upper Rio Grande Valley, for economic and strategic reasons as well (Fehrenbach, 1968: 258; Pletcher, 1975: 76-77).

Texas needed trade, and the Santa Fe market offered good opportunities. It embraced a considerable population (more than seven thousand inhabitants), which was isolated by twelve hundred miles from the Mexican capital and by four hundred miles, partly across a desert, from El Paso del Norte, the nearest settlement of considerable size in the direction of the capital (Sunder, 1995: 237). Santa Fe, ever since 1823, had afforded a rich Mexican trade, through wagon caravans that made annual trips from St. Louis, Missouri, and traders who received gold and silver in return for their goods. While it would have taken about six months to reach Mexico City, the journey across the Santa Fe Trail to Missouri took about two months, through a more level and safer route than the one across northern Mexico. If this trade, Lamar thought, was diverted to Texas, it could

supply enough precious metals for the Republic and thus relieve the financial embarrassments of the country. In addition, it could also lead to a line of posts through the Indian country, and thereby divert the hostile tribes from the Texas frontier.

No steps had been taken to exercise control over the New Mexican settlements until 1840, when William G. Dryden, a citizen of Santa Fe, visited Austin, the capital of the Texas Republic. He was approached by President Lamar, who asked him to act as commissioner for Texas in an effort to influence the people of New Mexico to approve the change in government. John Rowland and William Workman, two other citizens of Santa Fe, were also appointed commissioners (Brown, 1893: 189).

On his return to Santa Fe, Dryden took with him the instructions for the commissioners and a letter written by Lamar to the people of Santa Fe. In this letter, dated April 14, 1840, the President explained that his aim was to establish a trade route as well as to offer the New Mexicans the opportunity of participating in the Texas government. "We tender to you a full participation in all our blessings. [...] we shall take great pleasure in hailing you as fellow citizens, members of our young Republic, and co-conspirators with us for all the glory of establishing a new happy and free nation" (Gulick – Elliott, 1993: 370-371).

He outlined the benefits the New Mexicans would have if they joined the Republic of Texas, and promised that commissioners would be sent out to answer any questions and to facilitate the establishment of a union. He also argued for the necessity of sending along a military escort.

The Commissioners will be accompanied by a military escort for the purpose of repelling any hostile Indians that may infest the passage, and with the further view of ascertaining and opening a safe and convenient route of communication between the two sections of Country which being strongly assimilated in interests, we hope to see united in friendships and consolidated under a common Government (Gulick – Elliott, 1993: 371).

The Texas Congress did not support the grandiose plans of the president, so Lamar proposed an expedition to Santa Fe on his own initiative. He issued a call for volunteers, and promised the merchants transportation and protection for their goods to Santa Fe. Circulars and proclamations, printed in Spanish, were to be taken along by the three civil commissioners and distributed among the people. They were to assure the inhabitants that the expedition was peaceful, and to state that the only purpose was to open peaceful trade-relations and give the New Mexicans an opportunity to live under the liberal laws of Texas.

This expedition has been organized by the President for the purpose of opening a communication with that portion of the Republic known as Santa Fe, and of closely uniting it with the rest of the

Republic. [...] But, as that portion is inhabited by a people, strangers to our institutions and to our system of Government, speaking a different language, and deriving their origin from an alien source, whose religion, laws, manners and customs, all differ so widely from our own, the greatest circumspection will be necessary, in making known to that people the object of your mission, on your first arrival at Santa Fe, and subsequently in conducting your intercourse with them (Garrison, 1911: 737-738).

If they accepted the offer, it was promised that only the general laws of Texas would be extended over New Mexico and that their local laws and customs would continue in force until altered by themselves. The commissioners were instructed to use no force unless to repel attack (Brown, 1893: 190; Garrison, 1911: 737-743).

Let them feel and understand that they are really to be freeman, that they are to be citizens of a Republic, in whose Government the voice of each one of them will be as potent as that of the highest in our land, that their representation in our Legislature will be in proportion to their numbers, which will insure to them an equal participation in the making of laws for the future, and of repealing such as are now in force (Garrison, 1911: 739).

President Lamar appointed William G. Cooke, Richard F. Brenham, José Antonio Navarro as civil commissioners, and George Van Ness as their secretary. To protect the merchants a military force was established, headed by Hugh McLeod, and George Thomas Howard as second in command (Garrison, 1911: 737, 741). The recruits were organized into five companies of infantry and one of artillery. Two American travelers, George Wilkins Kendall and Thomas Falconer accompanied the expedition as guests. Kendall was the founder and editor of the *New Orleans Picayune*, the first penny press newspaper in the American South. He traveled to Texas in 1841 and was invited by Mirabeau Lamar to participate in the expedition as a guest, free of military or civil control (Saxon – Taylor, 2004: xiii-xv). His account of the expedition was first published in the *Picayune* in a series of fifty-eight articles between the beginning of June and the end of August 1842, and then as a book in 1844.¹ Falconer was an English jurist and explorer,

¹ Kendall, George Wilkins. *Narrative of the Texan Santa Fé Expedition, Comprising a Description of a Tour Through Texas, and Across the Great Southwestern Prairies, the Comanche and Caygüa huntinggrounds, with an Account of the Sufferings from Want of Food, Losses from Hostile Indians, and Final capture of the Texans, and Their March, as Prisoners, to the City of Mexico, with Illustrations and a Map*. 2 vols. New York: Harper and Brothers, 1844. Saxon, Gerald D. – Taylor, William B., eds. George Wilkins Kendall. *Narrative of the Texan Santa Fé Expedition, Comprising a Description of a Tour Through Texas, and Across the Great Southwestern Prairies, the Comanche and Caygüa huntinggrounds, with an Account of the Sufferings from Want of Food, Losses from Hostile Indians, and Final capture of the Texans, and Their March, as Prisoners, to the*

who left England for the Republic of Texas in the fall of 1840 and arrived there in May, 1841. He accompanied the Santa Fe expedition as an “invited guest” and was given the task of a “historiographer” of the journey, who was also to give “an account of the intermediate country and its scientific capacities” (Garrison, 1911: 742). He and Kendall became good friends. Falconer published a series of articles about the expedition in the *New Orleans Picayune* and then a book in 1842.² In my analysis I have used Kendall’s first-hand account as the main source of my research.

The civil commissioners, the chroniclers, and the military escort together with the merchants, teamsters, and others brought the total number of the Santa Fe expedition to 321. Twenty-one ox-drawn wagons carried the supplies as well as the merchandise of the traders, which was valued at \$200,000 (Nevin, 1975: 210; Weber, 1982: 266). The party, officially designated the Santa Fe Pioneers, set out from Kenney’s Fort, on Brushy Creek, twenty miles north of Austin on June 19, 1841 (Brown, 1893: 190; Saxon – Taylor, 2004: xv, 31-32). They traveled north and crossed the Brazos River. According to Kendall’s report:

The long train of wagons moving heavily forward, with the different companies of volunteers, as well mounted and well armed and riding in double file, presented an imposing as well as an animating spectacle, causing every heart to beat high with the anticipation of exciting incidents on the boundless prairies (Saxon – Taylor, 2004: 34).

The command pursued a northwestern course to the present site of Wichita Falls, where the Wichita River was mistaken for the Red River (Saxon – Taylor, 2004: 65-75). The pioneers followed the valley of the Wichita from August 5 until August 17, when they were deserted by their Mexican guide. They finally realized their error and sent a company out to the north to search for the Red River. On August 20 a guide returned to lead the wagon caravan (Brown, 1893: 191; Saxon – Taylor, 2004: 76-100). Harassed by Indians and suffering because of insufficient provisions and scarcity of water, the expedition slowly made its way to the northwest. According to Kendall’s account:

The regular rations of three pounds [of beef] a day to each man was cut down to one and a half, and this at a time when the beef had become extremely poor and destitute of nutriment, and more than the

City of Mexico, with Illustrations and maps. 2 vols. Dallas: DeGolyer Library and William P. Clements Center for Southwest Studies, 2004.

² Falconer, Thomas. *Expedition to Santa Fe: An Account of Its Journey from Texas through Mexico, with Particulars of Its Capture.* New Orleans: 1842; rpt., as *Letters and Notes on the Texan Santa Fe Expedition, 1841–1842*, with intro. by Hodge, Frederick Webb. New York: Dauber and Pine Bookshops, 1930.

former rations was really required to support men worn down and exhausted by long and fatiguing marches, weakened by the effects of bad water and no water at all (Saxon – Taylor, 2004: 100).

They had become not only worn down with fatigue, but were reduced to eating snails and lizards to prevent starvation. On September 10, 1841 Kendall wrote:

Our men were driven nearly to desperation by hunger. Little or no order could be preserved by the officers, the volunteers scattering about in every direction, hunting for plums, grapes, and such game as might fall in their way. Few deer or antelope were seen, and they were so shy that it was impossible to shoot them; but in place of them every tortoise and snake, every living and creeping thing was seized upon and swallowed by our famishing men with a rapacity that nothing but the direst hunger could induce (Saxon – Taylor, 2004: 137).

Then, unable to find a route by which the wagons could ascend the Caprock when they reached the Llano Estacado, McLeod divided his command, and sent out a party of horsemen to seek the New Mexican settlements while he waited with the wagons and the remaining force at the foot of the Llano Estacado. The advance party suffered many hardships and finally met some Mexican traders on September 12 and sent a guide back to lead the waiting force on into the settlements (Saxon – Taylor, 2004: 142-143).

The Texans had expected to be welcomed by the citizens of New Mexico and certainly had not anticipated armed resistance. According to William Dryden's report, which was forwarded to President Lamar from Brazoria on July 23, 1841 the Governor of Santa Fe as well as the people "were willing that Texas might establish her law and hold her Government over that country" (Gulick – Elliott, 1993: 556).

When Governor Manuel Armijo of New Mexico, however, had learned of the expedition, he sent out a detachment of nearly six hundred men to await the arrival of the Texans. Capt. William G. Lewis, one of the first of the advance party to reach the settlements, turned traitor and persuaded his comrades to lay down their arms on September 17 (Saxon – Taylor, 2004: 167, 176-178; Brown, 1893: 192-193). He was again used by the New Mexicans to secure the surrender of the main force on October 5 in front of a detachment of about 1,500 men (Saxon – Taylor, 2004: 186; Brown, 1893: 194).

Thus, without the firing of a single shot, the entire expedition passed into Mexican hands. The Texans, reduced in number and broken in health and spirit, had been conquered by the arid plains rather than by the force of Mexican arms. Even though they were promised good treatment and respect for all their private property, they were immediately searched after their surrender, robbed of everything, bound in pairs and marched to San Miguel, a frontier village on the Rio Pecos, east of Santa Fe. They arrived

there on October 12, three months and twenty-one days after starting from the vicinity of Austin, the Texas capital. According to Kendall's account:

Worn down and emancipated by hunger and fatigue, their pale and haggard countenances showed but too plainly that they had suffered dreadfully [...]. The clothing of many of the poor fellows consisted of but a shirt and a pair of pantaloons, and the single blanket which had been left them by the brave and 'honourable' Armijo was the poorest they were the possessors of at the time of their capture. They were all taken to a room on the opposite side of the square, and then huddled in like so many sheep in a butcher's pen! [...]

On the following morning the wagons were drawn up in line in the plaza of San Miguel, and immediate preparations were made for dividing the goods of the Texas merchants. [...] The distribution of the goods continued nearly the whole day, each company of the valorous warriors of Armijo receiving a share of the plunder in proportion to the time they had been in service against the Texans (Saxon – Taylor, 2004: 187).

On October 17, 1841, the Texas prisoners were started to march to Mexico City, by way of Santa Fe. Kendall described their prospects in a gloomy tone. "The beginning of a cold and disagreeable winter was at hand, as we set off on foot upon a journey of over *two thousand miles* should we be fortunate enough to withstand the fatigues attendant upon the journey, an uncertain fate awaited us at its determination" (Saxon – Taylor, 2004: 200).

Even though the journey from Santa Fe to Mexico City was closer to 1,600 miles than to 2,000 miles, the Texan prisoners were subjected to many indignities both en route and during their imprisonment in Mexico. The members of the expedition had already lost thirty men on the vast and arid prairies during their advance from Texas to Santa Fe, and forty more people died during their forced march from Santa Fe to Mexico City and then during their eventual imprisonment (Saxon – Taylor, 2004: xvi).

The affair became the subject of a heated diplomatic controversy between the United States and Mexico before most of the prisoners were finally released in April 1842 (Brown, 1893: 195; Fehrenbach, 1968: 258, 263). In response to the protests of Daniel Webster, the American Secretary of State, and the American public in connection with the cruel treatment of the prisoners and the fact that many of them were American citizens, who volunteered for the expedition for various reasons, the Mexican government as well as the Mexican press denied all responsibility (Manning, 1937: 101-108, 478-487, 489-490). The *Semanario de Monterrey* appraised the expedition in its supplement of March 13, 1842. "The decisive triumph achieved in New Mexico by our forces against the Texans who dared to violate that part of our territory, intruding in a hostile manner, has caused the most lively interest in various towns in the United States." The paper's argument was clear: "These are prisoners of war, nothing more. [...]"

Whatever the[ir] nationality, they should be treated as Texans and judged by our laws since they embraced their cause and came to our territory armed” (Saxon – Taylor, 2004: xxxiv).

The members of the Santa Fe expedition suffered a lot before the last prisoners were released in the summer of 1842. The ill-fated expedition cost Mirabeau Lamar his presidency. In 1841 Sam Houston was elected for a second term. It was him who had to face Mexican retaliation for Lamar’s imperialist aspirations. In 1842 the Mexican army attacked Texas twice and held San Antonio under siege for nine days (Fehrenbach, 1968: 260-261; Nevin, 1975: 215-216). The threat of Mexican re-occupation, and the fact that the young Texas Republic continuously struggled with economic problems revived the proposals for annexation to the United States.

When the American Congress passed a joint resolution about annexation in 1845, the consequence was the outbreak of the U. S. – Mexican War of 1846-1848. At the end of the war, in the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, Mexico was not only forced to give up Texas, but also the whole of what is today the American Southwest, including New Mexico (Israel, 1967: 733-751; Fehrenbach, 1968: 266-267, 270-273; Nevin, 1975: 221; Meinig, 1993: 142, 146).

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