



Written by [Roger D. McGrath](#) on July 23, 2018

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Come and Take It!

“You can have my guns when you pry them from my cold dead hands” became a popular saying among supporters of the Second Amendment during the 1980s and ‘90s, and caused the liberal media to go ballistic when, at a speech delivered to the NRA in 2000, Charlton Heston concluded his remarks by raising a Kentucky rifle above his head and intoning, “From my cold dead hands.” A thunderous standing ovation followed.



Many media leftists thought the great actor was now at the nadir of a downward trajectory that had begun in the mid-1960s when he began moving in a conservative direction. Here was a Hollywood actor who had starred in dozens of movies, had been awarded an Oscar for Best Actor for playing Judah Ben-Hur, had participated in two civil rights marches in the early 1960s, and had been awarded the Jean Hersholt Humanitarian Award by the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences for “outstanding contributions to humanitarian causes.” What gives? They didn’t appreciate that Heston had grown up hunting in the woods of northern Michigan, had served in World War II, and was a staunch supporter of all 10 Amendments of the Bill of Rights. Unlike many so-called civil rights advocates, Heston did not skip over the Second Amendment. Moreover, he even thought it the most essential of all.

He made this abundantly clear in a 1997 speech at the National Press Club luncheon in Washington, D.C. “It is America’s first freedom,” declared Heston, “the one that protects all the others. Among freedom of speech, of the press, of religion, of assembly, of redress of grievances, it is first among equals. It alone offers the absolute capacity to live without fear. The right to keep and bear arms is the one right that allows rights to exist at all.”

Reporting on the speech, the *New York Times* did its best to characterize Heston as an extremist. The paper quoted Jake Tapper (yes, that Jake Tapper), spokesman for Handgun Control Inc., saying, “His interpretation of the Second Amendment is unique to him and his organization,” and Christopher Eisgruber, a professor at New York University Law School, claiming, “This is a bleak and unrealistic idea. Sometimes ideas like this are stated by left-wing radicals defending urban riots, and if you’re on the outer fringe of society, you might believe that this is your only option. For Charlton Heston to believe this is utterly outrageous.”

Neither Tapper nor Eisgruber seemed to have a sense of history. Heston did — and so, too, did our Founding Fathers. They were students of history, especially Classical Antiquity. They understood that a people once disarmed were slaughtered or enslaved or made serfs or vassals. An armed citizenry was essential to protect all other freedoms.

The Founders were also aware that the link between disarmament and subjugation was widely understood throughout recorded history, to the extent that cultures, including, especially, American culture, typically honored those who defied disarmament and tyranny — especially if they fought when the cause seemed lost.



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When the Persians demanded the Spartans surrender their arms at Thermopylae in 480 B.C., King Leonidas replied “*Molon labe.*” Translated literally, the Greek phrase means “having come, take,” but a more accurate rendering in English would be something like “come and take them — if you can.” After seven days of resistance, including three days of fierce fighting and two days of battle in which the 300 Spartans under Leonidas stood virtually alone, the Greeks were overwhelmed by a Persian army numbering in the hundreds of thousands. The Persians should have been through the pass in seven hours, but instead, it took seven days. The delay gave the Greek city-states precious time to organize a proper defense and the heroic example of the Greek warriors in the Battle of Thermopylae and Leonidas’ defiance of the Persian demand for a surrender of arms inspired the Greeks to fight the invaders on land and sea. The ultimate Greek victory saved not only the Greek city-states but Western Civilization.

It’s not surprising that more than 2,000 years later, colonial Americans were following Leonidas’ example. During the Revolutionary War, the Continental Congress ordered the construction of Fort Morris at the port of Sunbury, Georgia. By November 1778, the hastily built fort was manned by fewer than 200 Continental troops and local militiamen and commanded by Colonel John McIntosh. A much larger and more powerful British force, led by a Colonel L.V. Fuser, arrived on the 25th. Fuser immediately demanded the surrender of the fort. “Sir, we would rather perish in vigorous defense than accept your proposal,” replied McIntosh. “We are fighting the battles of America and therefore disdain to remain neutral until its fate is determined. As to surrendering the fort, receive this laconic reply: COME AND TAKE IT!” Stunned by the reply, Fuser began to fear there might be American reinforcements in the area and withdrew. Word of McIntosh’s Spartan-like defiance of the British spread through Georgia and the Carolinas, inspiring American rebels.

Photo: AP Images

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A far better known example of “Molon Labe” defiance in American history occurred at Gonzales, Texas, in 1835. The story begins much earlier. Before the arrival of Americans in Texas, Mexicans had been able to do nothing more than establish a few small areas of settlement, mostly around San Antonio. By 1820, there were no more than 3,500 Mexicans in all of Texas, and that number was not growing. Indians, the Comanche in particular, kept the Mexicans on the defensive.

Once one of the weakest and poorest tribes of the Great Plains, the Comanche were transformed by the acquisition of the horse. They became the greatest horsemen of all Indians and carved out a territory for themselves that covered some 600 miles north to south — the Arkansas River to San Antonio — and 400 miles east to west — the Cross Timbers to the Rio Grande Valley. The Mexicans called it *Comancheria*. Perhaps 10,000 strong at their peak, the Comanche roamed across the territory in more than a dozen independent bands and raided Mexican settlements at will. As late as 1850, the Comanche raided Mexican settlements as far south as Durango.

In an attempt to pacify the Texas frontier, the Mexican government invited Americans to settle. The ornery, well-armed, and highly experienced American frontiersman was thought the ideal settler to put an end to Indian depredations. The first tract of land for settlement was granted to Moses Austin, but he died before he could take any action, and it was his son, Stephen, who established the colony. By 1825, 300 American families were calling Texas their home. For protection against Comanche raids, Austin



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organized a force of mounted rangers, which in time would be called the Texas Rangers. As John S. "Rip" Ford said in 1846, "a Texas Ranger can ride like a Mexican, trail like an Indian, shoot like a Tennessean, and fight like a very devil." The Comanche noticed the difference immediately. This new tribe was deadly and indefatigable.

A second American colony started taking shape in 1825 when Green DeWitt received a land grant to the southwest of Austin's settlement. DeWitt established a town on the east bank of the Guadalupe River and, in a political move, named it Gonzales in honor of the Mexican governor of Texas. For the first several years, the colony struggled, but by 1831, DeWitt had managed to settle 131 families on his grant. He got the Karankawa and the Tonkawa to sign peace treaties, but the far-ranging, horse-mounted Comanche were intent only on raiding.

In 1831, DeWitt asked the Mexican authorities to supply Gonzales with a cannon to aid in protection against the Comanche. After a two-month delay, a DeWitt colonist arrived with a Spanish-made, smoothbore brass (also referred to as bronze) cannon from the presidio at San Antonio de Bexar. Precise descriptions of the cannon are lacking, but since it was a "six-pounder," meaning it fired six pounds of shot, it was probably five feet long with a 3 ½-inch diameter bore. Such a cannon was effective at ranges up to 1,500 yards. In position at Gonzales, it would have looked intimidating to Indians and could do serious damage to horse-mounted warriors at distances far beyond the range of rifles.

By 1835, tensions were mounting between the American settlers in Texas and the Mexican authorities. By this time the great majority of those in Texas were Americans. They called themselves "Texians" and were chafing under the more authoritarian control of the new Santa Anna regime in Mexico City. They were not alone. Several Mexican states were in open rebellion against Santa Anna.

In September 1835, the military commander in Texas, Colonel Domingo de Ugartechea, at his headquarters in the presidio at San Antonio de Bexar, sent six soldiers to confiscate the cannon given to the American settlers. The Texians would have none of it and took the soldiers prisoner. They soon released them, though, so the soldiers could carry word to Ugartechea that the cannon would not be surrendered. To ensure against the cannon being captured by surprise, the Texians buried it in a peach orchard. Ugartechea now dispatched Lieutenant Francisco de Castañeda and 100 cavalry troopers to Gonzales. Castañeda carried an order from Ugartechea demanding that the *alcalde* of Gonzales, Andrew Ponton, surrender the cannon or face incarceration at the San Antonio presidio.

At the same time, Sarah DeWitt and two of her daughters, Naomi and Eveline, and their friends, Caroline Zumwalt and Cynthia Burns, cut material from Naomi's wedding dress and fashioned a battle flag. Against a white background the representation of a cannon was stitched with black thread, along with a five-pointed lone star above the cannon and the words "Come and Take It" below. The women of Gonzales were as ornery and defiant as their menfolk. This was who Americans were in 1835. They knew who and what they were and took pride in their kith and kin. They didn't take kindly to the dictates of someone they considered both foreign and oppressive.

On September 29, Castañeda reached the west bank of the Guadalupe. Across the river was the town of Gonzales and the cannon, guarded by 18 militiamen. However, the river was high and the Texians had seen to it that the ferry and several other boats normally there were long gone. Castañeda knew these American settlers were crack shots and an attempt to swim his horses across the Guadalupe under fire



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would leave many of his men dead or wounded. Instead, he sent word to Gonzales that he carried a dispatch for alcalde Ponton.

Gonzales militia captain Albert Martin sent word back that Ponton was out of town and that the militiamen would stand their ground. Moreover, Martin said the Mexican force must remain on the other side of the river — defiant words from the proprietor of a general store in Gonzales. Martin and his small group of militiamen who refused to retreat, although being outnumbered more than five to one, went down in Texas history as the Old Eighteen.

Castañeda moved his troopers 300 yards back from the river — out of Texian rifle range — and pitched camp. In the meantime, militiamen poured into Gonzales. First to arrive were Captain Robert Coleman and 30 mounted rangers from the militia company at Mina (today Bastrop), 50 miles to the north. The cannon was dug up and taken to a blacksmith's shop where it was mounted on the fore-wheels of a cotton wagon. Now the defenders of Gonzales had a mobile gun. Other militiamen from Fayette and Columbus soon arrived, and total numbers in Gonzales reached 140.

Castañeda had suddenly lost his great advantage in numbers and decided to reposition his force. Seven miles up the Guadalupe, he bivouacked on the property of DeWitt colonist Ezekiel Williams, who was in Gonzales and one of the Old Eighteen.

In the meantime, Castañeda had sent word to Ugartechea that the Gonzales settlers seemed determined to fight. This was terrible news for Ugartechea, who feared a fight would ignite a general rebellion of Americans in Texas. He had hoped Castañeda's show of force would have been enough. Ugartechea now prevailed upon Dr. Launcelot Smither, a Gonzales settler who happened to be in San Antonio, to return home and convince his fellow Texians to return the cannon. When Smither got back, he explained that if the cannon were returned, Ugartechea would recall his troops and Gonzales would be untouched. A militia captain called for a vote. The tally was lopsided. The Texians would fight.

With Castañeda upriver, militiamen crossed the Guadalupe and advanced on the Mexican camp. Early on the morning of October 2, the Texians attacked, employing not only their small arms but also the soon-to-be famous cannon. A militiaman carried the Come and Take It flag alongside the cannon and waved it throughout the battle. The Texians also used a second cannon during the battle, but that one was a much-smaller one-pounder and made of iron, not brass. Ever since there has been confusion over the two cannons. The smaller cannon was what the Spanish called an *esmeril*. Its caliber was not much more than 1 inch, and it weighed only 70 pounds. Nonetheless, it had an effective range of 700 yards. In Castañeda's after-action report, he made it very clear the American settlers employed two cannons, the second one "a small piece of ordnance."

The Mexicans retreated to high ground behind their camp, and Castañeda indicated he wanted to parlay. Militia captain John Henry Moore met with him. Castañeda said he was attacked without provocation. Moore told him he knew the Mexicans had come to take the cannon and the settlers of the DeWitt colony weren't about to let that happen. Moore further stated the Texians were fighting to uphold the Mexican Constitution of 1824, which Santa Anna was violating. Castañeda said he agreed with Moore about Santa Anna, but he had orders to confiscate the cannon and, politics aside, he would follow orders.

Fighting resumed and Castañeda, with two of his men killed and several others wounded, ordered a retreat to the presidio at San Antonio de Bexar. In his after-action report to Ugartechea, he excused his



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retreat by saying, “Since the orders from your Lordship were for me to withdraw without compromising the honor of Mexican arms, I did so.”

Word of what came to be called the Battle of Gonzales quickly spread. Two days after the battle, Stephen Austin wrote, “War is declared — public opinion has proclaimed it against a Military despotism — The campaign has commenced.” Newspapers in the United States called the battle “the Lexington of Texas” and published calls for Americans to come to Texas and join the fight.

The cannon that started it all was used by the Texians in the Siege of Bexar, which began in mid-October 1835 and ended in early December with the surrender of Mexican forces. All of San Antonio, including the Alamo, was now in Texian hands. The cannon was left at the Alamo and was used against the Mexicans in their siege of the old mission- turned-presidio-turned-Texian fort. The Mexicans finally had the cannon back when the Alamo fell on March 6, 1836. They later buried the cannon along with other captured Texian cannons inside the Alamo. Samuel Maverick, a veteran of the Texas Revolution, including the Siege of Bexar, dug it up — or one like it — in 1852, and in 1874, his widow had it melted down and cast into a bell, which hangs to this day in the belfry of St. Mark’s Episcopal Church in San Antonio.

The fate of the Come and Take It flag is less clear. Gonzales militiamen proudly carried it with them when they participated in the Siege of Bexar. What became of it after that is unknown — but thousands of replicas have been made, and today it can commonly be seen displayed and waved at Second Amendment rallies, Tea Party affairs, gun shows, gun rights conventions, and the like. Moreover, the Greek and English phrases “Molon Labe” and “Come and Take It” can also be seen emblazoned on T-shirts, banners, and bumper stickers. The Come and Take It flag can also be seen in several displays, as well as waving from a flagpole at the Gonzales Memorial Museum. Among the dozens of other artifacts on display at the museum is the smaller, iron cannon, which was abandoned by the Gonzales militia when its carriage broke at Sandies Creek en route to San Antonio. It soon disappeared in mud and debris. In 1936, a flood unearthed the relic, and years later it was authenticated and donated to the museum.

Also, and most importantly, the museum pays tribute to the heroes of Gonzales, the Old Eighteen, and the Immortal 32. The Old Eighteen, the men who stood their ground in the face of Castañeda’s 100 troopers, lost five of their members at the Alamo. They went as members of the 32-man strong Gonzales Ranging Company of Mounted Volunteers, which had to sneak and fight its way through Mexican lines to get into the old mission, answering William Barret Travis’ call for aid. All but three of the rangers died there. Those three survived only because at different times each was sent out as a courier. Since the 32 members of the ranger company entered the Alamo after the fate of its defenders was sealed, they have gone down in Texas history as the Immortal 32.

Their backgrounds vary — Thomas Jackson had been born in Ireland, Albert Martin in Rhode Island, John Flanders in Massachusetts, Jacob Darst in Kentucky, Almaron Dickinson in Tennessee, John Cain in Pennsylvania, Charles Despallier in Louisiana, Jonathan Lindley in Illinois, and others in Virginia, Missouri, Arkansas, Mississippi, Alabama, South Carolina, North Carolina, and England. Two of the Immortals were 16, another was 17. Six were in their 40s. One was 54. Among them were single young men, but most were married with children. Some had more children on the way. Byrd Lockhart was a widower with children. Isaac Millsaps had seven children, and his wife was blind. Occupations included surveyor, farmer, shopkeeper, civil engineer, and rancher. Several of the older men were veterans of



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the War of 1812.

May we never forget such men and may we never forget the women who created the flag that symbolized the courage, honor, and sacrifice of our American ancestors. May we never forget that an armed citizenry is essential to our freedom. Come and Take It!

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