



Written by [Steve Byas](#) on January 6, 2020

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Why and How Texians Took on Mexico

***Sam Houston & The Alamo Avengers: The Texas Victory That Changed American History*, by Brian Kilmeade, New York: Sentinel, 2019, 234 pages, hardback.**

Brian Kilmeade, author of the *New York Times* best-seller *George Washington's Secret Six* and two other books on American history (*Thomas Jefferson and the Tripoli Pirates* and *Andrew Jackson and the Miracle of New Orleans*), has produced yet another retelling of a famous event, the story of the Texas Revolution of 1836. Written in his entertaining, yet informative, style, this is a version written for a popular audience on the stirring events of the Texas Revolution — the heroic defense of the Alamo, followed six weeks later by the Texian (as they were then called) victory at San Jacinto under the leadership of Sam Houston.



After reading this book, a person will know why this story has inspired so many people since 1836.

The central characters of Kilmeade's narrative — David Crockett, Jim Bowie, William Barrett Travis, Sam Houston, and Stephen Austin — are presented fairly, as real flesh-and-blood human beings with all of the flaws of human nature, but at the same time figures of unusual heroic action and men to whom we as Americans owe deep gratitude.

When Thomas Jefferson purchased the Louisiana Territory from France in 1803, he believed that it included the area now known as the state of Texas. Later, it was among the grievances that Andrew Jackson had against John Quincy Adams. Adams, as secretary of state under President James Monroe, had given up America's claim to Texas in the 1819 Adams-Onís Treaty, the treaty under which the United States obtained Florida.

Stephen Austin inherited a land grant from his father, Moses, which Moses had received from the Mexican government shortly after Mexico won its independence from Spain. The lands of Texas, part of the Mexican state of Coahuila, were opened to settlement by American pioneers. Austin, as "empresario," was assigned the power to take and act on the land grant petitions of immigrants from the United States. The Mexican government believed the American immigrants would provide a buffer with the war-like Comanches who were discouraging settlement by the native Mexican population.

The immigrants from the United States believed they were entering a country with a constitution modeled after that of the United States they were leaving behind, complete with decentralized states and respect for civil liberties. That did not prove to be the case, and rebellions broke out in Mexico against the centralizing efforts of the government of Mexico. At first, the highly ambitious and ruthless



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General Santa Anna fought on the side of the government. With implications for future events in the Texas Revolution, he executed 112 rebels — after they had surrendered.

Later, Santa Anna won election as president of Mexico as a champion of the constitution and federalism, but he soon made himself a dictator. Santa Anna later confided in U.S. Minister to Mexico Joel Poinsett, “A hundred years to come my people will not be fit for liberty. They do not know ... unenlightened as they are [that] despotism is the proper government for them.”

Many native Mexicans fought in the Texas Revolution on the side of the immigrant Texians, and 13 died in defense of the Alamo. When Texas eventually declared its independence, Lorenzo de Zavala was elected the new republic’s first vice president.

Santa Anna adopted many of the policies of modern dictators, including attempting to ban the private ownership of firearms, a policy that helped precipitate the very rebellion it was intended to prevent.

Reminiscent of our own American Revolution, Texians — both immigrant and native — were torn between asking Santa Anna for statehood, along with respect for their rights under the Mexican constitution, or simply declaring independence from Mexico. As Santa Anna’s reign became increasingly dictatorial, it became clear that independence was the best course of action.

Texians, led by Jim Bowie, soon took the Alamo from a small Mexican garrison after a brief battle. The Alamo was an old Spanish Catholic mission that had been turned into a military fort in the southern Texas town of San Antonio. Sam Houston, a former governor of Tennessee, a protégé of Andrew Jackson, and a veteran of the War of 1812, had come to Texas and was soon a leader in the revolution. He strongly advised Bowie to abandon the Alamo, arguing that he could not successfully defend it against the military force Santa Anna could be expected to bring against them.

As Kilmeade writes, “The victory at San Antonio [by the Americans over the Mexican garrison] appeared to be a giant step closer to independence. The capture of the Alamo was a triumph, and the retreat of the Mexican force cause for great rejoicing. Could the war even be over? Sam Houston didn’t think so. He suspected it was a fight they should not have had, and the Alamo a fort that could not be held.”

Bowie defied Houston, the commander-in-chief of the new Texas army (mostly a paper army at this point), and later had a dispute with Colonel William Barret Travis as to which man should be in charge at the Alamo. Bowie and Travis resolved their differences with an agreement that Travis would command the regulars and the cavalry, while Bowie would be over the volunteers. They would issue orders jointly. By the time of the battle for the Alamo, the issue had more clearly resolved itself, as Bowie became seriously ill and was bedridden during the final Mexican assault.

Kilmeade notes that the exact figures of the force led by Santa Anna at the Alamo is in dispute, with figures as high as five or six thousand. Travis gave the 180 defenders (as with the size of the Mexican force, exact numbers are in dispute) of the fort a choice — he drew a line in the dirt with his sword and said those who wished could leave, while those who wished to stay and fight against the long odds should cross the line. All but one man crossed the line to join Travis in remaining.

Just before the final assault, Travis was able to smuggle a letter to Houston and the infant Texas “government,” pleading for help. “I am besieged, by a thousand or more of the Mexicans under Santa Anna.... The enemy has demanded a surrender ... otherwise, the garrison are to be put to the sword.... I have answered the demand with a cannon shot, and our flag still waves.”



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He concluded his famous letter with the stirring words, “If this call is neglected, I am determined to sustain myself as long as possible and die like a soldier who never forgets what is due to his own honor and that of this country — VICTORY OR DEATH.”

More than one Mexican assault on the Alamo failed, but after 13 days, while taking horrendous casualties, Santa Anna was able to breach the walls, and he either killed all the defenders in the battle or simply shot the few defenders taken prisoner. A Texian force, knowing that Santa Anna had murdered the survivors at the Alamo, chose to surrender following the Battle of Coleto few days later, but that surrender did not save them. After being taken to Goliad, all 425-445 prisoners were summarily executed on direct orders from Santa Anna.

Texians became enraged, and Houston’s army — about 80 miles east of San Antonio at Gonzales — swelled with volunteers, all wanting revenge for the Alamo and for Goliad. Houston’s biggest problem was convincing his enthusiastic army to wait until they were sufficiently prepared to go into battle.

Finally, following weeks of military training and retreating, Houston was ready to make a stand against Santa Anna at San Jacinto (near modern-day Houston, Texas). Fortunately for Houston’s Texians, the Mexican dictator-general wasted some time pursuing fleeing members of the Texas government. He especially wanted to capture and kill de Zavala, whom he considered a traitor.

Houston, “seated in the saddle on his tall white horse,” Kilmeade writes, “addressed his army” in a speech he described as the “speech of a lifetime.”

“We will meet the enemy. Some of us may be killed and must be killed; but, soldiers, remember the Alamo, *the Alamo! The Alamo!*”

When the Texians attacked, the Mexican army was mostly exhausted after the long pursuit of the Texas government and its army. In fact, most were taking a *siesta*. The Texians attacked with an enraged ferocity, with the words, “Remember the Alamo!” on their lips.

The battle was over in a mere 18 minutes, but the slaughter continued until dark. Only 12 Texians died in the assault, compared to 630 Mexicans. After Santa Anna was captured, he was forced to agree to the independence of Texas, with a border at the Rio Grande River. Although his men wanted to execute Santa Anna for war crimes, Houston sternly told them that they needed him alive to get the other Mexican armies out of Texas.

Kilmeade’s book is one any person who loves inspirational history would want to read.

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