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MOTIVATIONS OF UNITED STATES VOLUNTEERS DURING THE TEXAS REVOLUTION, 1835-1836

by Phillip Thomas Tucker

The romantic idealism that caused many United States citizens to enlist in the People's Army of Texas in 1835 and 1836 has been well documented. Volunteers from mostly the Southern states, but the Middle West and the North as well, played a key and perhaps the decisive role in winning the war for Texas Independence. The best known example of a direct military contribution in manpower from the United States to the Texas Revolution can be found with the two companies of Louisiana volunteers, the New Orleans Greys.1 In early 1836, the largest Texas force in the field, commanded by Colonel James Walker Fannin, was composed of over ninety percent of United States citizens.2 Indeed, among Fannin's contingent were such militia companies as the Alabama Red Rovers, the New Orleans Greys, the Kentucky Mustangs, the Mobile Greys and one more Kentucky unit and an additional Alabama company. Also a full battalion of Georgians bolstered Fannin's command.

Volunteering to fight against Mexico in behalf of Texas independence would come at a high price for these non-Texans. Indeed, most of them were killed in the Goliad Massacre and at the Alamo and the New Orleans Greys' flag was the only one captured by General Antonio Lopez de Santa Anna's forces at the Alamo.3 Approximately one half of the nearly 200 Alamo martyrs recently had come to San Antonio de Bexar from Alabama, Kentucky, and Tennessee. In fact, so many United States volunteers had poured into Texas during the revolution's early days that the influx caused an exodus among the native Texan soldiers. Many Texas troops returned to their neglected homesteads for the spring planting of corn and wheat crops. Before Santa Anna's invasion during the winter of 1836, it appeared that the war practically had ended. Few Texans, if any, expected a northern strike from Mexico in the dead of winter. The resulting manpower shortages, consequently, led largely to the Goliad and Alamo disasters.4

Obviously the high motivation for these men to forfeit their lives for a land that most had never seen embodied the usual principles of natural rights and revolution to justify a war for independence. Texas leaders clearly understood the appeal of America's earliest philosophical, moral, and political foundations. A typical request employing an idealistic appeal to seek United States volunteers came from one soldier in Texas, who implored: "The cause of philanthropy, of humanity, of liberty and human happiness throughout the world calls loudly on every man who can, to aid Texas."5

The flowery appeals for assistance were effective, drawing hundreds of volunteers from the states. Coming forth to cross the Sabine River,

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for instance, had become a holy mission for members of the New Orleans Grey Greys, "to demonstrate to the world, the strength and purity of the zeal they feel, espousing a struggle for the freedom of their countrymen; a struggle imposed by acts of tyranny, and the ambition of their author." In addition, the analogy between the Texas Revolution of 1835-1836 and the American Revolution of 1775-1781 had been made repeatedly throughout the Texan's independence movement. One volunteer, for example, wrote how he had joined the fight to uphold "the principles for which your fathers and my fathers fought in 1776 — and for which I have taken up arms in Texas in 1836." Such idealistic motivations of many of the United States volunteers has received full attention in the annals of Texas historiography.

But did other motivating factors exist? Did idealism and rhetoric alone cause hundreds of Americans to die at the Alamo and Goliad? Were there other or more important reasons why these young men chose to struggle beside the Texans in a conflict that was not their own and hundreds of miles from their homes? Why would boys from Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Tennessee, and Alabama willingly leave their native states and families to uphold the interests of a budding republic and a land that they had never seen before or knew little about? Could some or perhaps even the majority of United States volunteers have been motivated partially, or even primarily, by self-interest and profit?

Volunteers' motivations, of course, were as varied as each man's individual character. A journalist in 1836, for instance, understood as much, stating how the Texas volunteers consisted of "freemen, patriots, heroes, rogues, blackguards, office-seekers, discarded lovers, broken merchants, dismissed office holders, thieves, murderers and politicians." For Southern volunteers, the fear of an abolitionist crusade launched by Santa Anna — Mexico had freed its slaves since she had won independence from Spain — was a fear which sparked enlistment. Especially after Goliad and the Alamo, Mexican forces driving eastward toward the Louisiana border created visions of slaves rising in revolt across the Southland. Indeed, the Mexican Army had liberated the Texan's slaves during its push across the rich agricultural lands of "the Garden of America." Paranoia ran high in 1836, for it was believed that Santa Anna now "threatens to emancipate all the slaves in the South."

The Texas Revolution, consequently, became "the cause of safety of the South. If Santa Anna and the Mexicans are allowed to possess Texas, they will cause negro insurrections in the South, and thus become one of the most dangerous neighbors to the Union that ever appeared on our borders," warned an American in April of 1836. National security, contingent upon a successful Texas revolution, had now become a crucial issue. More Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama, Missouri, Tennessee, and Kentucky volunteers felt the potential threat and, therefore, enlisted to save homes and families from the horror of slave revolt: another possible blood
bath as had befallen the French in Saint-Domingue.

Even worse, Southerners envisioned a combined strike from three oppressed peoples, who had scores to repay upon white Americans: Mexicans, African-Americans, and Indians. At the end of April 1846, the prospect of the following potential reality sent shock waves rippling across the United States, especially in the South. Long before the main threat to a distinctive Southern civilization came to be viewed as originating from the North, a fear of danger from the nation to the south of the United States' border became excessive:

"One fact has been developed in the conduct of Santa Anna, that will cause a new and extraordinary sensation over the whole south. Santa Anna has proclaimed the emancipation of the slaves in Texas, and called the Indians to his aid.

This is one of the most alarming aspects for the safety, peace, and happiness of the south and west, that the affairs in Texas have yet taken. Taking this movement in connection with the piratical character of the war, we should not be surprised to see the whole South and West pour en masse, and carry their victorious arms to the walls of Mexico itself. Santa Anna not only wars against the colonists of Texas, but he has unfurled the flag against the domestic institutions of the South and West — he throws out menaces upon their safety, which as far exceed the puny efforts of the northern abolitionists, as it is possible to conceive.

It is utterly impossible for the south-western frontier of the United States, ever to be in safety, if the Mexicans possess Texas. Santa Anna has declared war against the inhabitants of the south. Will they stand by and are their very existence assailed? If the government at Washington do not move in this business, the people will move on their own accord."

This editor's analysis proved correct. It was the American people's united response, which explains why so many United States citizens enlisted in the Texas conflict. As they themselves and their sons would do in 1861, many Southerners joined the Texas struggle to defend their native region and an unique way of life.

In addition, emotionalism served as a catalyst. News of the Goliad and Alamo massacres stirred feelings for vengeance. The enemy's no-quarter policy exemplified Mexican ruthlessness and ungodliness to American minds. "The period of vengeance has arrived — the cup of wickedness is running over. Let the people of the United States rouse as one man," declared the New York Herald in mid-April of 1836. Propaganda increased as Santa Anna's forces swarmed ever closer to the Louisiana communities along the Sabine River. Further heightening of the fear, grim tales circulated of how the advancing Mexican army engaged in the "indiscriminate slaughter of women and children. The orders given to the soldiery being, to spare the life of no individual over ten years of age." Indeed it seemed as if Santa Anna was bent on destroying all of Anglo-Saxon civilization in Texas.8

A spirit of Manifest Destiny that perpetuated America's historic
mission of spreading republicanism also served as a cause for United States citizens to join the Texan’s ranks. The struggle for Texas independence, consequently, was an extension of the nation’s historical role in the New World: to bring mankind a brighter future by extending democracy. One American, for instance, viewed the conflict as the continuation of a worldwide liberalism during an age of democratic revolutions. “The war between Mexico and Texas is only the beginning of a new revolutionary movement on that soil, similar to that which began in England in 1640 — which broke out in the United States in 1776 and which is at this day spreading over Europe ... It is the movement of civilization and of self-government [which should] revolutionize and re-instate every one of the worn out governments of Spanish America.” The Texans were in the vanguard of the advance of republicanism, which would eventually dominate the entire world, according to this political rationale for national expansion.

Another American now foresaw, through conquest, an “infusion of the genuine spirit of American-Anglo-Saxon principles [which] will regenerate—will reconstruct—will settle that great nation [Mexico] on the basis of right, justice and genuine civil and religious liberty.” Military victory at San Jacinto on April 21, 1836 came to be seen not only as the birth of the Texas Republic, but an event “leading to the regeneration of the whole southern continent of America.” Indeed, Manifest Destiny had fused with the social and racial concepts of regeneration and the republic’s national mission.⁹

But perhaps different explanations other than idealism, fear of slave revolts, Manifest Destiny, and revenge might best explain the motivations of the majority of United States volunteers in the People’s Army of Texas. First, the nation’s economy was in trouble. An agricultural decline in 1835, a slackening off of exports and an influx of currency circulated by the state banks — causing a frenzy of land speculation — laid a poor foundation for economic stability. The financial crisis sent tremors through the national economy. Escalating economic instability resulted in a full-blown depression.¹⁰ Times had gotten harder for the American nation of common tillers of the soil and the historic “safety-valve” of such economic disturbances often had been westward migration. Texas, despite being embroiled in revolution, perhaps remained the best location in all of North America still offering the most natural rewards — in terms of sizable land and the region’s quality — and the greatest opportunities, for migrants to begin a new life during the mid-1830s. If Mexico could crush the revolt, the chance for Americans to migrate into Texas would be closed forever.

But perhaps more importantly, combining with the economic crisis to influence Americans to join the revolution came with official Texas policy. To lure soldiers, the Texas government offered huge bounties of choice acres, consisting of the country’s fairest lands. General Sam Houston, for instance, penned an appeal in early October 1835: “If volunteers from the United States will join their brethren in this section
[the San Augustine, Texas, area], they will receive liberal bounties of land. We have millions of acres of our best lands unchosen and unappropriated (sic). Clearly, in the views of many Texas leaders, only by mortgaging their country’s land could they ensure their revolution’s success. Demonstrating the importance of the bounties, a cynical recruiting poster nailed up along New Orleans, Louisiana, streets carried not one word of patriotic rhetoric or left a romantic illusion remaining:

"Now is the time to ensure a fortune in Land: To all who remain in Texas during the War will be allowed 1280 Acres. To all who remain Six Months, 640 Acres. To all who remain Three Months, 320 Acres. And as Colonists, 4600 Acres for a family and 1470 Acres for a Single Man."

In addition, a Texas appeal for aid appeared in a Northern newspaper editorial, which was addressed "To our friends in the United States." The request stated how "the people of Texas [now] need your assistance. We present to you one of the most delightful countries on the face of the globe: we offer you the most liberal remuneration in land." Such a financial incentive and bonanza in land at the onset of a severe economic depression especially beckoned members of the lower and middle classes in the South and West. Many Americans, consequently, cast their destinies with Texas.

And what a land had been offered. The Texas General Council had not exaggerated their country's richness upon challenging United States citizens to enlist in their cause: "We invite you to our country — we have land in abundance, and it shall be liberally bestowed on you. We have the finest country on the face of the globe ... every volunteer in our cause shall not only justly but generously be rewarded." And just two weeks after the Alamo's fall, an American newspaper advertised how "all volunteers shall be entitled to one mile square, or 640 acres of land, to be selected out of the public domain of Texas."

Indeed, the over 250,000 square miles of "that delightful garden of the world" seemed nothing short of God’s country. It included the beautiful hill country of the Edwards Plateau, the Great Plains' prairies rolling as far as the eye could see, the piney lands of eastern Texas, the fertile lowlands along the Gulf of Mexico, and the Rio Grande River country. And the countryside has been blessed with a mild climate: an invaluable asset to a nation of agriculturalists. The encroaching depression and the swelling tide of land speculators buying up property from farmers in the United States had made the Texas offer of instant status as a large landowner and future prosperity almost irresistible to the average man. Such rewards proved to be a powerful catalyst for Americans to flood into the Texas Army.

As implored a journalist: "Now is the moment for all young men, who want to create a name, and make a fortune, to bestir themselves. Go to Texas. Enroll yourselves in the brave army of [Texas]. A splendid
country is before you. You fight for a soil and a name that will become your own .... Enroll yourselves, young men of capital and enterprise, collect recruits they are abundant as the sands of the sea shore — proceed without delay to Texas [and] make the greatest republic yet organized, it is already the youngest. With a territory equal to that of France — a soil for superior — a climate as healthy as any in the world, Texas must soon become the second great republic, ....” The opportunity was too good to let pass for many Americans. Perhaps most of those volunteers enlisting in droves were seduced by the powerful lust for land.

Private Daniel William Cloud, an ex-Kentucky lawyer, had forsaken the prestige of his attorney office to become a lowly enlisted man in the fledgling army. No one more than Cloud, also highly idealistic, understood the implications of the gamble to establish a republic by armed revolt and against a formidable enemy, but “if we succeed, the country is ours ....” Indeed, for Private Cloud and others, the possible boon in Texas land was worth the risk of their lives. But the twenty-four-year-old Cloud would never see his dream of becoming part of the frontier’s large landowning class come true: he died at the Alamo less than three months after penning his life’s goals to his father. Cloud and other volunteers had died for one of the richest natural empires in all North America — the great prize at stake in the war between Mexico and Texas.

In an agrarian society where status, wealth, and class had been measured in terms of acreage, the availability of lush Texas acres could mean success not only for the individual volunteer and his family, but for future generations as well. The all-consuming passion of gaining hundreds of acres for risking one’s life on the battlefield could best be seen in the average soldier’s obsession with Texas lands. John Sowers Brooks, for instance, of the Georgia Battalion, wrote to his Peach State relatives in December 1835 that he would receive 1,100 acres after the struggle’s conclusion. Also he would get 600 acres for his military service — not a bad deal for perhaps only a few months of garrison duty. As so many others, Brooks would never claim any of the land he loved, meeting his end with Colonel Fannin at Goliad.

After San Jacinto, New Yorkers enlisted to secure a fantastic bounty: “The captains are to be presented with 1,170, and lieutenants 640 acres of fine fat Texas land, equal to the soil of the ‘Garden of Eden.’” Another volunteer hungry for a sizable chunk of Texas real estate was Private Micajah Autry. Indeed, Autry also sought to start life anew upon the eventual granting of hundreds of acres to him. He had failed in law and business in Jackson, Tennessee. But now the Volunteer Stater, age forty-two, saw that he could reverse his life’s fortunes in the land of milk and honey. More than anything else in the world, Autry told his wife of his primary goal: “I am determined to provide for you a home or perish.” For Autry and the rest of the Alamo garrison, death came on March 6, 1836.
Perhaps no one better summarized the motivations of a good many United States volunteers in Texas than George Dedrick of Colonel Fannin’s command. Destined to die in the infamous massacre on Palm Sunday 1836, Dedrick explained to his wife how: “My object of Goin (sic) [to Texas] was for you, my Self and Son and all my femaley (sic) hearafter (sic). in the first place as Soon as [I] became a Sitisan (sic) which by the Laws entitled me as a man of famaley (sic) to one Lease of Land Square which is three miles or fore (sic) thousen (sic) hundred acres of Land which wen (sic) things are seteled (sic) will be worth six thousen (sic) Dollars.” Dedrick’s viewpoint perhaps best represents the perspective of volunteers from Louisiana, Tennessee, Kentucky, Alabama, and Georgia. Clearly, the patriotic and romantic visions of the Texas Revolution had been replaced by more realistic considerations to George Dedrick and countless others.

Many Americans simply could not escape the intoxication of potential wealth in Texas land or the country’s beauty. Even a forty-nine-year-old, ex-Congressman from Tennessee, David Crockett, felt the pull of unlimited opportunity in battling for Texas. The frontiersman described: “What I have seen of Texas, it is the garden spot of the world, the best land & prospects to any man to come here.” Indeed, Texas was a land worth dying for if necessary for many United States volunteers—a price Crockett paid at San Antonio de Bexar.

Another soldier wrote an optimistic letter to his wife, promising great things for the future: “Be of good cheer Martha I will provide you a sweet home. I shall be entitled to 640 acres of land for my services in the army and 4444 acres upon condition of settling my family here.” Indeed, economics also served as a morale booster and source of inspiration among the Americans in the Texas Army. This factor partially accounts for the volunteer’s high morale— they were struggling for themselves, family, and the future.

The bounties offered exceeded the most gracious rewards imaginable. Originally each volunteer of the People’s Army of Texas was entitled to 640 acres. But later the grants increased greatly. After March 2, 1836, each soldier from east of the Sabine River would get one league [4,428 acres] and one labor [177 acres], if one settled his family in Texas. A single man was entitled to one-third of a league — 1,476 acres. Never in the nation’s history had Americans been offered a comparable amount of acreage for military service.

Land had become such a dominant factor, and perhaps the most important incentive, in drawing United States citizens into the Texas military that even some conservative Americans denounced their fellow countrymen as “land-pirates” and “free-booters.” These men were branded as mercenaries who had only volunteered to gain a “fertile paradisical (sic) piece of Texian lands, a mile square.”
Also exploiting this theme was General Santa Anna. Clearly, no one more than Santa Anna understood that the influx of United States volunteers in the Texas Army might practically guarantee an independent republic. From an encampment beside the Nueces River on February 17, 1836, and less than three weeks before annihilating the Alamo defenders, General Santa Anna made a direct threat to the United States’ “claimants to the acres of Texas land [who] will soon know to their sorrow that their reinforcement from New Orleans, Mobile, Boston, New York, and other points north,” would not be enough to save them. This threat of reprisals failed to deter the transplanted Texans, however. The mobilization of United States volunteers, ironically, fulfilled another function, providing the Mexican fighting man with the resolve to free his country of the foreign, Anglo invaders.

As if offering a defense for charges of land greed, one volunteer explained his motivation in lofty terms: “I was offered by Texas 50,000 acres of land on going there [but declined for] I have joined [the] cause from the purest of motives.” But evidently most of the United States revolutionaries were less idealistic and more pragmatic.

The land grabbing reached such proportions that Wall Street, New York City, land speculators, and investment companies were behind some of the organizing of military companies bound for Texas. General Sam Houston’s success at the Battle of San Jacinto had a dramatic impact in the financial world: “probably half a million of dollars have been made by the rise in Texas lands in Wall street,” estimated one journalist. Victory at San Jacinto, for instance, “has brought into Wall street, Texas, cut up and lithographed, ready like dried apples, for the highest bidder.” As lamented a New Yorker, “paradise is at last cut up into lots — the Garden of Eden is lithographed and sold in Wall Street,” Indeed, the Texas Revolution has become big business: “in Wall St. [during June of 1836] we have three companies, who are selling scrip night and day, and making money faster than the mint can coin eagles.”

But the most cynical accusation concerned a New York City volunteer battalion organized for Texas service. A number of Texas landowners and ex-land speculators of New York City had set up capital to form the military unit. These businessmen, thereafter, became the principal officers of the company. As lampooned one newspaperman, “another holy war is organizing, ....” The newly elected officers “have been engaged for three weeks in organizing six companies of troops to go to Texas and drive the Mexicans out of that country, so that they may be able to raise the value of their lands and sell out.” A New York citizen felt sympathy for the naive volunteers, who “had been egregiously duped and deceived by a certain set of speculators in Texas lands [by their officer-speculators who had prayed upon] the credulity of the youth of our city.”

Clearly, there were a number of strong motivations which prompted
American citizens to leave their homes and join the Texas Revolution in 1835 and 1836. More than just simple idealistic and patriotic justifications existed to explain the complex variety of reasons why so many young men of the United States risked their lives in the Texan’s independence movement. Personal motivations were complicated and varied, often depending upon each individual case. Even though these revolutionaries from mainly the Upper South, Middle West, and Deep South were key players in the winning of Texas, not all of their motivations were based exclusively upon self-sacrifice and patriotism. Untruths must be separated from reality for accurate evaluations of these men and their motivations.

As in the case of the Texas Revolution, diminishing economic opportunities in the United States caused many volunteers to view service in the Texas Army as a means of profitably benefiting oneself and family. Losing a farm to land speculators, crop failures, and a declining market for the average yeoman or lack of clients for an educated professional during the nation’s first great depression, were all factors that caused a good many Americans to enlist in the People’s Army of Texas. But regardless of their motivations, the large numbers of United States volunteers who fought at San Jacinto and died at Goliad and the Alamo played a crucial and stirring role during the Texas Revolution. Without the noble contribution of these volunteers, the birth of the infant Texas Republic in violent revolution probably would have never become reality.

NOTES


6*Official Correspondence of the Texan Revolution*, 1, p. 85.


8New York Herald, April 14 and 23, 1836.


