

## The Generalship of Sam Houston

Dr. Stephen L. Hardin

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If you seek humility, write a book. In 1994 I witnessed the publication of my monograph, *Texian Iliad: A Military History of the Texas Revolution*. By the modest standards of academic publishing the book has enjoyed healthy sales —although they cause Tom Clancy and Stephen King no loss of sleep. Newspapers and popular magazines such as *Texas Monthly* featured favorable reviews. The book won a number of prizes and the prestigious Texas Institute of Letters inducted as a member.

I was beginning to feel that I had made a worthwhile contribution to knowledge. Then came the critiques—late as usual—of my fellow academics. In truth, I can't whine that much. Overall, the scholarly reviewers were extremely kind.

Ronald Davis at Southern Methodist University perceptively concluded: "Steven [sic] Hardin draws a vivid picture of the war for Texas independence—engrossing, balanced, astute. *Texian Iliad* is a model of historical craftsmanship; it is also a splendid tale told with wisdom and compassion." Okay, I can handle that, even if Professor Davis did manage to misspell my name. My colleague, Professor Paul Lack, applauded the effort but expressed quibbles that centered upon my assessment of Houston's conduct during the San Jacinto campaign. "Hardin presents the participants' 'two distinct images' of Houston as either timidly uncertain or coolly confident and concludes that 'neither view is entirely true nor entirely false.' This hedge, while understandable, is not entirely sufficient." On the other hand, my old friend Margaret Swett Henson offered more biting criticism: "The first six chapters focusing on events leading to the Alamo and Goliad are the main strength of the book. Hardin's bias against General Sam Houston lessens the impact of the remaining chapters."

Talk about damned if you do and damned if you don't. Lack gigs me for sitting on the fence, while Henson slams me for partisanship. Margaret's criticism really hurt because I had worked assiduously to be impartial, not only to Houston, but all the participants. My first impulse was to throw up my hands, say to hell with it, and surmise there's just no pleasing some folks. In hindsight, however, I believe that Professor Lack is correct. I was so busy trying to be evenhanded that readers really don't know where I stand. The writer's first obligation is to communicate clearly and succinctly, and in that regard, I failed.

Whether one sides with Lack or Henson, there will be little quarrel with one fact. My San Jacinto chapter is a mess. I hope to do better this time. The critics forced me to rethink a number of issues concerning Houston's 1836 campaign. I now know more about that campaign and stand on firmer ground with some of my conclusions. Upon reading this, Professor Henson and legions of Houston groupies may organize a neck tie party, but not even Professor Lack will accuse me of fence straddling. So be it. All things considered, I would rather be thought wrong than mealy-mouthed.

Any effort to offer a detached critical analysis of Houston's generalship is hampered by his legend. To Texans, Sam Houston is no mere hero. Immigrants who came to Texas in the wake of San Jacinto made him an icon of patriotic faith, the homegrown military genius, the indispensable man to whom Texans owed their independence. Typical were the sentiments of Robert Hall, a volunteer who embraced the Houston mystique:

The Mexicans outnumbered [Houston's force] two to one, but on one side there was genius and courage, and on the other the treachery of the Alamo and the massacre of Fannin's men. Not one of those brilliant military maneuvers which originated in the brain of that master of the art of war [*Napoleon Bonaparte*] while he was crushing the Austrians in Italy is more worthy of the admiration of the student of history than the plan of that short campaign which drew the self-styled Napoleon

*of the West into a network of bayous and marshes, from which his cannon and musketry were powerless to extricate him.*

All nationalities cherish their great captains. To the Frenchman, Napoleon is history's ablest general; the German asserts that mantle rightly belongs to Frederick; the Englishman awards it to Marlborough or Wellington. With a perfectly straight face, Hall and other Texans have compared Houston's generalship to that of the great captains of history. Such grandiose assessments also extend to Houston's most famous battle. In 1930 Texan Clarence Wharton published *San Jacinto: The Sixteenth Decisive Battle*, in which he added that engagement to those Sir Edward Creasy listed in his 1851 classic, *Fifteen Decisive Battles of the World*. Today, one still remains agog at such blatant chauvinism, not to mention brazen presumption. Still, Wharton provided a useful construct, for only when one examines Houston's campaign in the perspective provided by the masters of the military art can his true merit be judged.

Many—indeed most—of those who had served under him during the 1836 campaign insisted that Houston exaggerated his contributions to advance his political ambitions. They claimed he appropriated laurels that should have properly fallen upon common Texian soldiers. Company commander Jesse Billingsley expressed the convictions of many San Jacinto veterans:

*The thief and the murderer I can guard against, but the liar I cannot. Therefore I must say that Houston is the basest of all men, as he has, by willfully lying, attempted to rob that little band of men of their well earned honors on the battlefield of San Jacinto. He has assumed to himself credit that was due to others.*

Houston's invariable political enemy, David G. Burnet, took up the cant:

*Gen. H. has long and habitually acted on the Spanish proverb, that "a lie that can gain belief for one hour, is worth the telling." . . . Gen. Houston knows how to appreciate and to profit by the old Spanish proverb, and he knows that his furtive laurels will wilt and wither into utter loathsomeness, under the full light of truth!*

Anson Jones, army surgeon and future president of the Republic of Texas, minced no words regarding Houston's role at San Jacinto:

*That battle was an achievement for which the world (right or wrong) will always give him credit, though, in my opinion, he is only entitled to the 783d part of what he has received.*

Modern Texans are shocked to hear such attacks against "the sword of San Jacinto," and no wonder. After all, in 1992 a Texas Highways reader's poll declared Sam Houston the "Number One Texan." His biographers dismissed critics as spiteful subordinates, covetous of their commander's renown, and largely ignored anything they had to say. The general's descendants, prominent by virtue of their association with the "Savior of Texas," were jealous defenders of "Old Sam's" public image. In 1901 when University of Texas Professor Eugene C. Barker presumed to edit and publish a number of primary accounts, some of which were mildly critical of Houston's conduct during the campaign (in fact, he edited out the really nasty stuff), the general's family demanded and received a public apology in the pages of the *Quarterly of the Texas State Historical Association*. Uppity academics learned their lesson. If junior faculty members sought tenure and promotion, they dared not upset the power elite who sat on boards of regents. Freedom of academic inquiry simply did not extend to Sam Houston, the grand champion of Texas sacred cows.

Now, nearly a century later, the climate has changed, even if Houston's heroic stature has not. Objective historians can no longer simply ignore the sheer number of the general's detractors. Those familiar with the events of the San Jacinto campaign find much of the criticism well founded. Students of military history

need to set aside the hagiography penned by political hacks and hero worshipers to gain a fresh perspective on Houston's generalship during the campaign.

### **The 1836 Campaign**

Before we can fairly assess Houston as a military commander, a quick summary of the 1836 campaign is in order. Following the capture of San Antonio in December 1835, many Texians—as they preferred to label themselves—believed the war won and most rebel forces returned to the comforts of hearth and home. In January and February 1836, however Mexican President and Commanding General Antonio López de Santa Anna launched his campaign of reconquest against the rebellious province.

From the Mexican interior, two main roads led into Texas. The first was the Atascosito Road, which stretched from Matamoros northward through San Patricio, Refugio, Goliad, Victoria, and finally into the heart of Austin's colony. The second was the Old San Antonio Road, that crossed the Rio Grande and wound northeastward through San Antonio de Bexar, Bastrop, Nacogdoches, San Augustine, and across the Sabine River into Louisiana. Two forts blocked these approaches into Texas: the Presidio La Bahía at Goliad and the Alamo at San Antonio. Each base functioned as a frontier picket guard, ready to alert the Texas settlements of an enemy advance. Colonel James C. Neill received command of the B́exar garrison. At Goliad, some ninety miles to the southeast, Colonel James W. Fannin commanded a four hundred-man-force inside the Presidio La Bahía—which the rebels renamed Fort Defiance. Both Neill and Fannin determined to stall the enemy on the frontier. Still, they labored under no delusions. Without speedy reinforcements, neither the Alamo nor Fort Defiance could long withstand a siege.

Santa Anna intended to crush the Texians in the jaws of a strategic pincer movement. On 16 February, he crossed the Rio Grande. He correctly surmised that the Texians were expecting him to advance from the south via the Laredo Road. By driving up the Old San Antonio Road, he opted for the indirect approach and approached Bexar from the west. On 17 February, General José Urrea forded the Rio Grande at Matamoros and drove up the Atascosito Road with a force of some 550 men. His part in the strategic plan involved a sweep of the coastal prairies, which would culminate in the recapture of Goliad. Santa Anna's advance elements arrived in B́exar on February 23, 1836 and lay siege to the Alamo. On March 6—day thirteen of the siege—Santa Anna launched an assault and wiped out all of the fort's defenders.

Meanwhile, Urrea conducted a brilliant sweep of the coastal bend. He achieved initial success when his forces surprised and overwhelmed detached Texian contingents at San Patricio and Refugio. Obeying General Houston's orders, Fannin abandoned Goliad with plans to fall back to the Colorado River. Yet, Urrea overtook Fannin's retreating force on the open prairie between Goliad and Victoria. After a spirited resistance at the Battle of Coleto, Fannin surrendered his command—then the largest Texian unit. On 27 March, Mexican soldiers executed Fannin and most of his men.

Earlier that month, on 11 March, General Houston had arrived in Gonzales to take command of 374 volunteers gathered there to relieve the Alamo. The men at that post had been dead since 6 March, but Houston would not have that intelligence confirmed until 13 March when Alamo widow Suzanna Dickenson rode into town with details of the siege and the final assault. She also reported that Santa Anna and a five thousand-man force was on the march to Gonzales. Now that the Alamo had fallen, Santa Anna's army might easily sweep in behind Fort Defiance. With that nightmare scenario in mind, Houston dispatched orders to Goliad for Fannin to abandon the town and retire to Victoria on the Guadalupe River.

All Houston's plans hinged upon Fannin's prompt withdrawal. With only 374 volunteers, Houston dared not engage Santa Anna's main force at Gonzales. The rebel general sought to rendezvous with the Goliad garrison for he was confident that when Fannin's four hundred arrived he could stop the enemy advance on the Colorado.

On the night of 13 March, Houston began his retreat. His small contingent crossed the Colorado River on 17 March and took up a position at Burnam's Ferry. Houston soon realized, however, that Burnam's was not the place to stand. Even if he did manage to halt Santa Anna's main force there, Urrea could cross the Colorado farther down river and then drive into the heart of the Texian settlements. Houston burned the ferry and marched down the east bank until reaching Beason's Crossing on 19 March.

Conditions improved at Beason's. Texians, now understanding fully the seriousness of the threat facing their country, flocked to Houston's banner, increasing his army to about fourteen hundred effectives. Spring rains swelled the banks of the Colorado, temporarily rendering it an impassable barrier for the Mexicans. Santa Anna had divided his forces, the better to locate the illusive rebel army. If the Texians could not hope to fight the entire Mexican Army, they might at least defeat a portion of it. Texian volunteers, enraged at the reports of the Alamo slaughter, were spoiling for a fight.

On 21 March they got their chance when an enemy division numbering between six and eight hundred under General Joaquín Ramírez y Sesma arrived opposite Beason's Crossing and pitched camp. His lieutenants urged General Houston to cross the river and attack Ramírez before he could be reinforced. Much to their chagrin, however, Houston only authorized a reconnaissance-in-force. Houston waited for the arrival of Fannin's force, which he expected at any time.

On 23 March Houston learned of Fannin's defeat and capture—news that totally upset his strategic planning. Writing Texas Secretary of War Thomas Jefferson Rusk, Houston revealed the depth of his despair:

*You know I am not easily depressed, but before my God, since we parted, I have found the darkest hours of my past life! If what I have learned from Fannin be true, I deplore it and can only attribute the ill luck to his attempt to retreat in daylight in the face of a superior force. He is an ill-fated man.*

On 26 March, Houston ordered a retreat to San Felipe on the Brazos River. The rebel army reached San Felipe on 28 March, but after spending only one night there, Houston ordered another retreat to Jared Groce's plantation, twenty miles upriver. The abandonment of San Felipe, the oldest Anglo settlement in Texas, caused a storm of protest. Two companies bluntly refused to retreat further. Captain Moseley Baker's company remained to guard the San Felipe crossing. Wiley Martin took his company about twenty-five miles down river to defend the Fort Bend crossing. Disgusted with constant retreat, many Texians deserted to assist their families who had joined the Runaway Scrape, a wild exodus toward the Louisiana border. On 29 March, the day it began the march to Groce's, the Texian army had dwindled to a mere five hundred. Houston used the two weeks at Groce's to good advantage. There he drilled his men in the rudiments of linear combat. Austrian-born George Erath admitted that the "delay at Groce's had a good effect in disciplining us and in giving us information on military tactics." Through the heroic efforts of the Texian surgeons, most of those stricken with maladies brought on by their almost constant exposure to spring rains gradually improved.

The Texians regained their health and self-confidence, but not their faith in Houston. Even a decade later veteran J. W. Robinson denounced his commander's policy of retreat:

*The man that has fear in his bosom may fancy that he sees it in every eye that meets his own—if it was not fear that made the Major General tuck his tail and run from the Colorado, from half his own number and from the Brazos, it was a total want of military capacity.*

The interim Texas government was also dissatisfied with their general. President David G. Burnet addressed a scathing letter to Houston:

*Sir: The enemy are laughing you to scorn. You must fight them. You must retreat no further. The country expects you to fight. The salvation of the country depends on your doing so.*

On 12 April Houston broke camp at Groce's. It required two days to transport all the men and supplies to the east bank of the Brazos. The general then marched his army eastward, but gave no hint of its destination. Many hoped they were headed toward the enemy and battle; others believed they were bound for the Sabine and shameful safety. On the evening of 12 April, General Houston asked Dr. Anson Jones what he thought of the army's prospects. The surgeon replied that the number of desertions concerned him and boldly told Houston that "if the retreating policy were continued much longer, he would be pretty much alone." Houston sought to assuage Jones's anxiety and the physician recorded his reply:

*[Houston] seemed thoughtful and irresolute; said he hoped yet to get a bloodless victory; and the conversation dropped, with an expression of an earnest hope on my part, that the next move he made would be towards the enemy.*

Jones wondered how Houston hoped to achieve a "bloodless victory" against Santa Anna. He would later discern the answer, but on that occasion the general did not elaborate.

On 16 April the rebel army reached a major crossroads, both literally and metaphorically. The north road led to Nacogdoches and safety, the other towards Harrisburg and confrontation. In the fork of the road stood a gigantic oak, forever recalled by the soldiers as "the Whichway Tree." Tension was high as the army approached the crossroads. Many swore they would mutiny if the general ordered the army north. Some called loudly for Houston's removal. As the moment of decision approached, the general lingered toward the rear of the column. As the lead elements approached the Whichway Tree, a shout sounded through the ranks: "To the right boys, to the right." The willful revolutionaries took the road to Harrisburg; Houston followed the army. Thereafter, the Texian army would be running, not from the enemy, but toward him.

On 20 April Houston took position in an oak grove near Lynch's Ferry on the Lynchburg- Harrisburg Road; the rebel army placed itself between the Mexican general and his main force. Returning from New Washington later that day, Santa Anna found his line of march blocked by the enemy. He hastened a courier to General Martin Perfecto de Cos at Fort Bend. That afternoon, attempts to reconnoiter the Texian position produced minor artillery and cavalry skirmishes.

On Thursday morning, 21 April, Cos arrived on the field with some 540 troops. The reinforcements increased Santa Anna's force to about 1,240. Houston, with 910 effectives, lost the numerical advantage. Around noon, Houston called a council of war that voted for an immediate attack, lest more Mexican reinforcements arrive.

Houston launched his assault around 4:30. Because rising ground and high grass screened the Texian approach, the attack caught the Mexicans by surprise. After initial attempts to rally failed, Mexican soldiers degenerated into what one of their officers described as "a bewildered and panic- stricken herd." The fighting lasted no more than eighteen minutes; the slaughter continued much longer. Vengeful rebels shouting "Remember the Alamo-Remember Goliad," killed some 630 Mexicans and captured another 730. Of the 910 Texians engaged, nine lost their lives. Thirty sustained wounds, including General Houston. Santa Anna escaped the battlefield, but Texians captured him on 22 April. Houston won a notable victory at San Jacinto, but only with the apprehension of the Mexican commander did the triumph become decisive.

## **The Texian Army**

To assess the merit of a general, one must evaluate the instrument he had to wield. Most great captains—Alexander, Cromwell, Frederick, Napoleon, Wellington—tailored their armies to fit their talents. Houston inherited an armed mob and was never able to train it to be much more.

Students of military history have observed that armies reflect society at large. That was certainly true of Houston's San Jacinto army. Most Texians who took up arms against Santa Anna were not merely Southerners, but Jacksonian Southerners. Even "Old Hickory's" political opponents tended to adopt certain of his presumptions as articles of faith. Among these were a reverence for the republican government, an innate distrust of the military profession, and a stubborn conviction in the "natural" talents of the "common man" over the education and training of a privileged elite.

While in Congress, David Crockett had demonstrated contempt for the military profession by recommending the abolishment of the Military Academy at West Point. The Academy was, he asserted, a bastion for the ne'er-do-well "son of the rich and influential," who were "too nice to work." "They are first educated there for nothing," Crockett fumed, "and then they must have salaries to support them after they leave there." He liked to remind his constituents that he had been a volunteer during the Creek War. As he told it, "the volunteer goes into the war for the love of his country." A Southerner might volunteer to protect his kin, his home, and his liberty, but he would never willingly "enter into service." That would render him a "hireling." To debase himself in such a manner would disgrace his ancestors and pervert his notions of republican government.

Nevertheless, many Texian leaders believed that a regular army, drilled, uniformed, and disciplined, would be required to defeat the European-styled force of Santa Anna. Some doubted the long-term value of volunteers. William B. Travis advised the General Council that Texas troops "should be subject to regular discipline & the 'rules and articles' of War. A mob can do wonders in a sudden burst of patriotism," he argued, "but cannot be depended on as soldiers for a campaign." Writing General Stephen F. Austin, Benjamin F. Smith, acting garrison commander at Goliad, voiced his objections in even stronger terms: "If you are compelled to stay long at a place; rely upon it, your men will desert you—There is nothing but their honor to govern them—that is in many cases but a cobweb." Such protestations apparently convinced Austin, for he wrote the president of the Consultation asserting the "absolute necessity of organizing a regular army and inviting a Military man of known and tried Talent to command it."

In light of these recommendations, the General Council attempted to organize a regular army. The force was to number 1120 enlisted men divided into two groups: regulars who enlisted for two years and "permanent volunteers" who would serve for the duration of the war. Modeled after the finest U.S. regiments, the Texas regular army was intended to be of the highest caliber. The men—according to plan—were to be well drilled and supplied. To insure knowledge of proper discipline, the Council ordered one hundred copies of Scott's Infantry Drill, twenty-six of Croop's Discipline and Regulations, and thirty-six of McCombs's School of the Soldier. Clearly, Texian leaders envisioned a war waged not by unseasoned militiamen, but by regulars schooled in the prevailing linear tactics.

Even when notables such as Austin, Travis, and Houston declared the need for regulars, the traditional scorn for professional soldiers went unchecked. Robert Morris of the New Orleans Greys, spurned a regular commission and informed Houston that none of his men would "enter into any service connected with the Regular Army, the name of which is a Bugbear to them." So it would appear. While the regular army enjoyed a surfeit of officers, at no time did it ever attract more than one hundred enlisted personnel.

Texian soldiers were civilian volunteers—headstrong, independent and proud. Perhaps that was best expressed in a December, 1835, broadside which earnestly enjoined: "Rise up, then, with one accord, and shoulder your rifles, march to the field of battle, and teach the hirelings of a tyrant that they can not battle successfully with citizen freemen." Revolutionary rhetoric sought to awaken "the principles of 1776" and portrayed Santa Anna as a silk-stocking aristocrat in the George III mold and his minions as Mexican redcoats. Indeed, to stress the comparison, some newspapers labeled the enemy "bluecoats." Reporting the death of his brother John at the Alamo, a vengeful Benjamin Briggs Goodrich jeered Santa Anna: "We will

meet him and teach the unprincipled scoundrel that freemen can never be conquered by the hirling [sic] soldiery of a military despot."

Among egalitarian volunteers an officer was merely first among equals, someone who had displayed natural leadership. Just before the opening skirmish at Gonzales, Robert Coleman reported, "we have as yet no head [but] there will be one chosen to day." Even so, Coleman, who would later be an insubordinate thorn in the side of Houston, was not overly concerned. "We are all captains and have our views," he affirmed.

Along with ancient long rifles, Southern fathers bequeathed a passion for liberty and contempt of privilege. Every man proud of that designation—and every boy who aspired to it—propagated and preserved the legacy of freedom. One might humble himself before the Almighty, but before no other—no matter how high his station. English gentlewoman Frances Trollope abhorred the "brutal familiarity" with which westerners addressed even President Andrew Jackson. "He was," she explained, "in deep mourning having very recently lost his wife." She stood near "Old Hickory" when one "greasy fellow" approached him with the inquiry:

"General Jackson, I guess?"

"The General bowed assent."

"Why they told me you was dead."

"No! Providence has hitherto preserved my life."

"And is you wife alive too?"

"The General, apparently much hurt, signified the contrary, upon which the courtier concluded his harangue, by saying,

'Aye, I thought it was one or the t'other of ye.'"

No free-born American owed his livelihood to some preening aristocrat; here one scraped his living from the land—or not—by the lights of his wits and energy. Notions of equality constantly hampered military discipline. Mrs. Trollope noted that despite their frequent militia drills she "never saw an American man walk or stand well." She theorized that this republican slouch was "occasioned by no officer daring to say to a brother free-born 'hold up your head.'" Early Texian settler Andrew Davis might have spoken for them all:

"I am more strongly tempted to fight if one shows he is above me than for almost any other offense. I will allow a man to be greater than I, but not better." Such men paid little heed to officers. During the 1835 Siege of Bexar, General Austin noted recruits who sought relief from the boredom of camp life at the bottom of a brown jug. He complained that drunks roared about shooting off rifles, wasting precious powder and ball. "In the name of almighty God," he implored the politicians, "send no more ardent spirits to this camp." On the day he handed command of the army over to Edward Burleson, a dejected Austin recorded:

"This army has always been composed of discordant materials, and is without proper organization—The volunteer sistem will not do for such service." Texian soldiers despised officers who had to "pull rank" or threaten punishment to enforce their orders. On the day before battle at San Jacinto, men inspecting their rifles discovered soggy priming. French Canadian volunteer Dr. Nicholas Labadie recalled, "one after another discharged his gun for the purpose of loading afresh," which produced a "perfect roar of musketry." The din enraged General Houston who had hoped to surprise Santa Anna's small contingent, which he knew to be nearby. Dr. Labadie recounted:

*General Houston . . . raised his stentorian voice, crying: "Stop that firing, stop that firing. God damn you, I say, stop the firing." Some of us said, "Our guns have been loaded over two weeks and we will not meet the enemy with them wet;" and then, right before his face, bang went another, and still another. By this time, raising himself up to his full height, and holding his drawn sword, he*

*declared he would run through the first man that would fire. One man close by myself said, "General, it won't do for you to try that game on us;" and with the most perfect indifference, he fired his rifle as he spoke. The general then gave it up.*

Clearly, there was no love lost between the men and Houston. Indeed, few soldiers ever held their commander in greater contempt. Houston returned the sentiment; he had no confidence that his ill-trained volunteers could hold their own in a stand-up fight with the Mexicans. Consequently, he made every effort to delay a major engagement until he had trained his men, efforts which his soldiers believed to be symptoms of cowardice.

During the San Jacinto campaign many soldiers developed an intense dislike for their general, which later blossomed into full-grown loathing. J. H. Kuykendall, a San Jacinto veteran, believed that Houston "misappreciated" the fighting abilities of his soldiers and resented the general's smug condescension toward volunteers. "A regular army was the general's hobby," he bitterly recalled. "He had little confidence in the kind of troops he commanded."

Both officers and men commonly ignored Houston's orders. During the cavalry skirmishing on 20 April, Mexican lancers clashed with the Texian mounted riflemen. Outnumbered and in trouble, Colonel Sydney Sherman, commander of the rebel cavalry, requested reinforcements. Houston refused. At that juncture, Captain Jesse Billingsley, determined to assist his beleaguered comrades, took matters into his own hands. As he led his company forward, others were spurred by its example, and it was "immediately followed by the entire Regiment." Yet to reach the battlefield, these strong-willed reinforcements had to march directly past their general. Houston angrily ordered them to countermarch back to the safety of the timber. Billingsley laughingly recalled: "This order the men treated with derision, requesting him to countermarch himself, if he desired it, and steadily held on their way to the support of Col. Sherman, and succeeded in driving the enemy behind their breastworks."

Even during battle the following day, Houston had a hard time getting the men—one hesitates to say his men—to listen to him. The wounded general rode among his men trying to halt the wanton slaughter of helpless soldados, many of whom begged for their lives crying, "Me no Alamo—Me no Goliad." Seeing the futility of his efforts, he admonished: "Gentlemen, I applaud your bravery, but damn your manners." Other Texian officers attempted to restore order but as one enraged volunteer told Colonel John Austin Wharton, "If Jesus Christ would to come down from Heaven and order me to quit shooting yellowbellies, I wouldn't do it, sir!"

Many modern critics find such churlish behavior, well, unprofessional. Surely that is the point—war was not a profession for Texas revolutionaries. Unlike the brassbuttoned regulars, they suffered no obligation to observe codes of conduct established by "officers and gentlemen." Although they had largely observed the rules during the 1835 campaign, following the slaughter at the Alamo and the massacre at Goliad, war in Texas became a dirty, savage pursuit, unrestrained by codes of "professional courtesy."

Discipline grew even worse after San Jacinto. Old settler Noah Smithwick reported "the only officer who ever had the temerity to try to enforce strict military discipline, paid for his folly with his life." He recalled "the poor fellow, whose only offense was a little youthful vanity, was found in his tent with his brains blown out." Clearly, the practice of "fraggings" did not originate in Vietnam.

Naturally, officers found commanding such insubordinate troops a frustrating task. Stephen Austin, James Bowie, and William Travis all resigned their commissions, only to be lured back into service. When Goliad volunteers rejected his authority, Sam Houston went on extended furlough with his Cherokee friends. Judge Advocate William H. Wharton submitted a rancorous letter of resignation in which he bemoaned the

"failure to enforce general orders," and concluded, "I am compelled to believe that no good will be achieved [sic] by this army except by the merest accident under heaven."

Fierce in battle and restless in camp, Texians were great fighters but poor soldiers. Once they had the scent of gunpowder in their nostrils at San Jacinto they were indomitable, but convincing them to stay around for the battle often proved a problem. Independent and insubordinate, they were an officer's nightmare. Yet, most of the officers were also touchy of their honor and quick to resign.

The Texian volunteer was disorderly, bedraggled, and unprofessional. He did not fight for procedures, politics, or pay. His reason stood over the hearth cooking game he had bagged; his reason napped in the crib he had crafted; his reason grew in the fields he had cleared and planted. Because his imperatives were so personal, he zestfully slaughtered any who threatened them. A consummate individualist, he did not want to belong to any establishment—a military establishment most of all. Still, he demonstrated wonderful initiative and marksmanship, as well as remarkable physical courage. A Jacksonian egalitarian, he mirrored both the vices and virtues of his age.

## **Problems**

Few Texas historians are willing to explore the San Jacinto campaign as military history. Social and political historians eagerly except the traditional view that San Jacinto was the culmination of Houston's wily strategy. The few who are military historians write it off as unworthy of discussion. Professor Archie P. McDonald dismisses the entire war as one that "has no Hannibal, no Napoleon to formulate or demonstrate great tactical or strategic truths." Indeed, he concludes, "Its only real value is moral." Most Texans seem to agree. Consequently, they tend to coat all mention of the revolution with a gloss of poetic hyperbole. What else could explain John Wayne's assertion? "[The Alamo] is the story of 185 men joined together in an immortal pact to give their lives that the spark of freedom might blaze into a roaring flame." So busy are we honoring the heroic sacrifice, that we frequently forget that the battle was a crushing military disaster. I sometimes have to explain to modern Texans that it really is a bad thing to have the enemy wipe out one of your garrisons to the last man. Nevertheless, the San Jacinto Campaign does provide a number of instructive problems for the serious military historian.

### **Problem I : Did Sam Houston have a cogent strategy?**

Santa Anna's winter offensive, although imposing dreadful hardships on his soldados, caught Houston by surprise and secured the momentum. Texians did not expect the Mexicans to strike until spring and were woefully ill-prepared to meet the onslaught. Until the single knock-out punch, Houston was dancing to a tune orchestrated by Santa Anna.

In fact, Houston initially refused to believe that the enemy had launched their attack. Robert Coleman, the general's bitterest critic, asserted that Houston dismissed appeals from Travis and Fannin as a "fraud [that] had been practiced upon the people by the officers of the frontier, for party purposes." Considering Coleman's animus toward Houston, one would be inclined toward skepticism if his account were not corroborated by an independent source. While on his way from the Independence Convention at San Felipe to Gonzales, Houston lingered at Burnam's Ferry on the Colorado. Houston had pledged "all mortal power" to relieve the Alamo garrison, but according to settler W. W. Thompson, the general lingered at Burnam's "all night & all day and all night again." While Texians were wrought with anxiety concerning the fate of Travis and his men, their commander dawdled. When Thompson inquired about the plight of the Alamo defenders, he received an amazing reply. Houston "swore that he believed it to be a damn lie, & that all those reports from Travis and Fannin were lies, for there were no Mexican forces there and that he believed that it was only electioneering schemes on [the part of] Travis & Fannin to sustain their own popularity."

Could Houston really have been so clueless? Well, yes. Houston was not a career soldier, but a career politician. He was conditioned to weigh political considerations first and had not shifted his thinking to accept the possibility that there were those in Texas not involved in a Byzantine power play. By the time Houston began thinking like a general, Santa Anna had stolen a march on him, the Alamo had fallen, and the enemy was driving toward the settlements. Houston's decision to concentrate his forces on the Colorado was perforce, not so much a calculated strategy as an act of desperation. What else could he do? To be fair, the factious politicians of the Texas provisional must bear their portion of the blame, but even so General Houston does not receive high marks as a strategic planner.

### **Problem II: Should Houston have attacked Ramírez y Sesma on the Colorado?**

Texian soldiers greeted Houston's orders to abandon the Colorado River line with utter contempt. Eager to avenge the Alamo slaughter, they believed they could have defeated the Mexican column across the river. Houston, however, never gave them the chance. "Thirteen hundred Americans retreating before a division of 800 Mexicans!" Coleman spat. "Can Houston's strong partisans presume to excuse such dastardly cowardice under the pretense of laudable prudence?" Even years later, Dr. Anson Jones excoriated Houston for abandoning the Colorado line.

*A stand here would have saved the country from the wide-spread and universal desolation and suffering which the retreat occasioned east of this river; and this was a consideration which, other things being equal, no military man could have disregarded without censure, as it could very easily have been foreseen.... In a military point of view, therefore, the retreat is without any reason, and can be accounted for but in two ways: first, the cowardice or ignorance of Gen. Houston, or second, his design to cross the Neches. In either case, he should be held accountable for the ruin brought upon Texas, and the immeasurable amount of suffering and misery entailed upon her helpless citizens, her women and children, by that measure.*

Like all good soldiers, the rebels wished to test themselves in battle, to engage the enemy and kill him. While few were students of military history, Texans would have applauded Napoleon's maxim: "I see only one thing—the enemy's main army." They embraced a no-nonsense approach to war. "Any of us can command Texans," Colonel John C. Hays once quipped. "All they ask is to be shown the road to the enemy's camp." Heroic rhetoric, but a naive approach to war that got many of them killed. Even if it had resulted in a Texas victory, an engagement at Beason's Crossing would have been costly and accomplished little. Houston evaluated the strategic realities:

*While in camp on the Colorado it was learned that Fannin's regiment had been captured and that [Ramírez y] Sesma, across the river from us, was in communication with Urrea and Gaona. Urrea could, therefore, cross the Colorado at Wharton, about 40 miles below the Texian camp, with his 1500 men and attack [our] left flank. Gaona with his force of about 750 could cross the Colorado at Bastrop, about 60 miles above the Texian camp, and attack the right flank, while Sesma could attack the front.*

Crossing a river under fire and attacking Ramírez y Sesma in his entrenchments would have been so destructive to the Texas army that it would have stood no chance in the battle that would surely follow. Houston probably understood Napoleon's maxim better than his men; he realized that the operative word was "the enemy's main army." A battle should serve the needs of strategy; a general does not launch a needless assault merely to quench his men's thirst for blood. There was only one reasonable course: retreat, keep his force intact, and pray Santa Anna made a mistake. One does not have to be a Houston "partisan" to acknowledge that on this occasion he made the right call.

### **Problem III: Did Houston intend to turn south at the Whichway Tree?**

No, he did not. I could not prove that when the book was published in 1994. Now I can. In 1837 Robert Coleman quoted Houston as saying the following while still at Groce's Plantation: "So soon as it is ascertained in camp that the enemy is at San Felipe, ... half the army will be teasing [sic] me to fight...I am, however, Commander-in-Chief. I will retreat to the Red lands....I will immediately issue marching orders, and a retreat shall be commenced as soon as possible." Dr. Anson Jones was equally certain of Houston's intentions: "Gen. Houston's policy was to retreat beyond the Neches and beyond the line which Gen. Gains, of the United States Army, would have defended, but [Houston] was forced by the men of his army to depart from this policy, and go to Lynchburg, from which resulted the battle of San Jacinto." Jones reiterated his point elsewhere. "This plan [to retreat to the U.S. border] was defeated by the determination of the Texas troops, by which Gen. Houston was forced on the 15th April, 1836, to deflect from the road to Nacogdoches, Gaines' Ferry, and Fort Jessup, and to take the one which led to San Jacinto. A common soldier wrote home during the campaign to explain Houston's plans and the reactions of his comrades: "The General says he will fly to the Trinity River; the soldiers say almost to a man they are determined not to follow him any longer in that direction. I presume, however, that if the soldiers will not follow the General, the General will follow the soldiers." An incident along the Harrisburg Road corroborated all the assertions that Houston intended to march to the Sabine. Pamela Mann had loaned the army a team of prized oxen. Mrs. Mann apparently expressed concern for her animals, but the general assured her that he was taking the army—and her oxen—to the Redlands and out of harm's way. When she discovered that the rebels had turned to the right, she mounted up and rode after her property. According to Private Robert Hancock Hunter, who witnessed the confrontation: "She rode up [to] the general & said, general you told me a dam lie, you said [you] was going on the Nacogdoches road." Coleman related essentially the same story. As he told it, Mrs. Mann charged Houston with duplicity: "I loaned you the oxen to go to the Trinity; as you have changed your route, I shall take them." With that, the brassy widow cut her oxen from the traces and led the beasts away. Mrs. Mann should not have been so hard on the general. After all, when he told her he intended to march the army to the Sabine he had meant it.

Houston himself provides the most compelling evidence. In 1845 the old hero addressed a loving crowd in his namesake city. On that day, at least, he was admirably candid:

*In the course of two days [at Gonzales] I received the lamentable information that Colonel Travis and his noble compatriots had succumbed to overwhelming numbers and had been brutally slaughtered. I immediately sent a courier to Colonel Fannin ordering him to destroy all his artillery that he could not remove and retreat to Victoria . . . Deaf Smith having returned from a scout reported the enemy advancing. I then determined to retreat and get as near to Andrew Jackson and the old flag as I could.*

What a remarkable admission this is. If Houston was telling the truth, he never intended to fight on the Colorado, nor the Brazos, nor did he intend to veer south at the Whichway Tree. Did Houston lie to his men and his government when he repeatedly said he intended to defend the Texas settlements? Yes, what other conclusion can one reasonably draw. Even so, it probably was the soundest strategy. Might Houston have lured Santa Anna into the Piney Woods where Texian riflemen could have deployed to better advantage? Might such a strategy have produced a Texas Teutoburger Wald? Intriguing questions, but they passed into the realm of idle speculation when the army took the right-hand fork.

#### **Problem IV : Was Houston's command style suited to the type of troops he commanded?**

Houston rarely sought council or discussed his plans. "Had I consulted the wishes of all," he explained during the campaign, "I should have been like the ass between two stacks of hay.... I consulted none—I held no councils of war. If I err, the blame is mine." This may be an expression of superb moral courage, but it might as easily be the infantile hubris of a supercilious ass.

Many see Houston's intransigence as his strongest asset, and would cite one of Napoleon's favorite maxims as proof: "In war the leader alone understands the importance of certain things, and he may alone, of his own will and superior wisdom, conquer and overcome all difficulties." The Emperor's nemesis, the Duke of Wellington once remarked that if his hair knew what his brain was thinking, he would cut it off and wear a wig. This command style worked for Napoleon because his men worshipped him; it worked for Wellington because his men respected his genius; it did not work for Houston because his men despised him and doubted his ability.

Houston led American frontiersmen imbued with republican zeal. He may have done better if he had effected a less imperious demeanor. The best commanders possess the ability to show tolerance and latitude. While visiting a regiment of New Zealanders in North Africa, General Bernard Law Montgomery remarked to their commander General Bernard Cyril Freyberg, "I notice your soldiers don't salute." Freyberg advised, "Wave to them, sir, and they'll wave back." Montgomery took the advice and discovered that New Zealanders fought much better than they saluted. On the occasions when veterans recollected Houston fondly, it was for his willingness to set aside the privileges of rank and share their hardships. In 1898 old soldier F. J. Cooke spoke in Houston's defense: "I saw him myself on the rout[e] from Beasons to San Felipe—with his shoulder under a wagon wheel—knee deep in mud—calling for help to lift a bogged down wagon out of the mud."

Texians were accustomed to having a say in their affairs and resented Houston's unwillingness to let them in on his deliberations. Of course, generals are not obliged to share their plans, but many great ones have. Frederick the Great gave his officers their instructions before the battle of Leuthen: "We must beat the enemy or all perish before his batteries. So I think, so will I act. Now go and repeat to the regiments what I have said to you." Prussians drilled their men to obey without question, but Frederick knew if he briefed his troops they would fight harder. Before Austerlitz Napoleon ordered battalion officers to read their men the plan for crushing the Russians and Austrians. He rightly believed if his soldiers understood the overall scheme, each would know his role in it. Montgomery sought to emulate the Emperor in this regard. He insisted that every private know his tactics before El Alamein. Australian and New Zealand troops, like Texans, fought better for generals who did not keep them in the dark.

There was no love lost between the men and Houston. Indeed, few soldiers have ever held their commander in greater contempt. Still, it is not necessary for soldiers to love their general. British soldiers did not like Wellington. Could anyone actually find George Patton lovable? Has anyone serving on his staff ever found "Stormin' Norman Schwarzkopf a "nice guy?" A general is required to ask men to perform difficult, frequently life-threatening tasks. Grousing is a natural consequence; Napoleon called the veterans of his Imperial Guard "my old grumblers." Perhaps no one stated it more succinctly than General Colin Powell: "Sometimes being responsible means pissing people off." No, one might not like his commander, but it is dangerous for soldiers to doubt their general's will to fight. That was Houston's greatest failing as a leader.

Houston had no confidence in his troops; even worse, he allowed them to know he had no confidence in them. That was unforgivable. Houston would have done better to appeal to pride, but instead the men felt "misappreciated." It is not beneath a general's dignity to stroke egos. Napoleon inspired his men and in the process bound them to his will. "If I want a man," he once admitted, "I am prepared to kiss his ass." Texian volunteers saw Houston as a martinet given to fits of pique—and they simply ignored him. "Houston was universally detested," President David G. Burnet recalled, "the army regarded him as a military fop and the citizens who remained in the country were disgusted at his miserable imbecility [sic]." The Prussian military writer Dietrich von Bulow perhaps said it best: "A general must praise the men in order to make them worthy of praise."

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In the final analysis, what did the San Jacinto campaign really accomplish? Not nearly as much as earlier writers have suggested. Many have maintained that Texians defeated the Mexican Army at San Jacinto, yet the contingent Santa Anna brought to the shores of Buffalo Bayou was only a small portion of the total force. Generals Filisola and Urrea each commanded divisions that were larger than the entire Texian army. Following San Jacinto, the Mexicans retreated south of the Rio Grande, but that had more to do with the almost total breakdown of logistics than the threat of Texian arms.

Some have taught that Texas won its independence at San Jacinto, but that is also a stretch. Texas may have won a breathing period, but during the decade that Texas existed as a Republic, Mexicans never surrendered their claim on the break-away republic. Not until the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo in 1848 did they agree to abandon Texas and accept the Rio Grande as the international boundary. Yet, Winfield Scott's occupation of Mexico City and the total defeat of their armies during the Mexican War determined that decision, not the battle fought twelve years before.

And what of Houston's generalship? Surprisingly, the appraisal of most historians remains unchanged. To them Houston was a brilliant commander whose brilliant strategic withdrawal culminated in victory at San Jacinto. Professor Randolph B. Campbell, Houston's most recent biographer, falls into lock step:

*Sam Houston's San Jacinto campaign was not a headlong flight toward security in the United States but rather a strategic withdrawal away from a numerically superior enemy while building strength and waiting for an opportunity to strike an effective blow. The men who wanted to fight before April 21—if they could have had their way—would have, as Houston put it later, "cost another Alamo or Goliad tragedy, and the day of San Jacinto would never have come." In any case, Houston won, and Texas became independent. San Jacinto became his password to Texas heroism forever.*

Such is the conventional wisdom. Writing as early as 1850, however, President Jones refuted it.

*What is singular, although the author of so great and unnecessary a disaster has never given a single reason for that disastrous retreat; and although none can ever be given, he has succeeded for fourteen years in humbugging an intelligent people into the belief that it was a "smart" move on his part, and that by it he decoyed the enemy into a "trap." Nothing can be more false than this assumption.*

Dr. Campbell is, however, correct in one regard: Houston won. Judged only by the outcome of the campaign Houston emerges as a great soldier; if measured by the standards of the great captains he barely manages a passing grade. And if one considers his opposition, he falls short. San Jacinto is a testament to a shoddy defense, not a skilled attack. Houston was able to surprise the Mexicans because Santa Anna neglected his camp security. The "Napoleon of the West" had, furthermore, taken his army off the prairies where his superior cavalry enjoyed an advantage and ventured into wooded marshes where the Texian riflemen could employ the terrain to advantage. San Jacinto was not so much a battle Houston won, as one that Santa Anna lost.

By his own admission, Houston never intended to give battle at San Jacinto. Recall, at the beginning of the campaign he determined to "get as near to Andrew Jackson and the old flag as [he] could." The Texian rebels hauled their general—kicking and screaming—to the banks of Buffalo Bayou. If he had waged the campaign he envisioned it probably would have climaxed in the battle of San Augustine. Surely that is the point. If Houston never planned to go to San Jacinto, how could the battle there possibly have been the culmination of his brilliant strategy?

But give credit where it is due. Houston displayed remarkable courage at San Jacinto. Riding ahead of the army, he presented a wonderful target. Enemy bullets killed four horses under him and shattered his ankle. Afterward, he served as first president of the Republic of Texas. He worked diligently to have Texas

admitted to the union. Following statehood, he served as governor and senator. Texans removed him from the governor's office when he opposed secession. He stood firm to his principles and his country and, though he did not live to see it, the crushing defeat of the Confederate states validated his judgment. He probably is the "tallest Texan," but he was not a great general.