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The Alamo as a Pyrrhic Victory: The Mexican Experience in the Battle of the Alamo

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Abstract

At the Battle of San Jacinto, General Sam Houston said "Remember the Alamo!" The question however is how should we remember it? Do we remember it as the American icon of freedom and liberty that has forever idolized figures such as Davy Crockett, James Bowie, and William Barret Travis? Before this question can be answered, one must first have a more precise understanding of what occurred at the Alamo. This can only be gained by looking at the battle from not only the side of the Texan rebels, but the Mexican troops as well. Little focus has been given to the experience of the Mexicans who were present at the siege. This raises the question of how does the story of what occurred at the Alamo differ when seen through the point of view of these participants. The historical trend has been to focus on the events of the siege of the Alamo through the experiences of its defenders. It is by focusing on the events of the Battle of the Alamo through the experience of the Mexican troops in addition to the experiences of the Texan rebels, that we can be able to gain a better understanding of not only the battle itself, but also be able to see why the Mexicans viewed the Battle of the Alamo as a Pyrrhic victory. Also, by answering this question, insight can be gained into how the outcome of the Battle of the Alamo affected Santa Anna and his troops throughout the rest

of the Texas campaign, because it was the "loss" that the troops felt they suffered that brought down their morale and affected their motivation to fight later on in the Texan campaign, thus leading to their loss at San Jacinto. Hence, by examining the Mexican primary sources concerned with the Battle of the Alamo I propose that there was no real victory for the Mexican armies, and that the call for battle in the "Remember the Alamo!" that Houston initiated was a straw man effectively manipulated for many years.

At the Battle of San Jacinto, General Sam Houston said "Remember the Alamo!"¹ The question however, is how should we remember it? Do we remember it as the American icon of freedom and liberty that has forever idolized figures such as Davy Crockett, James Bowie, and William Barret Travis? Before this question can be answered, one must first have an accurate understanding of what occurred at the Alamo. This can only be gained by looking at the battle from not only the side of the Texan rebels, but the Mexican troops as well. Little focus has been given to the experience of the Mexicans who were present at the siege. This raises the question of how does the story of what occurred at the Alamo differ when seen through the point of view of these participants. The historical trend has been to focus on the events of the siege of the Alamo through the experiences of its defenders. It is time that these issues which shed light on the experiences of the Mexicans under the command of Santa Anna, including their struggles, and the disagreements which occurred among Santa Anna's senior officers, are given the appropriate historical attention. It is by focusing on the events of the Battle of the Alamo through the experience of the Mexican troops, in addition to the experiences of the Texan rebels, that we can be able to gain a better understanding of not only the battle itself, but also be able to see why the Mexicans viewed the Battle of the Alamo as a Pyrrhic victory². It is important to address the issues which have not been addressed by other historians. This is important not simply to retell the story of the Alamo from a different point of view, but to look at what occurred through the perspective of the Mexicans and by doing so, be able to seek answers to the question of why did the Mexicans see the Battle of the Alamo as a loss, or a Pyrrhic victory. By answering this question the issues surrounding the Battle of the Alamo that other historians have not given the appropriate attention can be addressed. Also, by answering this question, insight can be gained into how the outcome of the Battle of the Alamo affected Santa Anna and his troops throughout the rest of the Texas campaign, because it was the "loss" that the troops felt they suffered that brought down their morale, and affected their motivation to fight later on in the Texan campaign, thus leading to their loss at San Jacinto.

The Battle of the Alamo took place from February 23 to March 6, 1836. The Alamo served as a fort which blocked one of two entrances into Texas from Mexico, and was also a way to alert the Texan settlements of enemy attack.

James Clinton Neill was placed in command of the Alamo, and was considered to be the logical choice because of his artillery experience and his regular army commission. ³ The main problem at the Alamo was its lack of supplies and it was this, coupled with the lack of reinforcements which would eventually cause the Alamo to fall to Santa Anna. Evidence of this lack of supplies can be seen in a letter Neill wrote to General Sam Houston in which he stated: "Unless we are reinforced and victualled, we must become an easy prey to the enemy, in case of attack." ⁴ It was soon after this that Houston ordered that the Alamo be abandoned and on January 19, sent James Bowie to carry out this order. Upon his arrival at the Alamo, Bowie was impressed by how those who were there worked to turn the Alamo into a fort, and it was then that he stated that he would rather "die in these ditches" ⁵ before he would give up the post.

On February 3, Texas governor Henry Smith sent William Barret Travis and his troops to the Alamo and five days later on February 8, David Crockett arrived with volunteers from the United States. When Neill left on furlough on February 14, he placed Travis in charge as post commander, but this caused resentment among the volunteer troops who wanted Bowie to be placed in charge. As a result, a compromise was reached in which Travis would command the regular army men and Bowie the volunteers. Also, both men would sign all orders and correspondence until Neill returned. ⁶

Those who were at the Alamo underestimated Santa Anna and felt that the Mexican troops would be unable to reach the Alamo until March 15, and as a result they were caught off guard when Santa Anna and his troops arrived on February 23. Santa Anna demanded that the Alamo surrender, but instead of conceding to this, Travis responded by firing a cannonball at Santa Anna's troops. The next day Travis took full command of the Alamo because Bowie became ill and was bedridden. Upon taking command, Travis swore "Victory or death" ⁷ and promised that he would "never surrender or retreat." ⁸

On March 5 Santa Anna announced to his troops that they would attack the following day. For his troops this was a surprise because the surrender of the Alamo seemed to be imminent due to its crumbling walls and lack of supplies. While some of his troops objected to the plan, Santa Anna ignored them, and during the early hours of March 6, Santa Anna attacked from four directions. During the attack, Travis was one of the first to die. Those in the Alamo soon retreated to the officers' quarters where they engaged the Mexicans in hand to hand combat. It was here where Bowie died. The chapel was the last part of the Alamo to fall and those defenders, who survived, were executed in accordance with Santa Anna's orders. ⁹ In total, all 189 defenders died at the Alamo, and of the approximate 6,000 Mexican troops, about 600 were wounded or died in the siege. ¹⁰

History teaches us that when we look to the past, we must look at it from all possible points of view in order to understand the entire story that the past is

trying to tell. Most accounts of the Alamo tell the story from the Texan point of view and more often than not, the Mexican side of the story is barely touched upon. This has resulted in the mythologization of the Battle of the Alamo that exists today which includes Davy Crockett bravely dying in battle fighting the Mexicans and William Barret Travis drawing the line in the sand for his troops to cross if they chose to remain with him to defend the Alamo. It is the mythologization of the Battle of the Alamo which has greatly contributed to what the Alamo has come to symbolize for many people today. The Battle of the Alamo has come to symbolize American freedom and liberty and "Remember the Alamo" has become not only a national slogan, but a pop culture phenomenon ¹¹. The problem with this is that when the time comes to remember the Alamo, what people remember is incorrect. People remember only that which has been turned into a media circus by the presentation of the Alamo story by companies and actors such as Walt Disney and John Wayne. Richard R. Flores discusses this in his article *Memory-Place, Meaning, and the Alamo*. In this article he discusses what he remembers learning about the Alamo as a child; that the Alamo was "the site where legends fell in martyrdom for my freedom. Bowie. Travis. Crockett. Texan heroes all of them." ¹²

These presentations do little to offer accurate contributions to what actually occurred at the Alamo, and only serve to help feed the myths that already exist. These myths only help to shroud the truth of what occurred at the Alamo in a cloak of mystery, and the truth needs to be uncovered. The importance of this is not merely to satisfy our curiosity of what occurred in the past, but to have a better knowledge of what occurred and to gain insight into how what took place laid the groundwork for what happened later on, as well as to see the impact it has had on society today. The only way to uncover the truth of the Battle of the Alamo is by looking at the battle from not only the perspective of the Texans, but the Mexicans as well. It is by looking at the Battle of the Alamo through the eyes of the Mexicans who were there that we can come to learn how they felt about what occurred and why they viewed the Alamo as a Pyrrhic victory.

Few historians have taken the viewpoint of the Battle of the Alamo as a Pyrrhic victory. While the Mexicans won the Battle, the troops under Santa Anna felt that the battle was a loss for them due to the number of lives lost, and the fact that the losses they suffered could have been avoided. Most of what has been said about the Battle of the Alamo has been written so that it tells the story as it occurred from the Texan side. Little of what has been written discusses in detail the battle from the Mexican point of view. The way most historians have written about the Battle of the Alamo is that it was a loss for the Texans and a victory for the Mexicans. One example which presents this view is *Battle of the Alamo*, a documentary that was made for the Discovery Channel. This documentary tries to offer a balanced account of what occurred. It makes use of several sources for the Texan side; however its main source for the portrayal of the Mexican side of the Battle is the diary by José Enrique de la Peña ¹³. Although the de la Peña diary is a valuable source, other sources need to be consulted in order to get a better idea as to what the Mexican side

of the battle was really like. While the documentary also makes note of the fact that there was confusion within the Mexican camp, it does not however, go on to point out how that confusion affected the troops and would ultimately be one of the factors that would be responsible for causing the losses the Mexican troops suffered.

In his book *The Texas Revolutionary Experience: A Political and Social History, 1835-1836*, Paul D. Lack makes the argument that the events of the Battle of the Alamo and the Texas campaign have been mythologized ¹⁴. Lack also talks about the efforts of the Texan campaign as being “wrecked by internal conflict, racial bias, personal ambition, and a nearly overwhelming individualism that plagued this revolution from its 1835 beginnings through the autumn of 1836.” ¹⁵ Although he mentions all of these issues, he discusses them from only the Texan side. While this book has addressed the problems that the Texans experienced, Lack reached the conclusion that the Texan campaign was not really a revolution, and also fails to discuss in depth the views of the Mexicans about the Battle and the issues which were problems for the Mexican troops.

In his book *Texian Iliad: A Military History of the Texas Revolution, 1835-1836*, Stephen Hardin offers a well analyzed account of the strategies of both the Texans and the Mexicans, as well as a well balanced account of what happened at the Alamo. Although his work is a well documented history of what happened at the Battle of the Alamo, like the other works mentioned, it fails to truly address the problems of the Mexican troops and why the soldiers under Santa Anna's command came to view the battle as not a victory but a loss.

José Enrique de la Peña was a captain who received a field commission as a lieutenant colonel at the start of the Texas campaign. De la Peña has been considered by historians to be an angry person. Much of this anger was directed towards the Mexican political and military establishment rather than the Texan rebels. ¹⁶ While one would think that because of this he was opposed to the campaign against the rebels, he in fact believed the campaign was necessary “in order to prevent not only dismemberment but also dishonor for the Mexican nation.” ¹⁷ The diary which he kept throughout the Mexican campaign in Texas provides a firsthand insight into what the experience of the Mexican troops was like during the siege. While the de la Peña diary is a key source of information, it is also the source of information about the Alamo that has been considered to be the most controversial, and as a result, there have been various debates on the authenticity of the document itself as well as the credibility of what the diary itself says.

In his diary, de la Peña offers an explanation in his prologue as to why he wrote the diary and published it. In the prologue to his diary, de la Peña states:

The diversity of opinions expressed
concerning the Texas campaign; the

accumulation of lies told to falsify the events, published in national as well as international newspapers, but especially in the latter, and the cheap adulation have rendered to the men least deserving of it; the ignorance, stupidity, and cruelty displayed by the ministry and the commander in chief of this war; the honor of the army, unjustly censured even by its own members, who without adequate knowledge have superficially or inaccurately passed judgement; the honor and self-esteem of every military man who participated, so deeply hurt by the inaccuracies in the official records as to dates, deeds, and places; and above all the honor of the country, deeply compromised by its leaders and no less by the truth and the atrocity of its crimes – these are the principal causes which compelled me to publish the diary I kept during the time I served in this unfortunate campaign. ¹⁸

The explanation which de la Peña gives is that he is trying to set the record straight about what happened during the Mexican campaign in Texas. By writing his diary he hoped to return honor to the men in the military as well the honor of Mexico and its people. De la Peña had no ulterior motives to publishing his diary. He would receive no monetary gain from it, would garner no public status from it, and more likely than not he would have made enemies for himself by publishing his diary. De la Peña mentioned this in the prologue to his diary as well.

I have heard some military personnel, especially those with rank say that whatever happened in Texas should remain buried in the deepest silence because it is shameful;... Others who have heard about my diary, have been cruel enough to say that for writing it alone, I should be condemned to isolation in a fortress, and when they see that I have published it, they will no doubt think that I should be shot. ¹⁹

It is by stating these facts, that de la Peña gives proof that there is no reason for him to lie in what he writes within the pages of his diary, thus giving support to the document's credibility as fact.

In his book, *Sleuthing the Alamo: Davy Crockett's Last Stand and Other*

Myths of the Texas Revolution, James E. Crisp gives evidence which supports the authenticity of the de la Peña diary. In the chapter on the diary itself, Crisp discusses Bill Groneman's book *Defense of a Legend: Crockett and the de la Peña Diary*. Groneman's book challenged not only the accuracy of the de la Peña diary but its authenticity as well, arguing that the diary was a forgery.²⁰ According to Crisp, Groneman's book claimed that "the de la Peña manuscript contained telltale anachronisms indicating a forgery".²¹ Crisp however, goes on to tell how after reading Groneman's book and researching the claims Groneman made, that he was able to dispel these claims and give proof that the diary was accurate and authentic.

It is in the fourth chapter of his diary that de la Peña relates the events of the Battle of the Alamo. Along with explaining what occurred during the battle, de la Peña also offers his own opinions about what happened and why what happened occurred the way it did. It is through the opinions and beliefs that de la Peña expressed, that we can gain a better perspective of the Battle of the Alamo from the point of view of the Mexican troops. In his diary, de la Peña discusses the events of February 23 when Santa Anna's troops came upon the Alamo. He also discusses how Santa Anna refused to enter into any agreements with the rebels and required their unconditional surrender, something that the rebels would be unwilling to agree to. Little else is discussed about the events of the siege between February 23 and March 5. The primary focus of de la Peña's writings in this section of his diary is what occurred behind the scenes during the siege within the Mexican camp.

Most of the Mexicans involved in the battle were more than willing to serve under Santa Anna in his Texas campaign. To these soldiers, it was an honor to defend their country and they were of the belief that their cause was a just one. Much of this belief was spurred by speeches given by Santa Anna and the effect of what was said was clearly evident among the troops:

'Soldiers, our comrades have been shamefully sacrificed at Anáhuac, Goliad, and Béjar, and you are those destined to punish these murderers. My friends: we will march as long as the interests of the nation that we serve demand'...This address was received enthusiastically, but the army needed no enticement; knowing that it was about to engage in the defense of the country and to avenge less fortunate comrades was enough for its ardor to become as great as the noble and just cause it was about to defend.²²

Many of the troops however, also felt that because the Alamo was only occupied by a small number of people, that there would be no need to have a

great loss of life, especially since the Alamo held no political or military importance for Mexico. It is here in his diary that de la Peña suggests that had it not been for the fall of the Alamo, the Mexican troops would have been able to surprise and defeat General Houston.²³ If the events of the siege had occurred differently, and Santa Anna had in fact left only a small force to keep watch over the Alamo, he most likely would have defeated Houston at San Jacinto, because it was the fall of the Alamo that served as the rallying force that drove the Texan rebels to defeat Santa Anna there.

Disagreements arose over some issues among Santa Anna's officers. Often times these disagreements were with the orders that Santa Anna himself had given. Two examples of this are the council of war that took place on March 4, and the discussion of what would be done with any prisoners of war. While these disagreements were present and served to show the weakness of the officers as a united group, they were never made known to Santa Anna because the officers knew that their commander "would not tolerate opposition, his sole pleasure being in hearing what met with his wishes, while discarding all admonitions that deviated from those wishes,"²⁴ It was during the council of war that Santa Anna made the argument about the necessity of making an assault on the Alamo. It was also this issue which the officers disagreed upon:

During a council of war held on the 4th of March at the commander in chief's quarters, he expounded on the necessity of making the assault. Generals Sesma, Cos, and Castrillón, Colonels Almonte, Duque, Amat, Romero, and Salas, and the interim mayor of San Luis were present and gave their consent...Some, though approving this proposal in the presence of the commander in chief, disagreed in his absence.²⁵

There were several officers who shared the sentiments of the attack being unnecessary since the surrender of the Alamo was almost imminent due to the fact that the Texans were lacking in supplies. One officer, who like de la Peña disagreed with the necessity of the attack, was Captain José Juan Sánchez Navarro y Estrada. He discusses this in his journal when he states: "It is said that His Excellency favors an assault, while everyone feels the opposite...Why is it Sr. Santa Anna always wants his triumphs and defeats to be marked by blood and tears!"²⁶

The second issue which the officers disagreed upon was what should be done with prisoners of war. While some felt that any prisoners should be executed, others felt this action to be too extreme, but this argument proved to have no effect, and in the end all prisoners were executed in accordance with Santa Anna's wishes:

The subject of what to do with prisoners was brought up, in case the enemy surrendered before the assault, the example of Arredondo was cited; during the Spanish rule he had hanged eight hundred or more colonists after having triumphed in a military action, and this conduct was taken as a model. General Castrillón and Colonel Almonte then voiced principles regarding the rights of men, philosophical and humane principles which did them honor; they reiterated these later when General Urrea's prisoners were ordered executed, but their arguments were fruitless.²⁷

A reason for Santa Anna being so willing to adopt the methods used by Arredondo as a model is that Santa Anna served under Arredondo when he was still a young officer and was greatly impressed by the methods Arredondo employed. De la Peña, however was not like his commander in chief and felt that to use such methods against the enemy would not only be unnecessary, but counterproductive as well.²⁸

The main reason for the assault on the Alamo in 1836 was General Cos' defeat at San Antonio in December 1835. This defeat resulted in a large loss of life, and caused the Mexican army much anguish. De la Peña suggests that it is because of this that Santa Anna pursued the assault on the Alamo because for him "To retake San Antonio, the historical capital of Texas, was an essential step in erasing the stain left by Cos' defeat."²⁹ A second reason for Santa Anna's decision to attack the Alamo may have been a statement made by Travis to his troops in the Alamo that if they did not receive food, munitions, and reinforcements by March 5, that they would either surrender or attempt to escape during the night. If this is true, then this would have spurred Santa Anna to move forward with an assault because it was thought by some that "he wanted to cause a sensation and would have regretted taking the Alamo without clamor and without bloodshed."³⁰

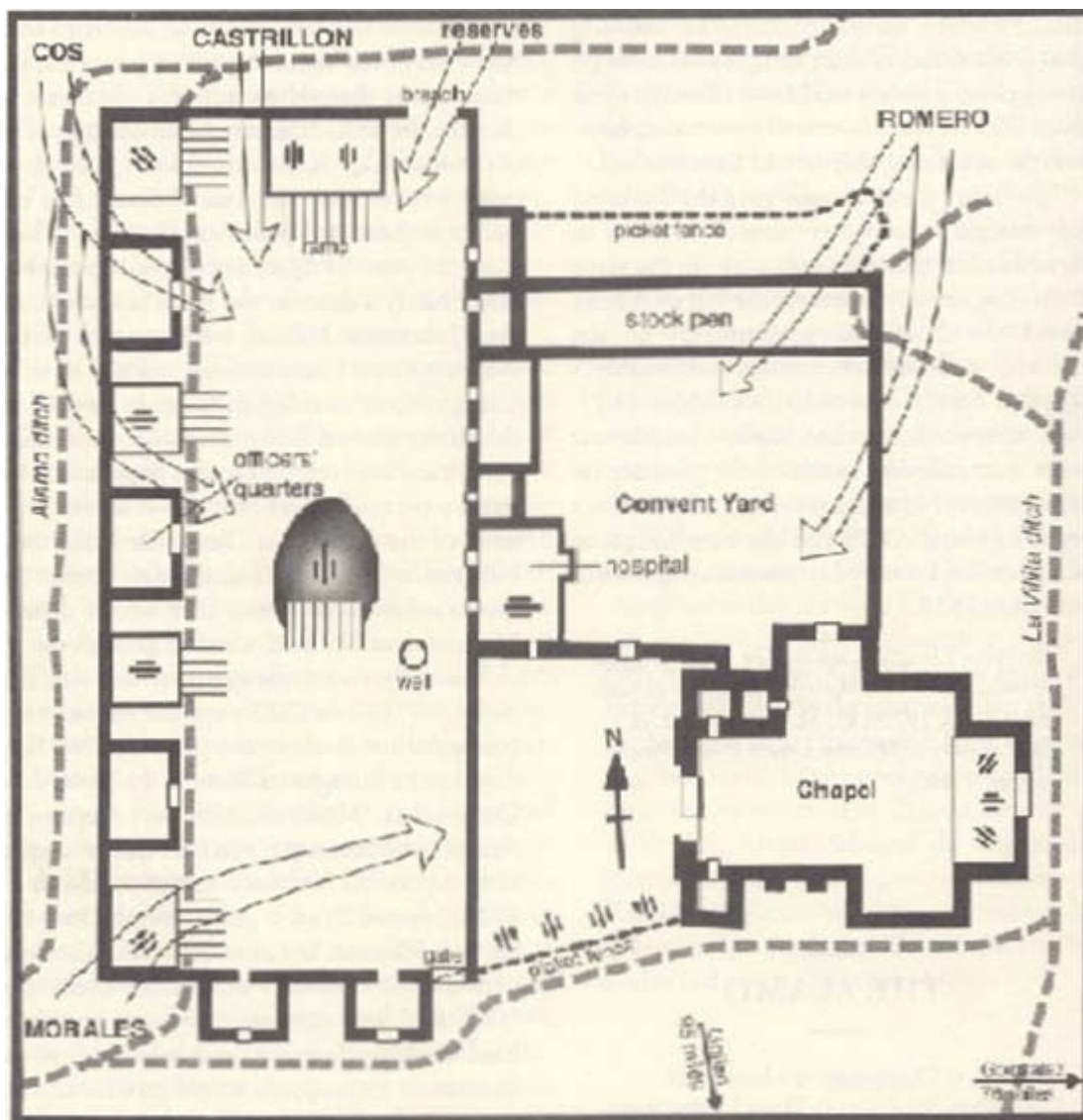
The military strategy that Santa Anna put into place for the attack on March 6 is of great importance. It was this strategy which was a major factor in the Battle turning out the way in which it did. Santa Anna issued the order for the attack on March 5. He issued the order to the generals, chiefs of sections, and the commanding officers. It was in the attack order that Santa Anna gave general instructions to his officers about the plan for the attack.

The time has come to strike a decisive blow upon the enemy occupying the Fortress of the Alamo. Consequently, His Excellency, the General-in-chief, has directed that,

tomorrow, at 4 o'clock A.M., the columns of attack shall be stationed at musket-shot distance from the first entrenchments, ready for the charge, which shall commence at a signal to be given with the bugle, from the Northern Battery...The troops composing the columns of attack will turn in to sleep at dark, to be in readiness to move at 12 o'clock at night...As soon as the moon raises, the centre companies of the Active Battalion of San Luis will abandon the points they are now occupying on the line, in order to have time to prepare. ³¹

Santa Anna made the decision to use four columns of troops for the attack. General Cos, Colonel Duque, Colonel Romero, and Colonel Morales each were placed in charge of one of the four columns. Santa Anna chose to command the Sapper Battalion that would be part of the reserve himself, but left the responsibility of the Battalion's formation up to Colonel Amat. The way in which each column attacked and the men who made up each of the columns were also key elements to the success of Santa Anna's strategy. When the assault on the Alamo began on March 6, all the columns were able to reach the walls of the Alamo except for the third. The third column was held back by cannonfire and forced to find another entrance. It was then, upon seeing the difficulties that the third column was having, that Santa Anna gave the order for Colonel Amat to move in with the reserves. It was also at this time that Santa Anna also ordered into battle his general staff and everyone who was at his side. ³²

Figure 1: Floor plan of the Alamo with indications to how Santa Anna's troops attacked.⁶⁶



Four columns were chosen for the attack. The first, under command of General Cos and made up of a battalion from Aldama and three companies from the San Luis contingent, was to move against the western front which faced the city. The second, under Colonel Duque and made up of the battalion under his command and three other companies from San Luis was entrusted with a like mission against the front facing the north...These two columns had a total strength of seven hundred men. The third, under command of Colonel Romero and made up of two companies of fusiliers from Matamoros and Jiménez battalions, had less strength, for it only came up to three hundred or more men; it was to attack the east

front...The fourth column, under command of Colonel Morales and made up of over a hundred chasseurs, was entrusted with taking the entrance to the fort and the entrenchments defending it. The Sapper Battalion and five grenadier companies made up the reserve of four hundred men. ³³

The end of the battle was where the most life was lost and the most blood was shed for both the Mexicans and the Texan rebels. As the Mexican soldiers would enter into rooms where it appeared that the rebels were surrendering, the soldiers would be attacked, and as a result of this the anger of the Mexican troops towards the men defending the Alamo was renewed. The order was given that no one other than women were to be spared, and it is de la Peña's belief that had this order not been given, much of the Mexican blood which was spilled could have been spared. ³⁴ The attack finally came to an end at approximately six o'clock in the morning, and lasted no longer than ninety minutes. It was only after seeing the devastation among his own troops that Santa Anna addressed them, giving them praise for their courage and thanked them on behalf of their country. ³⁵

The death of Davy Crockett, and what de la Peña says about it has led to much controversy over the course of time. While some argue that Crockett died fighting during the battle, what de la Peña states in his diary goes to suggest that Crockett did not die fighting, but that he in fact surrendered along with six other survivors and was executed by Santa Anna after the battle had already ended. ³⁶ Santa Anna's order to execute Crockett caused outrage among his officers and they did not support this order. Nonetheless, Crockett was executed when

Several officers who were around the president and who, perhaps, had not been present during the moment of danger, became noteworthy by an infamous deed, surpassing the soldiers in cruelty. They thrust themselves forward, in order to flatter their commander, and with swords in hand, fell upon these unfortunate, defenseless men just as a tiger leaps upon his prey. Though tortured before they were killed, these unfortunates died without complaining and without humiliating themselves before their torturers. ³⁷

While de la Peña was present at the time of the execution, he turned away when it occurred because he did not want "to witness such a barbarous scene."

³⁸

Many of the Mexican soldiers who fell at the Alamo were buried by their brothers-in-arms, and days after the assault, many questions still remained among the survivors including who was to blame for the loss of life that Mexico had suffered. One suggestion of whom the blame for the deaths of the Mexican soldiers would fall upon is General Ramírez y Sesma. The reasoning for this being that General Ramírez y Sesma was advised to enter the town of Béjar at a time when there were only ten men inside the Alamo, and he had failed to do so. Had he done as he was advised, those who were still in Béjar would have been unable to seek refuge in the Alamo, "thus avoiding the painful catastrophe we witnessed."³⁹ There were also many other major questions which were left unanswered after the attack. Included in these questions were:

It was questioned why a breach had not been opened? What had been the use of bringing up the artillery if it were not to be used when necessity required,...Why, before agreeing on the sacrifice, which was great indeed, had no one borne in mind that we had no means at our disposal to save our wounded? Why were our lives so uselessly sacrificed in a deserted and totally hostile country if our losses could not be replaced?⁴⁰

The blame for agreeing to go forth with the attack when there were no means present to save those who were wounded rests solely on the shoulders of Santa Anna himself. This blame lies with Santa Anna because it was during the council of war when the officers and the interim mayor of San Luis gave their consent to go ahead with the assault, no mention was ever made to them about the fact that there would be no field hospitals or surgeons for the wounded, meaning that for some, it would have been easier for them to die than be wounded.⁴¹ Had the officers and the mayor of San Luis been made aware of this information, it can only be assumed that they would not have given their consent to go ahead with the attack on the Alamo.

De la Peña's belief that the reason for the number of Mexican lives lost had to do with Santa Anna's order to spare no one but the women reflects the sentiments of many of the soldiers who survived the siege. For many of the troops, although they had been victorious in battle, the Battle of the Alamo was not considered a victory. In the minds of these soldiers the amount of life lost on the side of the Mexicans was great and unnecessary. This was also what influenced Santa Anna to alter the numbers of Mexican soldiers as well as the Texan rebels who were killed in his reports.

According to documents found among these men and to subsequent information, the force within the Alamo consisted of 182 men; but according to the number by us it was 253.

Doubtless the total did not exceed either of these two, and in any case the number is less than referred to by the commander in chief in his communiqué, which contends that in the excavations and the trenches alone, more than 600 bodies had been buried. What was the object of this misrepresentation? Some believe it was to give greater importance to the episode, others that it was done to excuse our losses and to make it less painful. ⁴²

It was clear that for the surviving troops, the loss of their comrades was difficult, and the circumstances surrounding this massive loss, made it an inexcusable one. However, while the losses suffered by the Mexicans may have been inexcusable and avoidable had other actions been taken against the Texans, once Santa Anna put his strategy into play, the losses he suffered were inevitable due to the problems the Mexican troops were faced with.

There were various problems that Santa Anna and his troops encountered throughout the battle. While any one of these problems on their own may not have had much effect on the troops or the losses that they suffered, when put together, the only foreseeable outcome was what actually occurred. It was what actually occurred that resulted in the greatest problem of all for the Mexican camp: the loss of life they suffered. The first problem which the troops had was figuring out the method in which to carry out the plan that Santa Anna had for attacking the Alamo. The troops lacked weapons and even though the field pieces and artillery would not arrive for another day or so, the order for the attack was still given on the 5th of March. ⁴³ To compensate for the lack of available weaponry, "the columns had been ordered to provide themselves with crow-bars, hatchets, and ladders." ⁴⁴ This order did not serve to help the troops however, because "not until the last moment did it become obvious that all this was insufficient and that the ladders were poorly put together." ⁴⁵ The losses suffered by the Mexicans also hindered their own success because "The few poor ladders that we were bringing had not arrived, because their bearers had either perished on the way or had escaped. Only one was seen of all those that were planned." ⁴⁶ Had the troops had enough of the necessary weapons, they would have been better prepared to defend themselves, and would possibly been able to minimize the losses they suffered.

A second problem for the Mexican troops was that they had no officers from the engineers' corps present at the siege. These officers had remained in Mexico, and without them Santa Anna had to rely on the personnel from the Sapper Battalion to estimate the strength and defenses of the Alamo. This alone however, was not a great problem since those in the Sapper Battalion who were charged with carrying out this task were capable of doing so with some degree of accuracy. It was when this lack of the appropriate personnel

became coupled with the lack of communication that there was a larger problem at hand.

To whom was this sacrifice useful...It was paid for dearly, though it could have been otherwise had these men been required to... communicate to their comrades the fate that awaited them if they did not desist from their unjust cause. They could have informed their comrades of the force and resources that the enemy had. ⁴⁷

This lack of communication between the troops contributed to the losses that Santa Anna suffered moreso than the lack of the officers from the engineers' corp. Because the appropriate personnel was not available to give the most accurate estimate of the strength and defenses of the Alamo, the communication among the troops was of paramount importance to ensure that the attack went as planned and to minimize the amount of life lost. It was because this communication was not there, that the troops suffered the losses they did.

The level of the preparedness of the Mexican troops was a larger problem than just their weapons. The ladders themselves were a significant issue because with the plan of sending twenty eight ladders into the siege and so many soldiers to use them, it raises questions about how effective this type of attack would be. ⁴⁸ Also, Santa Anna gives an insight into what the level of training was for many of his troops by specifying in his military order from March 5 that the soldiers would need to use chin straps on their hats and that the soldiers should be wearing shoes or sandals. ⁴⁹ By saying this in his military order, he gives an insight into the low level of training that his troops had received. Had his soldiers received higher levels of training, it would have been unnecessary for Santa Anna to specify an order for something his soldiers should have already known to do. Beyond the training of the soldiers themselves, Santa Anna's troops were also under prepared in the amount of food that they brought with them for the campaign. In a letter that he had written to General Filisola on February 27, Santa Anna writes: "Your Excellency will command the Purveyor General to gather all of the food supplies and to march immediately, avoiding any delays that might hamper the services of the Nation, as these troops are lacking in food." ⁵⁰ The shortage of food is an important factor for the Mexican camp because it was on February 27, four days after arriving in San Antonio and still several days before the actual attack, that Santa Anna addresses this issue. Without food, it would be difficult for the troops to regain their strength after the march into San Antonio in order to be ready for battle. Another problem with this was that there was also a shortage of funds. In the same letter to General Filisola, Santa Anna stated

"Your Excellency will also order that the Treasury, with the Commissary,

take the lead with forced marches, and escorted by a convoy, as there is a very urgent need for money.”⁵¹ This is important, because had there been enough funds for his troops, Santa Anna would have been able to purchase not only the food that his soldiers needed, but weapons as well.

Besides not being prepared for such a campaign because of a lack of weapons, food, and money, the troops also did not have the appropriate medical staff necessary to care for those who would be wounded in battle. This was cause for much upset among the troops after the battle. Carlos Castañeda was a soldier who published an account of the Texas campaign in 1837. He discusses the results of the lack of proper medical staff and facilities in his account.

Three hundred were left dead in the field and more than a hundred of the wounded died afterwards as a result of the lack of proper medical attention and medical facilities in spite of the fact that their injuries were not serious.⁵²

This lack of facilities for those who would need medical attention is one of the largest contributing factors to the number of Mexican troops that died. To the troops, those who died were not considered the only victims of the attack. Some survivors would come to view those who were killed as lucky when compared to those who were only wounded. In his journal, Captain José Juan Sánchez Navarro y Estrada talks about the wounded as though they were in a worse state than those who were killed in battle.

There are no hospitals, medicines, or doctors; and the condition of the wounded is such as to cause pity. They have no mattresses on which to lie or blankets with which to cover themselves, in spite of the fact that on entering Béxar, we took from the enemy the remnants of three or four stores and that one has been set up and called the Government Store, where everything is sold at a high price and for cash.⁵³

It was conditions such as these which would contribute to the mindset of the Mexican troops about the outcome of the Battle of the Alamo as more of a loss than a victory, as well as a shameful event in their nation's history.

The way the Mexican troops themselves felt about the attack on the Alamo and its aftermath have not been given much attention by historians. Many of the troops after the battle felt that the attack on the Alamo, although it was a victory, was not worth the lives that were lost in the process. In his account of

what happened at the Alamo, Carlos Castañeda refers to it as a massacre.

One hundred and eight-three unfortunate wretches who were sacrificed there cost us the lives of over 400 Mexicans! He would have us believe that 'life was guaranteed to the enemy on the condition that they surrender their arms and take an oath never to take them up again against Mexico.' There never was such a promise made. From the moment we entered Béxar, the enemy was asked to surrender at discretion to which the enemy never consented. Let them deny this fact if they dare; let them deny the fact that a red flag was raised on the steeple of the cathedral of that city as a sign that no quarter would be granted and that everything would be carried by fire and sword. ⁵⁴

Like Castañeda, many other Mexican soldiers were angered by Santa Anna's twisting the truth of what occurred in order to justify the losses that the Mexican army suffered at the Alamo. Many felt that by altering the number who were killed, Santa Anna disgraced the honor of the men who died in the battle merely to be able to further his own cause. The morale of the army as a whole was effected by the results of the battle of the Alamo. The losses suffered there affected the soldiers so much that:

The morale of the army had changed completely since the taking of the Alamo, because of the errors committed in that undertaking and the sufferings they were undergoing and had undergone en route; on the march the soldier could count only on half his rations and the officer had only enough to pay to provide himself with food, which was sold at prices quoted in gold by the very people who were responsible for providing these necessities. ⁵⁵

Most of the soldiers were of the same opinion that the amount of blood shed at the Alamo on both the sides of the Texans and the Mexicans was useless and unnecessary, yet it appeared as though the losses meant nothing to Santa Anna so long as the ends justified the means. General Vincente Filisola, Santa Anna's second in command was one of the soldiers who felt this way, and expressed this in his account of what occurred during the Texan campaign that was published in 1849.

In our opinion all that bloodshed of our soldiers as well as of our enemies was useless, having as its only objective an inconsiderate, childish, and culpable vanity so that it might be proclaimed that Béxar had been reconquered by force of arms and that in the attack many men had died on both sides. ⁵⁶

It was as a result of the losses the troops suffered that many of the men under Santa Anna's command began to develop contempt for him and began to view what happened at the Alamo as an event which was a disgrace that had tarnished the name of the Mexican nation.

How much more glorious would have been the good name of Mexico if instead of so much blood and so many dead, the lives of the unbridled and ungrateful enemies of the Alamo...had been saved and the men sent to Mexico to engage in public works that would have in some degree indemnified the expenses that they had caused! And how great would not have been the fame of the same general in chief when without the loss of a single soldier and without any remorse whatsoever for the blood spilled later in San Jacinto, if he had brought back to his country that vast territory that the ungrateful protégés were trying to usurp. ⁵⁷

To many of his troops it seemed as though Santa Anna's reasoning for going ahead with the attack on the Alamo, even when he knew what the outcome might be for his soldiers, was to further his fame and glory. He showed no regard for the loss of so many lives and it was not until he saw firsthand the devastation among his ranks that he thanked his troops on behalf of their country and gave them praise. Yet even after seeing the losses his troops suffered, Santa Anna still failed to see the Alamo as a loss for Mexico.

One of the biggest issues which Santa Anna's men disagreed with him on was the way in which he falsified the numbers in his reports back to Mexico about the outcome of the siege. In the letter that he wrote to the Secretary of War and Navy, General Jose Maria Torre on March 6, Santa Anna stated

Among the corpses are those of Bowie and Travis, who styled themselves Colonels, and also that of Crockett, and several leading men, who had entered the Fortress with

dispatches from their Convention. We lost about 70 men killed and 300 wounded, among whom 25 are officers. ⁵⁸

The issue that this statement raises is the question of what were Santa Anna's motives for falsifying the numbers of troops that were killed and wounded in battle. Not only did Santa Anna change the numbers of the losses of his own troops, he also falsified the number of Texans that were killed as well. In the report sent back to Mexico, Santa Anna claimed that over 600 Texans were killed in the battle. Like de la Peña in his account of what happened, Carlos Castañeda would also set the record straight about the number of Texans who were killed.

In the report made on that date to the supreme government by His Excellency it is stated that more than 600 of the enemy were killed. I myself wrote that report and must now confess that I put down that number at the command of His Excellency. In stating the truth now, I must say that only 183 men were killed. I call upon the whole army to witness my statement. ⁵⁹

One reason for Santa Anna's falsifying the number of the Texans killed is that it would serve as a justification for the amount of lives that the Mexican army lost. Also, by altering the numbers of deaths the way he did, he also provided himself with a justification for why he handled the battle the way in which he did. He was also able to make it seem as though the troops who died did not die in vain, as was the commonly held sentiment of the surviving men who were part of the Texan Campaign.

The feelings of loss experienced by the Mexican troops are an important factor in the story of the Battle of the Alamo. It was this feeling of loss that brought down the morale of the troops and led to their viewing the battle, and eventually the entire Texas campaign as a disgrace for both the military and for Mexico. Many of the soldiers came to blame Santa Anna for this loss, claiming that had he been willing to listen to what his officers had to say and considered alternative strategies, the outcome of the battle would have been much different. Many of the troops, like de la Peña, place blame on Santa Anna because he was aware of how unprepared the Mexican camp was for this battle, and the troops felt that because he had this knowledge, Santa Anna should not have given the order for the attack on the Alamo.

To Santa Anna, the losses suffered did not matter, for him the only thing that was important was victory, and he was willing to do whatever it took to obtain the victory he desired.

The Mexican rank and file, said de la Peña, saw the battle of the Alamo as a 'defeat' because of the many men who died for the vanity of a commander who cared nothing for their lives. ⁶⁰

Santa Anna was a very controversial political figure. He ruled as a caudillo ⁶¹ and the way in which he conducted the Texas campaign is a reflection of this. The most obvious example of this being Santa Anna's refusing to listen to the suggestions which his senior officers offered him throughout the campaign. To some, the way in which he conducted the campaign itself was enough evidence to show how unnecessary it was.

Santa Anna's careless delay in dispatching his troops after the battle to engage Sam Houston's army, thought de la Peña, proved how needless the premature assault on the Alamo had been. ⁶²

It was not until Santa Anna had received news of the victories of General Urrea along the Texan coastal plain that Santa Anna had decided to have his troops that remained in San Antonio pursue the remaining Texan rebels. Even so, the troops which he finally sent were sent off with inadequate rations, which to some showed signs of incompetence among high ranking officials. ⁶³ The fact that Santa Anna waited so long to dispatch troops in pursuit of Sam Houston's army raises the question of what was the purpose of the attack on the Alamo if there were no intentions of immediately pursuing any remaining rebels after the battle was over. By doing so that would have certainly assured Santa Anna a victory in his Texas campaign, something which he desperately wanted, yet he waited until hearing word of the status of General Urrea and his troops before deciding to move on from San Antonio. Santa Anna's waiting to hear of the status of General Urrea's troops leads one to think that his motives in attacking the Alamo had nothing to do with trying to suppress the Texan rebels, but that his motives were selfish in nature.

For Santa Anna, the battle of the Alamo was driven much by revenge. In December of 1835, General Cos had been defeated at the Alamo by the Texan rebels. This defeat resulted in a large loss of life for the Mexican troops, and like the battle of the Alamo that would occur only several months later, was viewed as a disgrace for Mexico. This loss was a driving force for Santa Anna's decision to attack the Alamo in March of 1836. Another motive for Santa Anna's decision to attack the Alamo was that it would further his fame and glory. This motive for the attack gives insight into the narcissistic nature of Santa Anna's personality. For Santa Anna, all that was important was the victory, not the means by which it was obtained or what ill effects came as a result. The narcissistic nature of Santa Anna's personality also gives insight into why he was so resistant to listen to the suggestions of his senior officers. In his mind,

Santa Anna felt that his way was the best and only way in which the Mexican army could succeed in the campaign against Texas. Examples of this can be seen in the way Santa Anna reacted when officers did not agree with his decision to spare no one but the women and when officers objected to the order of execution for Davy Crockett. It would be Santa Anna's narcissistic personality that would act as a contributing factor to his being not only unable, but also unwilling to see the Battle of the Alamo as his soldiers did, a loss.

Even though Santa Anna's troops saw the Battle of the Alamo as a loss, and the reasons for this were apparent at the time, Santa Anna still viewed the battle as a victory, because for him to see the battle as a loss was not an option which he would consider. Even when the battle had ended and he saw how his troops had suffered and the losses that they incurred, his response was to thank them for their service to their country and to praise them for their courage, not to acknowledge the losses suffered and consider how these losses affected his men. It was imperative to Santa Anna that the battle was a victory because many people were questioning his tactics and his methods of leadership in Mexico. It was the way in which he ruled that would eventually be responsible for his being exiled three different times. In order to compensate and make the battle to appear as a victory, Santa Anna took several steps. These steps included Santa Anna ordering Carlos Castañeda to alter the numbers of Texans and Mexicans who were wounded and killed in the report about the battle that was sent back to Mexico. By increasing the number of Texans who were killed and by decreasing the number of Mexican wounded and dead, Santa Anna laid the groundwork for the battle and the entire campaign in Texas to be considered a worthwhile and successful effort. This effort however would be unsuccessful due to the loss at San Jacinto. It was the loss at San Jacinto that cost the Mexican army the Texas campaign, and had the Battle of the Alamo been conducted differently, it was a loss that could have been avoided.

Santa Anna ignored many of the issues that his soldiers did not at the end of the battle. Santa Anna was well aware of how his soldiers felt about the results of the battle and was also well aware to the fact that his troops felt that the Alamo was not a victory for them, yet Santa Anna still saw the battle as a victory, often glorifying the sacrifice his fallen soldiers had made by saying how they gave their life for their country in his correspondence back to Mexico. To his troops however, this would not make up for the fact that their brothers-in-arms died needlessly. The way in which Santa Anna handled the Battle of the Alamo demonstrates several of his characteristic military strengths and weaknesses: "he was able to pull an army together quickly and with severely limited resources, but he also combined elaborate planning with slipshod and faulty execution."⁶⁴

It is perhaps because of the slipshod and faulty execution of his plans that Santa Anna felt compelled to portray the Battle of the Alamo as a victory when his own troops considered it a loss.

The Battle of the Alamo is no doubt an important part of history, and as Sam Houston said, we should "Remember the Alamo". The important thing however is that it is remembered correctly. If we are to remember it as it has been told to us, as a mythologized part of history shrouded in mystery, then what is the point of remembering it at all? The way in which the Alamo should be remembered is not as a tragedy for the Texans and a victory for the Mexicans. It should be and needs to be remembered for what it really was, Pyrrhic victory. Neither side won this battle. Both suffered terrible losses, and for the Mexicans it was ultimately what led to their downfall at the battle which would follow several weeks later at San Jacinto.

It is only by looking at the experiences of the Mexican soldiers that we can truly begin to grasp what the true story of the Alamo was. While some aspects of the story may forever be clouded by myth and legend, others, by examining the Mexican side of the battle, become clearer with this knowledge. While we may never learn the entire truth surrounding Davy Crockett's death or whether or not William Barret Travis actually drew the line in the sand, we can see that Santa Anna was immensely under prepared for this campaign and we can learn how his men who at the outset of the Texas campaign revered him and were willing to follow him wherever he went, at the conclusion of the Battle of the Alamo hated and despised him. Not only are we made aware of these issues by taking a look at the Mexican side of the Alamo, but we become conscious of the driving forces which brought about these issues and the effect these issues had not just on the Mexican troops, but the entire Texas campaign.

While the Battle of the Alamo has come to be symbolic of American freedom and liberty, it was a pointless battle, fought only to boost the ego of a narcissistic leader who craved fame and glory. The battle served no purpose to Santa Anna. It had no significance to Mexico militarily or politically, and as such was useless and unnecessary. In the end, the battle served only to cause death and destruction, as well hinder the morale of the Mexican troops. Although Santa Anna wanted his revenge for Cos' defeat only two months earlier, he failed to see that the costs of the battle would come to outweigh the results. Santa Anna lost almost 600 men at the battle, many of which resulted from his careless oversight to guarantee that there would be field surgeons and hospitals present within the Mexican camp to ensure that those who were wounded would receive the medical attention that they needed. These men, who died so needlessly, were only pawns to Santa Anna. To him they were merely things which he could command; he failed to see them for what they were. He failed to see his men as people with families and lives back in Mexico, that because of his decision to attack, they would never see again.

It is by looking at the first-hand accounts of Santa Anna's troops that the full scope of the Mexican side of the Battle of the Alamo can be seen. By looking at the diary of José Enrique de la Peña, the journal written by Carlos Castañeda, the writings of General Vicente Filisola, as well as the correspondence back to Mexico and the military orders that Santa Anna himself wrote throughout the

campaign, that we can see how the Mexican troops truly felt about the Battle of the Alamo. The fact of the matter is that while at the onset of the Texas campaign, many if not all of Santa Anna's men felt it was an honor for them to be able to serve their country and that their cause was just, by the end of the Battle of the Alamo, many of his men, came to feel as though the battle was an embarrassment and disgrace to Mexico. Many of Santa Anna's men also came to feel that by altering the numbers of the Mexicans who were lost in the battle, he not only did them an injustice, but disgraced the honor of their fallen brothers-in-arms.

The Battle of the Alamo, like many other things in history, can offer a valuable lesson. Not every battle results in a victory for someone and a loss for someone else. There are times, when for both sides, no matter what the outcome of the battle may be, there is no victory. Such was the case of the Battle of the Alamo. To the Texans, the loss was clear. For the Mexicans however, while the loss was clear to his soldiers, for Santa Anna himself, blinded by his quest for glory and revenge, the losses were never seen. This on its own was enough to affect the way in which the Mexicans would fight the rest of the Texan campaign. While the Texans learned from their loss, and were able to use it as their battle cry at San Jacinto, Santa Anna did not learn, or was unwilling to see the true outcome of the Alamo, and as a result, his troops never fully recovered from their loss and fell at San Jacinto.

Although we will never be able to know the entire truth of the events surrounding the Battle of the Alamo, we can expand upon what is already known. The experiences of the Mexican troops not only serve to enrich our understanding of the Alamo battle but to shed light on issues surrounding the battle which have not been previously addressed by historians. It is only by viewing the battle as a Pyrrhic victory that we can be able to see how Santa Anna's men felt about the battle. Santa Anna's opportunities for a much different outcome than what really occurred abounded up until he put his plan of attack into effect. His men were aware of this, including the fact that General Ramírez y Sesma failed to take the Alamo at a time when there were only ten men present. Santa Anna's men were willing to do as their commander-in-chief ordered, but had hoped to do so with a minimal loss of life, especially since they were aware of the weakened status of the Alamo due to its lack of supplies. It was not until that Santa Anna ordered that no one would be spared except the women that the troops realized that any hope they had of the battle ending with as little blood shed as possible was gone.

Many perspectives exist about the Battle of the Alamo. This, like the many other accounts that have been written by authors such as Stephen Hardin, James Crisp, and Paul D. Lack, offers a new insight into the events of the battle. However, it is up to the individual to take into consideration all of the different perspectives which have been presented throughout history in order to truly gain a more complete knowledge of the story of the Battle of the Alamo.

Mexicans, there are the facts. Judge for yourselves, and let your terrible verdict fall upon those who may deserve it. That to which I have been an eyewitness I have narrated faithfully, and that which I have not witnessed I have verified through the most circumspect and trustworthy men. If my sentiments do not please, my frankness will testify to the fact that at least I am honest, for I say what I feel and judge without prejudice and without fear of the hatred of those in power. ⁶⁵

About the Author

I am a senior history major with a minor in psychology. I am planning on attending graduate school for special education. I am also planning to eventually go on to pursue my PhD in history. My main areas of interest are British history in the Tudor-Stuart era and American history during the colonial period.

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Endnotes

1. Richard R. Flores, "The Alamo: Myth, Public History, and the Politics of Inclusion," *Radical History Review* 77 (2000): 93.
2. A Pyrrhic victory is a victory that is won by incurring terrible losses. This expression alludes to King Pyrrhus of Epirus, who defeated the Romans at Asculum in a.d. 279, but lost his best officers and many of his troops. Pyrrhus then said: "Another such victory and we are lost." In English the term was first recorded (used figuratively) in 1879., [dictionary.com]
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21. Crisp, 66.
22. De la Peña, 40.
23. De la Peña, 43.
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29. Crisp, 80.
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31. Hansen, 337-338.
32. De la Peña, 48-49.
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44. De la Peña, 48.
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47. De la Peña, 54.
48. Hansen, 354.
49. Hansen, 354.
50. Hansen, 334.
51. Hansen, 334.
52. Hansen, 384. This quote is from the 1837 published account of the Texan Campaign by Carlos Castañeda.
53. Hansen, 406.

54. Hansen, 385.
55. Hansen, 430. This quote is from the beginning of chapter five of the de la Peña diary.
56. Hansen, 394.
57. Hansen, 394.
58. Hansen, 341.
59. Hansen, 386.
60. Crisp, 81.
61. A caudillo is a leader or chief, especially a military dictator; a political boss, an overlord., [www.dictionary.com]
62. Crisp, 83.
63. Ibid.
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