

■ On Texas Independence

Date: March 7, 1836

Author: Stephen Austin

Genre: speech

Summary Overview

On March 7, 1836, Stephen F. Austin, the most successful empresario (one who recruited settlers) of Texan colonization, gave a speech in Louisville, Kentucky, imploring Americans to lend their support and assistance in Texas's quest for independence from Mexico. His speech was methodical, detailing the history of Mexican involvement with Texas, the desire to raise colonies of respectable citizens—to do so was a deterrent to invading Native American tribes such as the Comanche—and the escalating issues with the Mexican government, culminating in the denial of basic rights. On two occasions, Austin strategically reminds his audience of the similar feelings of oppression that drove their forefathers to revolt against Great Britain only sixty years before, thus recalling a central part of American history still within living memory. It is important to note that Austin was not asking for Texas to be admitted into the Union; rather, he was seeking the assistance of one nation for another in its quest for self-government.

Defining Moment

This speech of Stephen F. Austin's presents a powerful message, even to a modern reader. His words were written not in haste but with careful thought and preparation. There is much evidence to suggest he wished to represent Texas's pursuit for independence as thoroughly and honestly as possible; to this end, Austin was particular with dates and other details. Although not included below, found within the unabridged speech is a list of reasons Austin gave to prove that the Mexican government had failed in its federal duties to Texas and its people, principally the recent dissolution of the government by General Santa Anna. The following is an exceptionally emphatic example of Austin's message regarding this: "The people of Texas firmly adhered to the last moment, to the constitution which they and the whole nation had sworn to support. The government of Mexico have not—the party now in power have

overturned the constitutional government and violated their oaths—they have separated from their obligations, from their duty and from the people of Texas; and, consequently, they are the true rebels." Although this section does not include a reference to the American Revolution, similarities may be drawn between the two conflicts. Governments have obligations to their constituents and, therefore, should be held responsible when they fail. For Austin, this particular failure could only be remedied by the secession of Texas.

The entirety of Austin's speech makes a number of references to the American Revolution; no doubt this was done specifically to generate sympathy for Texas's fight. Austin implored his listeners to recognize the justifiable reasons he and his people had for complete separation from Mexico, arguing that they, too, had been ill used by those in power and were no longer willing to endure it.

Author Biography

Stephen Fuller Austin, despite the many years that have passed since his death, is still fondly remembered and hallowed within the state of Texas, where he is popularly regarded as the father of the state. He was born in Virginia on November 3, 1793, to Moses and Maria Austin and was raised in Missouri. The career of Texan empresario was not the path Stephen chose for himself; rather, the vision of colonization throughout Texas was the dream of his father. Moses Austin, who originally dealt with the Spanish with regard to Texas, knew that Spain wished the land settled and had attempted to do so repeatedly in the past in order to "keep interlopers and Indians at bay and lend credibility to Spanish claims of possession" (Brands 21). Soon after permission for his colony was granted, Moses died, leaving his son Stephen in charge of carrying out his dream.

Settlement of Texas may not have been Stephen's life goal, but it was a promise to his father that he suc-

cessfully fulfilled, despite tangles with the Mexican government after Mexico won its independence from Spain. In time, he came to hold his own vision for Texas, which included a capital city: “The Texas of his dreams was not a collection of isolated homesteads but a community of cooperating individuals and families” (Brands 91).

The last year of Austin’s life—1836, the same year as his speech—saw the establishment of the Republic of Texas on March 2, followed the next month by the

momentous victory against General Santa Anna at the Battle of San Jacinto. He passed away from pneumonia on December 27, 1836, at the age of forty-three. Sam Houston, a general of the Texan army and later the first president of the new republic, lamented, “The Father of Texas is no more! The first pioneer of the wilderness has departed!” (qtd. in Brands 478). Since his death, Stephen F. Austin has continued to be hailed throughout the land he led toward independence.

HISTORICAL DOCUMENT

It is with the most unfeigned and heartfelt gratitude that I appear before this enlightened audience, to thank the citizens of Louisville, as I do in the name of the people of Texas, for the kind and generous sympathy they have manifested in favor of the cause of that struggling country; and to make a plain statement of facts explanatory of the contest in which Texas is engaged with the Mexican Government.

The public has been informed, through the medium of the newspapers, that war exists between the people of Texas and the present government of Mexico. There are, however, many circumstances connected with this contest, its origin, its principles and objects which, perhaps, are not so generally known, and are indispensable to a full and proper elucidation of this subject.

When a people consider themselves compelled by circumstances or by oppression, to appeal to arms and resort to their natural rights, they necessarily submit their cause to the great tribunal of public opinion. The people of Texas, confident in the justice of their cause, fearlessly and cheerfully appeal to this tribunal. In doing this the first step is to show, as I trust I shall be able to do by a succinct statement of facts, that our cause is just, and is the cause of light and liberty:—the same holy cause for which our forefathers fought and bled:—the same that has an advocate in the bosom of every free-man, no matter in what country, or by what people it may be contended for.

But a few years back Texas was a wilderness, the home of the uncivilized and wandering Comanche and other tribes of Indians, who waged a constant warfare against the Spanish. These settlements at that time were

limited to the small towns of Bexar, (commonly called San Antonio) and Goliad, situated on the western limits. The incursions of the Indians also extended beyond the Rio Bravo del Norte, and desolated that part of the country.

In order to restrain these savages and bring them into subjection, the government opened Texas for settlement. Foreign emigrants were invited and called to that country. American enterprise accepted the invitation and promptly responded to the call. The first colony of Americans or foreigners ever settled in Texas was by myself. It was commenced in 1821, under a permission to my father, Moses Austin, from the Spanish government previous to the Independence of Mexico, and has succeeded by surmounting those difficulties and dangers incident to all new and wilderness countries infested with hostile Indians. These difficulties were many and at times appalling, and can only be appreciated by the hardy pioneers of this western country, who have passed through similar scenes.

The question here naturally occurs, what inducements, what prospects, what hopes could have stimulated us, the pioneers and settlers of Texas, to remove from the midst of civilized society, to expatriate ourselves from this land of liberty, from this our native country, endeared to us as it was, and still is, and ever will be, by the ties of nativity, the reminiscences of childhood and youth and local attachments, of friendship and kindred? Can it for a moment be supposed that we severed all these ties—the ties of nature and of education, and went to Texas to grapple with the wilderness and with savage foes, merely from a spirit of wild and visionary adventure,

without guarantees of protection for our persons and property and political rights? No, it cannot be believed. No American, no Englishman, no one of any nation who has a knowledge of the people of the United States, or of the prominent characteristics of the Anglo-Saxon race to which we belong—a race that in all ages and in all countries wherever it has appeared has been marked for a jealous and tenacious watchfulness of its liberties, and for a cautious and calculating view of the probable events of the future—no one who has a knowledge of this race can or will believe that we removed to Texas without such guarantees, as free born and enterprising men naturally expect and require.

The fact is, we had such guarantees; for, in the first place the government bound itself to protect us by the mere act of admitting us as citizens, on the general and long established principle, even in the dark ages, that protection and allegiance are reciprocal—a principle which in this enlightened age has been extended much further; for its received interpretation now is, that the object of government is the well being, security, and happiness of the governed, and that allegiance ceases whenever it is clear, evident, and palpable, that this object is in no respect effected.

But besides this general guarantee, we had others of a special, definite, and positive character—the colonization laws of 1823, '24, and '25, inviting emigrants generally to that country, especially guaranteed protection for person and property, and the right of citizenship.

When the federal system and constitution were adopted in 1824, and the former provinces became states, Texas, by her representative in the constituent congress, exercised the right which was claimed and exercised by all the provinces, of retaining within her own control, the rights and powers which appertained to her as one of the unities or distinct societies, which confederated together to form the federal republic of Mexico. But not possessing at that time sufficient population to become a state by herself, she was with her own consent, united provisionally with Coahuila, a neighbouring province or society, to form the state of COAHUILA AND TEXAS, “until Texas possessed the necessary elements to form a separate state of herself.” I quote the words of the constitutional or organic act passed by the constituent congress of Mexico, on the 7th of May, 1824,

which establishes the state of Coahuila and Texas. This law, and the principles on which the Mexican federal compact was formed, gave to Texas a specific political existence, and vested in her inhabitants the special and well defined rights of self-government as a state of the Mexican confederation, so soon as she “possessed the necessary elements.” Texas consented to the provisional union with Coahuila on the faith of this guarantee. It was therefore a solemn compact, which neither the state of Coahuila and Texas, nor the general government of Mexico, can change without the consent of the people of Texas.

In 1833 the people of Texas, after a full examination of their population and resources, and of the law and constitution, decided, in general convention elected for that purpose, that the period had arrived contemplated by said law and compact of 7th May, 1824, and that the country possessed the necessary elements to form a state separate from Coahuila. A respectful and humble petition was accordingly drawn up by this convention, addressed to the general congress of Mexico, praying for the admission of Texas into the Mexican confederation as a state. I had the honor of being appointed by the convention the commissioner or agent of Texas to take this petition to the city of Mexico, and present it to the government. I discharged this duty to the best of my feeble abilities, and, as I believed, in a respectful manner. Many months passed and nothing was done with the petition, except to refer it to a committee of congress, where it slept and was likely to sleep. I finally urged the just and constitutional claims of Texas to become a state in the most pressing manner, as I believed it to be my duty to do; representing also the necessity and good policy of this measure, owing to the almost total want of local government of any kind, the absolute want of a judiciary, the evident impossibility of being governed any longer by Coahuila, (for three fourths of the legislature were from there,) and the consequent anarchy and discontent that existed in Texas. It was my misfortune to offend the high authorities of the nation—my frank and honest exposition of the truth was construed into threats.

At this time (September and October, 1833,) a revolution was raging in many parts of the nation, and especially in the vicinity of the city of Mexico. I despaired of obtaining anything, and wrote to Texas, recommending

to the people there to organize as a state de facto without waiting any longer. This letter may have been imprudent, as respects the injury it might do me personally, but how far it was criminal or treasonable, considering the revolutionary state of the whole nation, and the peculiar claims and necessities of Texas, impartial men must decide. It merely expressed an opinion. This letter found its way from San Antonio de Bexar, (where it was directed) to the government. I was arrested at Saltillo, two hundred leagues from Mexico, on my way home, taken back to that city and imprisoned one year, three months of the time in solitary confinement, without books or writing materials, in a dark dungeon of the former inquisition prison. At the close of the year I was released from confinement, but detained six months in the city on heavy ball. It was nine months after my arrest before I was officially informed of the charges against me, or furnished with a copy of them. The constitutional requisites were not observed, my constitutional rights as a citizen were violated, the people of Texas were outraged by this treatment of their commissioner, and their respectful, humble and just petition was disregarded.

These acts of the Mexican government, taken in connection with many others and with the general revolutionary situation of the interior of the republic, and the absolute want of local government in Texas, would have justified the people of Texas in organizing themselves as a State of the Mexican confederation, and if attacked for so doing in separating from Mexico. They would have been justifiable in doing this, because such acts were unjust, ruinous and oppressive, and because self-preservation required a local government in Texas suited to the situation and necessities of the country, and the character of its inhabitants. Our forefathers in '76 flew to arms for much less. They resisted a principle, "the theory of oppression," but in our case it was the reality—it was a denial of justice and of our guaranteed rights—it was oppression itself.

Texas, however, even under these aggravated circumstances forbore and remained quiet. The constitution, although outraged and the sport of faction and revolution, still existed in name, and the people of Texas still looked to it with the hope that it would be sustained and executed, and the vested rights of Texas respected. I will now proceed to show how this hope was defeated by the

total prostration of the constitution, the destruction of the federal system, and the dissolution of the federal compact.

It is well known that Mexico has been in constant revolutions and confusion, with only a few short intervals, ever since its separation from Spain in 1821. This unfortunate state of things has been produced by the effects of the ecclesiastical and aristocratical party to oppose republicanism, overturn the federal system and constitution, and establish a monarchy, or a consolidated government of some kind.

In 1834, the President of the Republic, Gen. Santa Anna, who heretofore was the leader and champion of the republican party and system, became the head and leader of his former antagonists—the aristocratic and church party. With this accession of strength, this party triumphed. The constitutional general Congress of 1834, which was decidedly republican and federal, was dissolved in May of that year by a military order of the President before its constitutional term had expired. The council of government composed of half the Senate which, agreeably to the constitution, ought to have been installed the day after closing the session of Congress, was also dissolved; and a new, revolutionary, and unconstitutional Congress was convened by another military order of the President. This Congress met on the 1st of January, 1835. It was decidedly aristocratic, ecclesiastical and central in its politics. A number of petitions were presented to it from several towns and villages, praying that it would change the federal form of government and establish a central form. These petitions were all of a revolutionary character, and were called "pronunciamientos," or pronouncements for centralism. They were formed by partial and revolutionary meetings gotten up by the military and priests. Petitions in favour of the federal system and constitution, and protests against such revolutionary measures, were also sent in by the people and by some of the State Legislatures, who still retained firmness to express their opinions. The latter were disregarded and their authors persecuted and imprisoned. The former were considered sufficient to invest Congress with plenary powers. It accordingly, by a decree, deposed the constitutional Vice President, Gomez Farias, who was a leading federalist, without any impeachment or trial, or even the form of a trial, and elected

another of their own party, Gen. Barragan, in his place. By another decree it united the Senate with the House of Representatives in one chamber, and thus constituted, it declared itself invested with full powers as a national convention. In accordance with these usurped powers, it proceeded to annul the federal constitution and system, and to establish a central or consolidated government.

How far it has progressed in the details of this new system is unknown to us. The decree of the 3d of October last, which fixes the outlines of the new government, is however sufficient to show that the federal system and compact is dissolved and centralism established. The States are converted into departments.

GLOSSARY

appertained: rightfully belonged

Bexar: short form of San Antonio's original name, San Antonio de Béxar

Gen. Barragan: Miguel Barragán (1789–1836), a Mexican general who also served as interim president

Gen. Santa Anna: Antonio López de Santa Anna (1794–1876), president of Mexico both before and after Barragán, best remembered for his infamous clash with the Texans at the Alamo

organic act: an act that institutes a fundamental aspect of government, such as establishing a territory

plenary: absolute and unchecked

Rio Bravo del Norte: the Mexican name for the Rio Grande, the river that forms the present-day border between Mexico and Texas

Document Analysis

Stephen F. Austin spoke before a crowd in Louisville, Kentucky, describing the plight of the newly declared Republic of Texas and making the case for its complete independence from Mexico. To him, the government of Mexico had no recourse to challenge the Texans' decision; in fact, the government's actions had precipitated the colonists' pursuit of freedom. The available resources make it difficult to determine who exactly made up the audience for this speech, but it is clear that Austin possessed a strong desire to set the record straight. He opened by saying, "The public has been informed, through the medium of the newspapers, that war exists between the people of Texas and the present government of Mexico"; although his speech then describes how this has been misconstrued, Texas was indeed at war with Mexico. A crucial event in Texan history had occurred the day before Austin gave this speech, though he made no references to it; it is unclear whether he had yet received news of the Battle of the Alamo.

The Alamo

The Alamo is an integral part of Texas, both its history and its culture. Originally a mission, the Alamo, also referred to as the Mission San Antonio de Valero, was for the Texan side a symbol of the battle lines in the ensuing conflicts with the Mexican army. For two of the three men most associated with its defense, there was mixed communication from the start as to what exactly to do with the old mission. James Bowie, under direction from General Sam Houston, was determined to destroy it before leaving, as he saw the Alamo as difficult to defend; however, his attitude soon changed. William Barret Travis wanted to defend the fort, but he, like Bowie before him, realized it held far too few men to do so. In a letter later echoed by pleas from Travis, Bowie wrote, "Our force is very small; the returns this day to the commandant is only hundred and twenty officers and men. . . . It would be a waste of men to put our brave little band against thousands" (qtd. in Brands 340). Bowie and Travis, who held joint leadership over those stationed at the Alamo, were severely outnumbered by Santa Anna and the Mexican army, which has been estimated at ap-

proximately five thousand troops.

In the end, the men defending the Alamo could not fend off the troops surrounding them. Historian Richard Flores details the scene at the old mission: “Upon arriving, Santa Anna orders the men in the Alamo to surrender. Unwilling to do so, Travis answers with a canon [sic] shot aimed at the Mexican forces” (“Alamo” 93). The men in the Alamo made their choice, and surrender was not an option. The final battle on March 6, 1836, saw the fall of approximately two hundred men, including Travis and Bowie, as well as the illustrious Davy Crockett. In his detailed account of Texas’s fight against Mexico for freedom, historian H. W. Brands states that while Santa Anna proved his military might against the mission in San Antonio de Béxar that day, his success was a veneer, as it merely handed the Texans “a rallying cry that lifted their political struggle against Santa Anna to the moral realm. . . . Santa Anna’s great blunder at Béxar was not to lose so many of his own men but to kill so many of the enemy (and after the battle to burn their bodies, which added to the sacrificial significance)” (378).

Texas from Wilderness to Colonization

Although hostilities with the Mexican army were known to Austin at the time of his speech, he chose instead to focus on what he and others had brought to the Mexican territory of Texas. He may have chosen this approach in order to present Texas’s bid for independence as a measured decision, rather than as simply the result of provocation due to armed conflict. This approach lent more credibility to their cause, especially given Austin’s past: he had led the first legal settlement within the territory; therefore, no one else possessed more authority to speak on the subject than he. In his speech, Austin said, “The government opened Texas for settlement. Foreign emigrants were invited and called to that country. American enterprise accepted the invitation and promptly responded to the call. The first colony of Americans or foreigners ever settled in Texas was by myself.” Historian Sam W. Haynes writes that the Mexican government was highly interested and invested in empresarios bringing in settlers; each empresario was obligated to “bring at least one hundred families to settle the area within a six-year period,” and to fulfill their mission, the empresarios were given vast land grants (57). In an effort to preserve heritage and cultural values, the government issued two stipulations that the settlers were to abide by and that, presumably, each individual empresario was required to enforce: they had to be Roman Catholics (or agree

to convert), and they had to become Mexican citizens. Given the generous endowments of land the Mexican government was offering in order to bring in a population, most were willing to adhere to these requirements. However, as time went on and more settlers began arriving, more and more of them proved resistant to the government’s conditions. Haynes writes that Austin tried valiantly to carry out his obligations as an empresario, but “the challenge of turning [the settlers] into loyal Mexican citizens . . . proved more difficult. . . . Anglo-Texans possessed neither the resources nor the inclination to abide by the Mexican government’s insistence on building Spanish-speaking schools and Catholic churches” (57).

Immigration from the United States into Texas came to a halt in April 1830, nearly a decade after Austin’s first settlement. A Mexican official, Manuel de Mier y Terán, had made a visit to the territory two years before and was appalled by what he saw; there had been little attempt by the colonists to observe the precepts set down by the officials and particularly a lack of respect toward acculturation, inclining the colony dangerously toward what Mexico did not want to happen: the acquisition of Texas by the United States. Haynes closes his article by stating that the banning of new settlements in the territory, as well as the abolition of slavery—then a highly heated topic within the US government—led directly to the fight for Texan independence.

Texans vs. the Mexican Government: Who Was to Blame?

In Austin’s speech, he averred that he had done much for the Mexican government, turning Texas from a “wilderness” to a civilized society where the people had no fear of Indian raids; his speech specifically named the Comanche tribe as one that caused problems. He also brought the settlers the Mexican government had requested, thereby creating a thriving population of fresh Mexican citizens. Mexico failed to uphold its end of the bargain by not providing a stable government: “The constitutional general Congress of 1834 . . . was dissolved in May of that year by a military order of the President before its constitutional term had expired. The council of government composed of half the Senate . . . was also dissolved.” To Austin’s way of thinking, what good would the colonies be if there was not a proper overall structure and legislation in place for the populace?

However, Stephen Austin’s claim that Mexico was pushing Texas toward independence leaves out a critical detail. Austin, like his father before him, had assured Mexican officials that those signed on to move to the

settlements either would already be professed Roman Catholics or would become so, and that they would become Mexican citizens, with the attendant adoption of associated cultural factors. As Mier y Terán had observed, these conditions had not been upheld. In this regard, whether due to the empresarios' reluctance to hold the new colonists to the rules requested by the government or the colonists' resistance to such regulations, Stephen Austin and the other empresarios had not fulfilled their part of the bargain.

Despite this, Austin's argument about being let down by officials holds the most sway. No society can adequately be provided for without the support of a stable government. The repeated actions of the Mexican officials left the settlers with little confidence in those in power, as the balance shifted again and again among a mix of faces and offices. As already mentioned, Mexico greatly feared the annexation of Texas by the United States, which would have cost the nation a great territory. However, given the lack of a consistent administration, the loss of Texas was perhaps not surprising.

Essential Themes

There are recurring references throughout Austin's speech to "our forefathers." His choice of words is clever: by using the word "our," he includes his audience in the Texans' plight. The audience, hearing the references to the revolution, may have held that parallel in their minds throughout his speech, ensuring empathy in the hearts of his listeners. Here was semiautonomous, English-speaking Texas being oppressed by Mexico, its parent country. The people of the United States, previously under the yoke of England, had risen up and broken away; such a nation would sympathize with the plight of Texas. At one point in his speech, Austin went further, suggesting that the Texans had a stronger case for independence: "Our forefathers in '76 flew to arms for much less. They resisted a principle, 'the theory of oppression,' but in our case it was the reality—it was a denial of justice and of our guaranteed rights—it was oppression itself." Although it is unknown how effective Austin's speech would have been if the tragedy at the Alamo had not occurred, or even what it lent to their cause overall along with the massacre, the Texans did find their support. The Republic of Texas was a separate entity in North America for nine years before being granted US statehood in 1845. The endeavors of Stephen Austin, William Travis, James Bowie, Davey Crockett, and Sam Houston have not been forgotten in the state. Their names have been

enshrined in history, and Texans continue to hold them in the highest esteem.

—Jennifer L. Henderson Crane

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