



*The Alamo.* Walt Disney Pictures,

**Reviewed by** Richard Bruce Winders

**Published on** H-War (May, 2004)

Historians want to think that the public learns about the past from them but there is no denying the power of Walt Disney. I frequently hear from visitors at the Alamo that Fess Parker is responsible for their fascination with Davy Crockett, the Alamo, and history in general. Nearly fifty years after the release of its influential TV mini-series, "Davy Crockett: King of the Wild Frontier," Disney has again taken on the Alamo as a subject. Rumors of the possibility of a movie project were already in the air when I came to the Alamo in 1996. It was not until 2001, however, that it was announced that Ron Howard--fresh from his success from *A Beautiful Mind*--planned to produce and direct a film about the battle. Early versions of the script were soon in circulation and construction commenced on a movie set west of Austin, Texas. Unfortunately, Howard became enmeshed in his own battle over the Alamo, not with the despotic Santa Anna but with Disney, the company that opted to make the film. Howard declined to direct the project after he and Disney disagreed on the budget and rating for the film. The veteran director had wanted to make a gritty historical epic while Disney preferred a tamer and shorter product. John Lee Hancock took over the project as director when Howard and his team withdrew from active participation on the film. These events should remind viewers of the old warning about the danger of changing horses in the middle of a stream. The story of behind-the-scenes trouble generated an avalanche of neg-

ative press that any film would find difficult to overcome. When all is said, though, the new movie is much better than its detractors would have the public believe. True, it suffers from the compression of time, space, and personalities inherent in all historical films. Hancock and his crew, however, went to great lengths to present a broad and encompassing historical interpretation of the Texas Revolution. In addition, the attention to detail relating to set design and material culture is at a level unexpected from an American production. The film's strengths, though, may also be its greatest commercial weakness because Hancock's version of historical events bears little resemblance to the story to which the public is accustomed. The film has many good points beyond a realist representation of San Antonio and Texas in 1836. Extraordinary effort was exerted to make the Mexican Army look like the veteran fighting force it was. The director used almost all Hispanics to portray soldados although an Anglo-looking soldier occasionally pops up. Hancock even included readily identifiable Zapadores or engineers in the attacking force. The Cazadores are armed with Baker rifles. The assault takes place in the dark instead of the daylight as depicted in almost all other Alamo films. The Mexican artillery is very realistic and even includes rockets. The film should be given credit for other things, too. There is an attempt to place the Texas Revolution (of which the Alamo is a part) in a real historical context. A Tejano perspective is present

through the person of Juan Seguín. A Mexican perspective is also evident though faint. The topic of slavery is broached. Owing to the revised scope of the movie, however, these story lines do not have the impact that the director intended, or for which he hoped. Thus, the "big picture history lesson" should be seen as a casualty of the struggle that took place in the film's development. Perhaps a director's cut will be issued that will allow viewers to see a more coherent and cohesive version of the film. <p> To their credit, Howard and Hancock sought advice from a number of historians before and during the film's production, particularly Stephen L. Hardin, author of <cite>Texan Iliad: A Military History of the Texas Revolution</cite> (1993) and Alan Huffines, author of <cite>The Blood of Noble Men</cite> (1998). Their input is clearly visible to anyone familiar with their work. <p> All in all, Disney's new Alamo movie is not as bad as its pre-release publicity promised it would be. In fact, it is a vast improvement over previous on screen depictions of the battle and the events surrounding it. Does it have flaws? Of course it does. However, it has much to offer to someone who does not have the mistaken impression that a movie is going to be a faithful representation of history. Film-making, after all, is a form of art which means that the final product is just that--art! Some art is impressionistic and other art is more realistic. This Alamo film definitely falls into the second category and can serve as an excellent starting point for a substantive discussion on the Texas Revolution and its most famous battle.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at <https://networks.h-net.org/h-war>

**Citation:** Richard Bruce Winders. Review of *The Alamo*. H-War, H-Net Reviews. May, 2004.

**URL:** <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=15401>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.