

H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Jay A. Stout. *Slaughter at Goliad: The Mexican Massacre of 400 Texas Volunteers*. Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 2008. xv + 242 pp. Illustrations. \$29.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-59114-843-2.

Reviewed by Richard Bruce Winders (The Alamo)

Published on H-War (April, 2009)

Commissioned by Janet G. Valentine



An Introduction to the Goliad Massacre

Many people know about the Alamo, even though their knowledge about the famous 1836 battle and its significance may be hazy. But who knows about Goliad, an event which followed closely on the heels of the Texan defeat in San Antonio, and which actually produced more Texan casualties? Jay A. Stout contends that the answer is virtually nobody. In his latest work, *Slaughter at Goliad*, the author promises to bring forth “the most comprehensive treatment yet on the slaughter at Goliad” (p. xii). Thus, the purpose of his book is to shine light on the events that occurred in March 1836 around the old Mexican town of Goliad, and the Presidio La Bahía.

Goliad has always been the poor step-sister to the Alamo. Both were military disasters brought on by the inability of the leaders of the Provisional Government of Texas to set aside their personal grievances in order to devise an effective defense against the approaching armies of Mexico. Throughout the fall of 1835, the Texan victories resulted in the capture of the strategic settlements of San Antonio and Goliad. As factions within the Provisional Government bickered over what to do next, General Antonio López de Santa Anna showed no irresolution, but led his army back into Texas.

Two columns marched into Texas. The largest was led by Santa Anna himself, and destined for San Antonio. The second smaller one was commanded by General José Urrea, and it advanced on Goliad. The key to understanding why these settlements were so important to both the Mexicans and the Texans is the knowledge that

both were population centers, military outposts, centers of commerce, and crossroads laying astride the two major roads that traversed Texas. The rebels and government forces did not just happen upon these places; they were drawn there by the dictates of war. Strategic locations have to be controlled.

The Texas Revolution, the setting for the story of Goliad, should be viewed as a reflection of Jacksonian American. Rampant egalitarianism made it difficult for the Texans to follow orders. Samuel Houston, appointed commanding general by the Provisional Government, was told that he could not exercise any authority over the volunteers in the field because they had already elected their own leaders. At the head of an almost nonexistent Texas regular army, Houston could merely suggest a course of action while he issued commissions and waited for his newly appointed officers to recruit their companies. Two men who received commissions were William B. Travis (Lieutenant Colonel of Texas Cavalry) and James W. Fannin (Lieutenant Colonel of Texas Artillery). Respectively, these men—the first a lawyer and the second a struggling planter—were fated to be the commanders at the Alamo and Goliad. Their commissioning is indicative of the common belief at the time that every American was a natural born soldier, and that no special training was required to lead citizen-soldiers. As in government, commanding volunteers in antebellum America required the consent of the governed.

James W. Fannin has come off poorly in the history

of the Texas Revolution, an assessment that Stout supports. The illegitimate son of a Georgia planter, Fannin struggled to find his place in life. A brief and unsuccessful period of study at the U.S. Military Academy gave him a claim to military prowess that he did not possess. Like many of his compatriots, Texas offered him the opportunity to reinvent himself. Once the revolution erupted, Fannin (with his quasi West Point credentials) emerged as a community leader capable of mobilizing volunteers, something his elevation to such a high rank acknowledged. As lieutenant colonel of the 1st Regiment of Texas Artillery, Fannin was third in command of the regular army, after Houston and Lieutenant Colonel James C. Neill, the post commander at San Antonio.

Fannin quickly became involved in the contentious split that developed in the Provisional Government of Texas. He sided with the General Counsel, which stood in opposition to Houston and Governor Henry Smith. His supporters in the General Council rewarded him with a commission as Colonel of Volunteers, and an independent command of an expedition intended to seize and hold the Mexican city of Matamoros. As such, Fannin controlled the largest gathering of Texas troops at that time.

Fannin's headquarters was at Goliad where an old Spanish fort was located. His inability to make critical decisions, coupled with the pervasive Jacksonian egalitarianism of the time, doomed him and his command to destruction and historical disfavor. He failed to push forward to Matamoros. When it became apparent that Urrea had already reached that place and was beginning his march northward into Texas, Fannin put his men to work fortifying the old *presidio*. When the plea for reinforcements from Travis (who was besieged at the Alamo) arrived, Fannin first ordered a march to San Antonio and then, at the urging of his officers, countermanded the order. Learning that colonists lay in Urrea's path, he sent a detachment to their rescue. When that detachment was trapped, he sent another to assist the first. In the meantime, Houston (who had finally been given command of all troops in the field, even volunteers) sent orders for Fannin to destroy the fort and to retire. Fannin chose to stay, hoping that his missing detachments would rejoin him. Once he did decide to leave the relative safety of the fort, Fannin allowed Urrea to surround his command and, after an intense battle, was forced to surrender to the Mexican general. Fannin and his men were marched back to the fort, held for a week, and then marched out by the Mexicans and killed on March 27, 1836—Palm Sunday. As Stout and others have pointed out, Fannin's record is

not admirable.

Stout's work is not a campaign history of the Texas Revolution—for that, readers might want to see Stephen L. Hardin's book, *Texian Iliad* (1996). What Stout has done is craft a narrative of events leading up to, and then detailing, the Goliad Massacre. In order to accomplish this, he relied almost entirely on the information posted on two web sites: *The Sons of DeWitte Colony Texas* and *The Handbook of Texas*. To give Stout credit, he has combined the available primary sources into a readable narrative. If you are new to the Texas Revolution, *Slaughter at Goliad* will be a fresh, engaging story. But, more seasoned students of the conflict will unfortunately render the verdict no author wants to hear: "there is little here that is new."

The work is best classified as a trade book rather than an addition to the scholarly works on the Texas Revolution. Stout's almost total reliance on accounts published on the internet highlights the opportunities for research made possible by the web. Nevertheless, he either failed to consult or failed to credit the not insignificant bulk of secondary literature on the Texas Revolution in general, and Goliad specifically. There are no references (even in the bibliography) to Chester Newell's *History of the Revolution in Texas, Particularly of the War of 1835 & '36* (1838), Hardin's *Texian Iliad*, Kathryn Stoner O'Conner's *Presidio La Bahía* (2001), Jackie L. Pruet and Everett B. Cole's *Goliad Massacre: A Tragedy of the Texas Revolution* (1985), or Stephen L. Moore's *Eighteen Minutes: The Battle of San Jacinto and the Texas Independence Campaign* (2004). There is no mention of John H. Jenkins's ten volume set, *The Papers of the Texas Revolution* (1973). Omissions such as these cast doubt on the author's depth of knowledge about the conflict. It also makes it possible to discount what could otherwise have been "the most comprehensive treatment yet on the slaughter at Goliad" that Stout intended it to be (p. xii).

What are Stout's contributions if not in the realm of original research? He is a talented writer who has pieced together a story that has been somewhat fragmented. Thus, *Slaughter at Goliad* can best serve as a solid introduction to the killings at Goliad. Stout also raises the important larger issue about what happened. Was it a *bona fide* execution or was it a rank massacre? Stout's title announces his position: it was slaughter.

The Mexican government contended that the revolt in Texas was not really a revolt at all, but an invasion by "land pirates." Volunteers from the United States, in small groups and organized companies, were indeed coming to

Texas to help establish an independent republic in the breakaway state. These men saw real links between the struggles of the American colonists of 1776 and the Texan colonists of 1835. On December 30, 1835, the eve of Santa Anna's advance into Texas, the Mexican Congress passed a law stating that any armed foreigner caught fighting against the government would be treated as a pirate. Although not specifically spelled out, the implication was that this was to be a war without prisoners.

At its core, the story of Goliad is about the treatment and ultimate fate of men captured on the battlefield. Older literature on Goliad clearly proclaimed that what happened to the prisoners was a massacre. What else could you call the shooting down of nearly four hundred men who had surrendered and thrown themselves on the mercy of their captors? Moreover, subterfuge had been used to make the killings easier by telling the prisoners that they were being marched out of the fort so they could begin their journey to the coast, and then home. Only the term massacre was strong enough to accurately describe the event. Modern writers and community leaders some-

times blanch at the word, though. After all, weren't the Mexican soldiers only following their government's orders? The volunteers were considered outlaws (men outside the protection of the law) and Mexico had the right to treat them as such. Even in 1836, however, many Americans and Mexicans had trouble accepting Santa Anna's claim that he was merely "following orders" when he insisted that men of Fannin's command be put to death.

Why should modern military historians care about Goliad? The treatment of men captured on the battlefield (whether prisoners of war or enemy combatants) is particularly relevant following September 11, 2001. I do not believe the canard that "one man's terrorist is another man's freedom fighter." Nevertheless, nations combating nongovernmental forces encounter the dilemma of what to do with prisoners. As in the case of Goliad, it is possible to win the battle, but to then lose the public relations war in its aftermath. One does not have to look far for current examples as to how this lesson still holds true. Military historians would be well served to take Stout's advice to remember Goliad.

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 Stout, Jay A., *Slaughter at Goliad: The Mexican Massacre of 400 Texas Volunteers*. H-War, H-Net Reviews. April, 2009.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=24485>



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