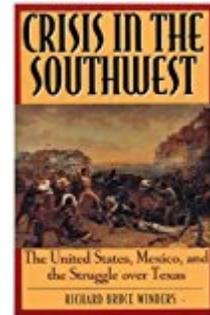




Richard Bruce Winders. *Crisis in the Southwest: The United States, Mexico, and the Struggle over Texas.* Wilmington, Del.: Scholarly Resources, 2002. xxx + 172 pp. \$34.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8420-2801-1; \$84.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8420-2800-4.



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The Thirty Years' War for Texas

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Few historians are as well equipped to write the history of the struggle between the United States and Mexico over Texas as Richard Bruce Winders, who is currently the curator and historian at the Alamo in San Antonio. Winders served as Assistant Editor of the 1998 Macmillan encyclopedia volume, *The United States and Mexico at War: Nineteenth-Century Expansionism and Conflict*, and his prize-winning book *Mr. Polk's Army: The American Military Experience in the Mexican War* appeared in 1997.

In his current position, Winders has undoubtedly discovered that many visitors “remember the Alamo,” but have little notion of how the events of the Texas Revolution fold into the larger history of the United States, much less the history of Mexico.

It is the author's goal to see the struggle for Texas whole, without the “arbitrary periodization” that often blocks “our understanding of the past, and by extension, of ourselves” (p. xii). He succeeds admirably, not only demonstrating the centrality of the struggle over Texas

for mid-nineteenth-century America, but also bringing fresh insights into the ways that the Texas Revolution of 1835-36 embodied issues that lie at the heart of the Civil War era: states' rights and secession, tensions between region and nation, and the dangerous attractions of rapid economic development (often through the use of slave labor) on a nation's frontier.

The Texas Revolution developed from precisely these issues, but in the ironic immediate context of a Mexican civil war between “Centralists” and “Federalists” who fought to determine the structure of that nation's government. It is a further irony that the “Federalists” of the United States were the ideological soul mates of the Mexican “Centralists,” while those calling themselves “Federalists” in Mexico were the defenders of states' rights from the impositions of the national government. Winders reminds us that Texas *twice* seceded from larger republics (in 1836 and in 1861), each time to protect cherished rights of home rule and local control—especially control of economic development—and each time claiming oppression from an overbearing central government that was unfriendly to slavery.

Winders sees this “ideological” continuity (p. xiii), along with continuities of geography and personnel, as the prime justification for his holistic approach to the struggle for Texas—a struggle between Mexico and the United States which the author believes to have been virtually inevitable, however complex and contingent may have been the precise reasons for the outbreak of fighting in 1835 or 1846.

American penetration of Texas began very early in the century, and proceeded inexorably despite the defensive policy twists pursued by first Spain and then Mexico to prevent the loss of the territory. Whether this penetration was by Stephen F. Austin’s peaceful plowmen or the rifle-toting volunteers of the Revolution and the Mexican War, many individuals on both sides of the shifting boundary were involved in successive stages of the long struggle. Some of the same Mexican officers fought against Americans on Mexican soil at the time of the revolt in Texas, during the decade of conflict between Mexico and the Texas Republic, and in the climactic struggle with the United States. The book’s extensive “Cast of Characters” (pp. xxi-xxix) highlights this personal aspect of historical continuity.

There were long memories on both sides. Texan soldiers in the battle for Monterrey in 1846 remembered tactics learned in similar house-to-house fighting in San Antonio de Bexar in 1835. And when at Buena Vista General Antonio Lopez de Santa Anna offered to accept the outnumbered Zachary Taylor’s “surrender at discretion, under the assurance that you will be treated with the consideration belonging to the Mexican character” (p. 115), thoughts of the Alamo and Goliad could not have been far from the minds of the Americans, who chose instead to fight.

Bruce Winders wants us to remember the Alamo, too, but always in the context of the thirty years’ struggle between the United States and Mexico over Texas. Despite the image of *Davy Crockett’s Last Fight* on the cover of *Crisis in the Southwest*, the focus of this book is certainly not the Texas Revolution, which accounts for only a dozen of the work’s more than 170 pages. Indeed, the entire period of American colonization and revolution in Texas (1821-1836) is covered in the first of six chapters, and is designated as the “stage setting” (p. 1) for the larger drama. Nevertheless, Winders has pressed into this brief beginning essay a wealth of material, much of which elucidates the Mexican roots of the revolt in Texas. Winders also nicely shows the intricacies of politics in the conjoined state of Coahuila y Tejas, which brought

together Anglos and Hispanics in cooperation as often as in conflict, even as the armed struggle with the central government began in 1835.

His second chapter, covering the almost constant border warfare between Mexico and the Texas Republic in the decade following the Revolution, is an important bridge between the better-known battles of 1836 and 1846. There is much information here that rarely appears outside specialized monographs, and everyone who reads it will better appreciate the origins of the grim blood-feud between Texans and Mexicans which characterized (and stained) much of the action during the war between the United States and Mexico. It is a mistake to see this enmity as a consequence primarily of the Texas Revolution. The painful internal and external conflicts of the Texas Republic—which precipitated the symbolic return to the service of Mexico by the Texan Revolutionary hero Juan Seguin in 1842—are a critical part of the story that Winders tells.

It is only in the book’s third chapter, however, that “Act One” (p. 71) of the main drama begins, with the annexation of Texas by the United States and the beginning of the war with Mexico. The author’s intention is to show fully the diplomatic, political, and military aspects of annexation, war, and the “conquering [of] a peace” (p.133), but in a book this short about a struggle so long, something has to give.

The heart of the book is the 40-page fourth chapter, which covers the military conquest of Mexico. It is a stirring read, full of fascinating and enlightening details, and redolent of the author’s thorough familiarity with this war. Coverage of the political machinations in Mexico and the United States which affected each side’s prosecution of the war is also well done, but without the richness conveyed by the story of men at arms. The weakest of the three related narratives is that of the diplomatic maneuverings by Texas, its two larger neighbors, and the European powers. Here the author gives little more than a quick summary of a well-known tale.

Nevertheless, *Crisis in the Southwest* nicely accomplishes the author’s chief ambition. He firmly places the struggle for Texas at the center of three inextricably related stories: the difficult relationship between the United States and Mexico in the first half of the nineteenth century; the territorial expansion of the United States; and the argument over slavery expansion, which plunged this country into its own civil war in the bitter aftermath of its triumphal but fateful conquest of Mexico.

This last story, like some of the other non-military aspects of this book, is told more perfunctorily than one would prefer, but the author nevertheless makes his point. The Alamo and the struggle for which it stands are closer to the mainstream of nineteenth-century American history than most of the visitors to the San Antonio shrine ever realize, and the triumphs and tragedies symbolized by this old mission chapel extend far beyond a 13-day siege, and far beyond the boundaries of Texas.

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