

# The Controversy Over the Alamo Battle Flag

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Often a people's myths are the highest and truest expression of  
its spirit and culture.<sup>1</sup>

William L. Shirer

In night fighting use many torches and drums, in day fighting  
many banners and flags in order to influence the sight and  
hearing of our troops.<sup>2</sup>

Sun Tzu

## Introduction

In the annals of warfare it is hard to imagine braver words than those of Colonel William Barret Travis in his letter of 24 February 1836. In the face of certain death he wrote, "our flag still waves proudly from our walls—I shall never surrender or retreat." Unfortunately, Colonel Travis never left us with a description of his flag.<sup>3</sup>

Lieutenant Colonel José Enrique de la Peña, the tireless and experienced professional soldier of the Zapadores Battalion, participated in the battle and gives us what is considered to be one of the most reliable accounts from the

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<sup>1</sup>William L. Shirer, *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich* (New York: Fawcett Crest, 1962), 149.

<sup>2</sup>Sun Tzu, *The Art of War*, trans. Samuel B. Griffith (London: Oxford University Press, 1963), 107.

<sup>3</sup>Letter from William Barret Travis to General Sam Houston and the Government of Texas, 24 Feb. 1836, in George A. McAlister, *Alamo: The Price of Freedom* (San Antonio: Docutex, Inc., 1988), 160–61.

Mexican side. He recalls the taking of “a flag,” but gives no details as to its composition.<sup>4</sup>

In his report to the War Ministry, General Antonio López de Santa Anna noted:

The bearer carries with him one of the flags of the enemy Battalions, taken that day, whereby the real schemes of the traitorous colonists and their collaborators gathered from the ports of the United States of the North can be better perceived.<sup>5</sup>

Santa Anna’s commentary leaves little doubt that the flag he described is that of the New Orleans Greys. Is this, however, the flag or one of the flags that flew over the Alamo during the siege of 23 February through 6 March 1836?

## The New Orleans Greys

Two companies of volunteers for service in Texas were organized in New Orleans on 13 October 1835. The Greys were composed of over one hundred men representing twelve states and six foreign nations.<sup>6</sup> Having been outfitted with grey uniforms they were dubbed the “New Orleans Greys.”

The first company of Greys began their journey into history by transiting up the Mississippi, then overland to the Sabine River via Nachitoches, Louisiana. Once in Texas they were redesignated as the “San Antonio Greys,”<sup>7</sup> and when they arrived there a group of young ladies presented them with a guidon.<sup>8</sup> Apparently the Greys had been expected since the guidon was presented to them upon arrival and, therefore, could not reflect their new designation.

The guidon is a blue silk flag measuring 90 by 116 centimeters.<sup>9</sup> It is charged with an eagle and sunburst, and the inscription “FIRST COMPANY OF TEXAN VOLUNTEERS! FROM NEW – ORLEANS. GOD & LIBERTY” all in black. There is no surviving description of the guidon of the second company.

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<sup>4</sup>José Enrique de la Peña, *With Santa Ana in Texas*, ed. and trans. Carmen Perry (College Station, Tex.: Texas A & M Press, 1975), 49.

<sup>5</sup>M. A. Sánchez Lamego, “Storming the Alamo: A Mexican Version,” *Dallas Morning News*, 6 Mar. 1966, p. 26A.

<sup>6</sup>*The Handbook of Texas*, vol. 2 (Austin: Texas State Historical Assn., 1952), 273.

<sup>7</sup>*Handbook of Texas*.

<sup>8</sup>Mamie Wynn Cox, *The Romantic Flags of Texas* (Dallas: Banks Upshaw and Co., 1936), 202.

<sup>9</sup>J. Hefter, “The Riddle of the Alamo Battle Flag,” *Texas Military History* 5 (1965): 119.



Guidon of the New Orleans/San Antonio Greys

The Greys arrived at Mission Concepción in time to participate in the siege of Bexar, which was fought from 5 through 9 December 1835.<sup>10</sup> After the surrender of General Cós, the Greys, along with the other rebels, occupied the crumbling mission-fortress called the Alamo.

When the Mexican forces retreated from San Antonio, the Texans decided upon an invasion of Mexico.<sup>11</sup> With the exception of six men,<sup>12</sup> the Greys joined that ill-fated expedition. Those remaining behind kept the guidon of the first company of Greys.

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<sup>10</sup> Daughters of the Republic of Texas, comp., *The Alamo/Long Barrack Museum* (Dallas: Taylor Publishing, 1986), 20–21.

<sup>11</sup> Daughters of Texas, *Alamo/Long Barrack*, 21.

<sup>12</sup> Amelia Williams, "A Critical Study of the Siege of the Alamo and of the Personnel of Its Defenders," *The Southwestern Historical Quarterly* 37 (Jan. 1934): 180–81.

## The Battle

While the movements of the Greys are easily traced and the actions at the Alamo are fairly well documented, it is not known with any certainty how many or which flags flew over the Alamo. It would seem unlikely that Colonel Travis, with his nearly fanatical desire to hold the Alamo, would honor those who would abandon him by flying their flag from the walls of the doomed fortress.

Additionally, no eyewitness described in specific detail what flag or flags flew over the Alamo. Santa Anna's report stated that the Greys' guidon was *one* of the flags captured and not specifically that it flew from the old mission.

There is a general consensus that the flag of the Alamo was the Mexican tricolor with the date "1824" in place of the Mexican arms. There also seems to be no mention of the guidon prior to its so-called "discovery" by W. A. Keeting, former Attorney General of Texas, while in Mexico City's National Museum in 1933.<sup>13</sup>

Even with this dramatic turn of events, highly romanticized Hollywood productions such as *The Last Command* and *The Alamo* fail to mention or depict the Greys' guidon. The exception is the IMAX docudrama *Alamo: The Price of Freedom*. It shows the flag in question as a company guidon at the head of a small body of men and not as a garrison flag.

Today there is a prevailing belief that the Greys' guidon was raised as the Alamo's garrison flag.<sup>14</sup> This may be due in part to the writings of General M. A. Sánchez Lamego. He reports that three soldiers of the Regular Jiménez Battalion were killed attempting to capture the rebel colors. Finally, Sub-lieutenant José María Torres of the Zapadores Battalion succeeded in taking a "blue flag" and replacing it with the colors of his own battalion before he himself was mortally wounded.<sup>15</sup> From various accounts of the battle we can reconstruct the events leading to the capture of a flag at the Alamo.

The shifting masses of troops outside of the walls were pinned down by Texan fire until a breakthrough was made at the breach in the north wall.<sup>16</sup> As the Texans fell back into the plaza, the Mexicans swept across the north and west walls, overpowering riflemen and cannoneers along the way. Once captured, the cannons were turned to face the rebels caught in the open in

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<sup>13</sup>B. C. Utech, "Flag that Waved Over Alamo's 180 Defenders is Discovered by Texan in Mexican Museum," *Fort Worth Star-Telegram*, 12 Nov. 1933, p. 3.

<sup>14</sup>Mary Ann Noonan Guerra, *The Alamo* (San Antonio: Lebco Graphics, 1983), 8.

<sup>15</sup>Sánchez Lamego, "Storming the Alamo."

<sup>16</sup>McAlister, *Alamo*, 182.

the mission plaza.<sup>17</sup>

The rebels then took refuge in the fortified *convento* or “Long Barracks.” The Long Barracks also served as a hospital and headquarters. The Mexicans then proceeded to concentrate a deadly barrage upon the Texans inside.<sup>18</sup>

The guidon of the Greys is believed to have flown from a pole at the southern end of the *convento*, which was the highest point of the fort. Sub-lieutenant Torres and others had to fight their way to the pole in order to cut the ropes securing it to the roof. Pole and flag fell among the dead and dying.<sup>19</sup>

After this point there is no historic evidence as to the disposition of that flag. It is merely assumed that the flag taken to Mexico was the one captured at the *convento* rooftop.

If this were so, the guidon should have borne at least some of the classic signs of battle — rents, bullet holes, and smoke or blood stains. Considering that the main firearm of the Mexican infantryman was the woefully inadequate Model 1809 India Pattern English “Brown Bess” musket<sup>20</sup> combined with the fact that approximately fifty thousand rounds had been expended during the final assault,<sup>21</sup> it seems likely at least one bullet would have accidentally hit the flag.

Before time and deterioration had taken their toll on the guidon it was found to have “no combat marks; it was whole clean and undamaged. . . .”<sup>22</sup> Considering that it is a flag reputed to be at the center of a hellish firefight, it was in amazingly good condition. It may be that the guidon was stowed in the barracks and found only after the defenders had been completely annihilated.

Another possibility is that the Greys’ guidon was not even present during the siege of the Alamo. It is possible that the Greys took their guidon with them and it was captured when Colonel James Fannin surrendered his forces to General Don José Urrea at Goliad.<sup>23</sup>

After Fannin’s troops were massacred, Urrea led his forces into San Antonio to join the main army under Santa Anna.<sup>24</sup> He may have taken the captured guidon with him as a trophy for his president.

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<sup>17</sup> Philip Haythornthwaite, *The Alamo and the War of Texan Independence 1835–36* (London: Osprey Publishing Ltd., 1986), 15–16.

<sup>18</sup> McAlister, *Alamo*, 184.

<sup>19</sup> Guerra, *The Alamo*, 11.

<sup>20</sup> Haythornthwaite, *The Alamo and Texan Independence*, 36.

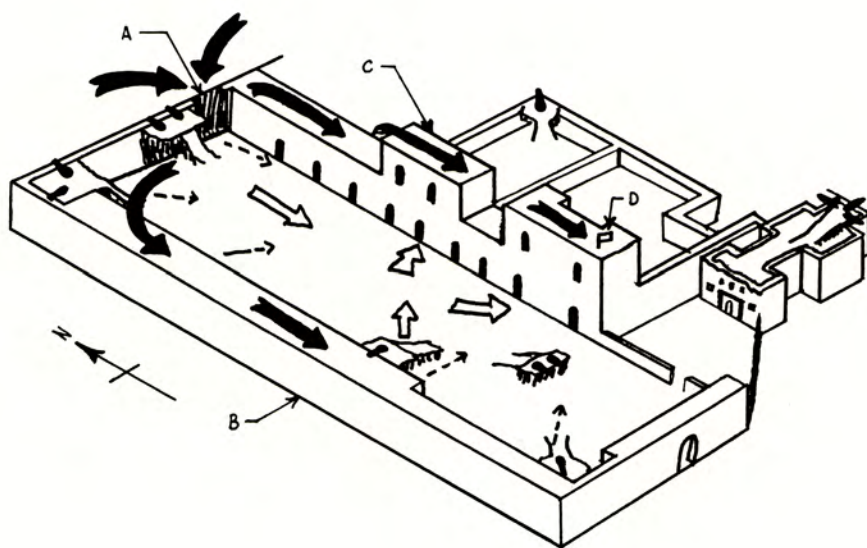
<sup>21</sup> de la Peña, *With Santa Ana*, 51.





<sup>22</sup> Hefter, “The Riddle of the Alamo Battle Flag,” 119.

<sup>23</sup> Haythornthwaite, *The Alamo and Texan Independence*, 18–19.

<sup>24</sup> McAlister, *Alamo*, 135.

# The Alamo on 6 March 1836



-  Mexican Army movements
-  Texan Army movements
-  Pattern of Mexican fire towards Texans
-  Texan cannon

- A. Breach in North Wall
- B. West Wall
- C. *Convento* or Long Barracks
- D. Reputed position of Greys' guidon

If the Alamo battle flag was the Mexican tricolor with the date “1824,” Santa Anna may have realized that taking this flag to Mexico City could inspire supporters of the constitution of 1824 to take up arms against him. It is possible that in order to make the Texas revolution look like intervention from the north, he sent the Greys’ guidon rather than the actual flag flown over the Alamo. Although there is no evidence to support this theory, considering Santa Anna’s well-known deviousness, it is entirely within the realm of possibility.

## The Controversy

In the past few years many have dedicated much time and effort to secure just one flag. Why? The Museo de Intervenciones in Mexico City holds a number of captured American flags. The British still hold American flags captured in the War of 1812.<sup>25</sup> The Americans still hold a number of foreign flags captured in World War II.<sup>26</sup> The State of Texas still holds three Mexican flags captured during the Texas Revolution<sup>27</sup> and the Dallas Historical Society holds one.<sup>28</sup> Why is there no public outcry for the return of these flags?

Perhaps it is the public perception of the Battle of the Alamo itself. Although the fall was a severe blow to the Texan cause, it soon became a rallying point for the rebels. “Remember the Alamo!” became not only the battle cry of the men at San Jacinto but of the American national consciousness as well.<sup>29</sup>

The Alamo has become an icon of American mythology.<sup>30</sup> It is the “John Wayne” of American battles. Ultimately, it is the sacrificial altar of American civil religion and the truest expression of how far Americans would go in the pursuit of their “Manifest Destiny.” The Alamo is not only portrayed as a symbolic struggle between good and evil, it is seen as the symbolic Genesis

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<sup>25</sup> Timothy Wilson, *Flags at Sea* (London: Her Majesty’s Stationary Office, 1986), 49.

<sup>26</sup> Captured foreign flags can be seen at any number of U.S. military museums and in “World War II: 1941–1945; 50th Anniversary Commemorative Exhibitions,” currently touring U.S. museums.

<sup>27</sup> Flags of the Matamoros Battalion (M-3-80T) and the Guerrero Battalion (M-5-80T) held in the Lorenzo De Zavala State Archives and Library, Austin, Texas, and the flag of the Toluca Battalion displayed at the San Jacinto Museum of History near Houston, Texas.

<sup>28</sup> Steve Veazey and John D. Potter, Jr., *Flags in the History of Texas* (Dallas: Hendrick-Long Publishing, 1991), 12.

<sup>29</sup> Susan Prendergast Schoelwer, *Alamo Images: Changing Perceptions of a Texas Experience* (Dallas: DeGolyer Library and Southern Methodist Univ., 1985), 9.

<sup>30</sup> Schoelwer, *Alamo Images*, 3, 8, 173.

of Texas.<sup>31</sup> The serendipitous discovery of the guidon brought to light a holy relic in the creation myth of a new Anglo-American nation. That relic is the focus of an ongoing crusade.

On many occasions Texas has petitioned the government of Mexico to return the guidon. Mexico consistently refuses to discuss the matter, often citing the guidon's fragile state as the reason that it cannot be allowed to be transported.<sup>32</sup> To Mexico the flag is a trophy of war paid for with the blood of her sons defending her from outside intervention. It is a treasure not to be surrendered easily.

While the idea of trophies of war may seem archaic today, it should be noted that the U.S. Armed Forces in the recent Gulf War appropriated large amounts of captured equipment for display as trophies.<sup>33</sup>

How far are Americans willing to go to possess this flag? Some Texas fourth grade students came up with the idea of trading the cork prosthetic leg of Santa Anna, which was captured during the American War against Mexico.<sup>34</sup> The death mask of Pancho Villa was also considered as a suitable trade item for the flag. The mask, which was owned by an El Paso woman, had already been returned to Mexico some time before.<sup>35</sup>

Others cite the fact that on two occasions the United States has returned captured battle flags to Mexico and, therefore, Mexico should reciprocate by returning the Greys' guidon.<sup>36</sup> The first instance occurred on 3 March 1947 when President Harry Truman presented to President Miguel Alemán the flags captured at Chapultepec Castle on 13 September 1847.<sup>37</sup> They were the flags in which Mexico's "Child Heroes" wrapped themselves before the children leaped off a cliff to avoid the flags' capture.<sup>38</sup> The other was the return of seventy-six captured Mexican flags on 13 September 1950. The act, which was intended as a gesture of goodwill towards Mexico, coincided with the 103d anniversary of the Battle of Chapultepec.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>31</sup>Schoelwer, *Alamo Images*, 4.

<sup>32</sup>"Mexican Curators: Texans Will Have to Find Alamo Flag," *Odessa [Texas] American*, 24 June 1991, p. 2A.

<sup>33</sup>Barry McWilliams, *This Ain't Hell . . . But You Can see It From Here!*, ed. Colin Sorel McWilliams (Novato, Calif.: Presido Press, 1992), 220–26.

<sup>34</sup>"Kids May Not Get Flag, But the Idea's a Corker," *San Antonio Light*, 13 Feb. 1986.

<sup>35</sup>Pete Szilagyl, "Alamo Flag Brings Mexico Under Siege in Sesquicentennial Bid," *Austin American-Statesman*, 1 Dec. 1985, p. 1A.

<sup>36</sup>Szilagyl, "Mexico Under Siege," p. 1A.

<sup>37</sup>Robert A. Pastor and Jorge G. Castañeda, *Limits to Friendship: The United States and Mexico* (New York: Knopf, 1988), 23.

<sup>38</sup>*Enciclopedia de México*, vol. 4 (Mexico City: Enciclopedia de México, 1972), s.v. "Guerra de E.U. a México."

<sup>39</sup>"Flags Across the Border," *Newsweek*, 25 Sep. 1950, 48.

This argument can be countered by the fact that article IV of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, which officially ended the 1846–48 war, stipulates that the United States will restore all “apparatus of war . . . and other public property. . . .”<sup>40</sup>

On 3 April 1985, the Texas Congressional delegation sent a request to President Miguel de la Madrid of Mexico, calling for the return of the Greys’ guidon. The request, which was supported by many other state delegations (notably those that had sent volunteers to fight for Texas), stated that the returning of the flag would be “a positive gesture of goodwill” and a “symbol of U.S. – Mexican friendship.”

Senator Phil Gramm of Texas would not sign the request. He felt that it did not go far enough. He sought the permanent return of the guidon to Texas because of its “tremendous historical significance.” The only reply received was a confirmation from a low level government official acknowledging receipt of the request.<sup>41</sup>

On 16 June 1991 a resolution was passed by the Texas Legislature but not signed by Governor Ann Richards; the resolution formally asked President Carlos Salinas de Gortari to return the guidon to Texas. The resolution also called for President George Bush to request the return of the guidon at the Free Trade talks.<sup>42</sup>

On another front, Fort Worth, Texas radio station WBAP encouraged listeners to write to the President of Mexico, in care of the station, asking to return the guidon. The campaign yielded over 7,000 letters from across the country. Although the letters were screened before they were forwarded to Mexico, officials there were insulted by some of the letters. This resulted in a greater determination to keep the flag because, for them, the perceived insults turned the flag into “the heart of Mexico.”<sup>43</sup>

Since Mexico apparently will not give, sell, trade, or loan the flag, it would seem to some that the flag will forever remain in Mexico. Some, however, are not so easily daunted. With no other avenues available, some Texans believe that outright theft would be a suitable solution to the flag question. A group of Austinites reportedly have offered to pay as much as \$36,000 to anyone who could secure possession of the flag by whatever means.<sup>44</sup> To counter this threat, museum curators have carefully hidden

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<sup>40</sup>“Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo,” in *Statutes at Large of the United States of America, 1789–1873* (Washington, 1851), 9:924.

<sup>41</sup>Szilagyl, “Mexico Under Siege.”

<sup>42</sup>“Mexican Curators: Texans Will Have to Find Alamo Flag.”

<sup>43</sup>Szilagyl, “Mexico Under Siege.”

<sup>44</sup>Szilagyl, “Mexico Under Siege.”

the guidon in one of several Mexico City museums. Officials now deny any knowledge of the guidon's whereabouts.<sup>45</sup>

## U.S. – Mexico Relations

A majority of Americans remain dumbfounded at Mexico's obstinate refusal to return the flag. This may be because most Americans are blissfully unaware of the history of United States – Mexico relations.

First of all, Mexico considers the loss of Texas to be the result of plans conceived in Washington.<sup>46</sup> Mexico also feels that the annexation of Texas was a matter of United States intervention in Mexican affairs and resulted in the loss of Mexican territory.<sup>47</sup> The American War against Mexico, which ended in what Mexico believes to be the outright theft of vast expanses of Mexican territory, was followed by the forced sale of the area known as the Gadsen Purchase. These events validated Mexico's fears of Anglo-American domination of North America.<sup>48</sup>

In the 20th century, the occupation of the port of Veracruz in 1914 by the U.S. Navy and the U.S. Army's Punitive Expedition of 1916 raised fears of further loss of territory. By one account, the United States had invaded, occupied, and otherwise interfered in Mexican internal affairs a total of 285 times from independence to 1918.<sup>49</sup> The long history of Anglo depredations against Hispanics living in former Mexican lands tends to confirm to Mexicans the low regard Americans have towards Mexico.<sup>50</sup>

To make matters worse, intensified efforts to retrieve the guidon came at a bitter time in Mexican history — the 1986 Texas Sesquicentennial. While the occasion may have been a joyous event in Texas, it was a bitter memory in Mexico.<sup>51</sup>

For these historic reasons, Mexico feels that it cannot cooperate in returning the guidon. Political tradition holds that if Mexico were to yield on this small issue to the United States, Mexico would eventually be forced

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<sup>45</sup>“Mexican Curators: Texans Will Have to Find Alamo Flag.”

<sup>46</sup>Angela Moyano Pahissa, *La Pérdida de Texas* (Mexico City: Editorial Planeta Mexicana, 1991), 78.

<sup>47</sup>“Bitterness Tinges Mexican View of Sesquicentennial,” *San Antonio Express-News*, 11 May 1986.

<sup>48</sup>Richard Griswold del Castillo, *The Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo: A Legacy of Conflict* (Norman, Okla.: Univ. of Oklahoma Press, 1990), 59.

<sup>49</sup>Pastor and Castañeda, “Limits to Friendship,” 123.

<sup>50</sup>Stan Steiner, *La Raza: The Mexican Americans* (New York: Harper and Row, 1969), 359–61.

<sup>51</sup>“Bitterness Tinges Mexican View of Sesquicentennial.”

to give in to new demands and interventions from its powerful northern neighbor.<sup>52</sup>

Because of Mexican political tradition, it is doubtful any president could authorize the return of the guidon to the United States. Any president who did so would be branded a traitor to the fatherland. As long as Mexico perceives itself to be a weak Third World nation, it will vigorously resist any U.S. political overtures for the return of the guidon. Every request for the guidon by the United States is doomed by American ignorance of history; Mexico is similarly gridlocked by its perception of history.<sup>53</sup>

Even overtures of friendship such as the returning of Mexican battle flags are met with apprehension. Some Mexican newspapers voiced their opposition to the move, fearing that it could revive old hatreds.<sup>54</sup> Only an extraordinary event like World War II has caused Mexico to act as one with the United States. Because national survival required cooperating with the United States in political, military, and economic matters, Mexicans were asked to “cancel any ill feelings originating from inexorable historic events.”<sup>55</sup>

For the foreseeable future the guidon of the New Orleans or San Antonio Greys will likely remain in Mexico City. It will remain for the same reasons that Texas wants to see it returned. In Texas it serves as a symbol of glory and courage to be remembered forever. In Mexico it is also a symbol, a symbol of lessons never to be forgotten.

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<sup>52</sup>Pastor and Castañeda, *Limits to Friendship*, 71.

<sup>53</sup>Pastor and Castañeda, *Limits to Friendship*, 52–70.

<sup>54</sup>“Flags Across the Border,” *Newsweek*.

<sup>55</sup>Romulo Mungia, Sr., *Symbol of Solidarity . . . The Mexican Banner in the Cradle of American Liberty* (San Antonio: Mungia Printers, 1943), 12.