

LAMAR'S IDEA OF "NATIONALISM"

Lamar decided the Cherokees must leave Texas, where they had resided as long as the Americans themselves. Whether this policy was wise or not, it was in line with Lamar's major policy of "laying the foundations of a great empire." It was part of his "ambitious nationalism." Lamar was opposed to the annexation of Texas to the United States from the first. He had dreams of another great independent republic, side by side with the United States, which ultimately would stretch from the Gulf of Mexico to the Pacific. He looked forward to the time when both New Mexico and California, which were still parts of Mexico, would be incorporated in this new republic. The key to Lamar's whole course as president of the Republic of Texas lies in this. He did not conceive his task as that of establishing stable and economical government within the settled sections of Texas. He conceived himself in the role of an empire-builder, and as laying the foundations of a new nation which would one day rival the United States in area, population and wealth. If history had been different—if Texas had never been annexed to the United States, and if New Mexico and California had finally been annexed by Texas instead—the people of the nation which would have resulted would today honor Lamar probably as the greatest man in that nation's history. Certainly no other man during this period had such lofty dreams.

Anson Jones, who served in the senate during Lamar's administration, took the president and his cabinet to task on the scale of their operations. He told Lamar that it was a great fault to think and act as a great nation when, in point of fact, Texas was as yet but "a first-rate county." He pointed out that there were counties in the United States that were ahead of Texas in wealth and production, and suggested that in following Lamar's policy Texas might result in ruin. But this sort of talk could not affect Lamar, who considered such opinions as "lacking in vision". The truth is, Anson Jones made a lot of sense. Many of the problems facing the Texas government were not very different from those of a large and populous county. But it was characteristic of Lamar's temperament that he was not nearly so much interested in those problems as in the task of "laying the foundation of a great empire." This is what Anson Jones had to say about Lamar at the time:

Lamar's idea of
"nationalism"
continued

"General Lamar may mean well—I am not inclined to challenge his motives—he has fine literary talents, and is an elegant writer. But his thinking is altogether of a dreamy, poetic nature, a sort of political poet and crusader, and completely unfit for the duties and the every-day realities of this position. Texas is too small for a man of such wild, visionary 'magnificent ambition.'"

This judgment may have been a little severe. But certainly Lamar's temperament did not fit him for the presidency. He saw himself as the leader of a great nation when really Texas was just a struggling infant republic. There can be no doubt that his views influenced decisions about the Cherokees. Instead of endeavoring to have an understanding with the Cherokees over their negotiations with the Mexicans and to establish peace with them, Lamar decided that they must leave Texas. And, in spite of the fact that there was no money in the Texas treasury, he proposed to pay the Indians for their other losses, if they would leave the country peaceably.

Lamar's policies regarding Indians

The Cherokees refused to go. They felt they had a right in the country, and to the lands that they had been cultivating for years ---they were a semi-civilized race, and lived by agriculture and stock raising, rather than by hunting. They believed they had as good a right in the country as the Americans. So they refused to comply with Lamar's proposal. A meeting was called with the Cherokee chiefs and Texas and the Indians pretended to agree to leave Texas. They said they would quit the country for a fee, but after the chiefs had left the place and returned to their villages, it was discovered that this was merely a play for time, and that the Cherokees were gathering their forces for the purpose of warfare. Chief Bowles, the leading chief of the Cherokees, was discovered two days after the meeting to be gathering the Indians for a battle. Edward Burleson and General Rusk lead the Texas militia in a decisive battle against them at a point on the Neches, near the Indian village, in what is now Cherokee County. The Indians were defeated and Chief Bowles was killed. The survivors fled from the battlefield and ultimately left the country.

During the next year Lamar turned his attention to the Comanches, who had been committing raids in the west and carrying off prisoners. On March 19, 1840, the "council house fight" occurred in which twelve Comanche chiefs were killed at San Antonio. The chiefs had come by appointment to discuss a treaty, and had been told to bring with them all the prisoners in their possession. Instead of complying they brought only one prisoner, a little girl, though it was known there were many others. The chiefs were then informed that they would be held as hostages until the other prisoners were delivered up. One attempted to escape and, when challenged by a sentry at the door, drew his knife. He was shot down and instantly the other chiefs drew their knives and began a desperate struggle for their liberty. Efforts to stop them failed, and the Texans were compelled to use their rifles. All of the twelve chiefs were killed. At the end of the event, the Texans killed thirty-five more of the Indians. Seven Americans were killed and eight wounded.

The Comanches then went on the warpath, but in August they were decisively defeated by a force of Texas regulars under Gen. Felix Huston in a battle at Plum Creek, near Gonzales. In October the same year an expedition under Col. John H. Moore destroyed the main Comanche village on the upper Colorado and killed more than a hundred warriors. A more or less constant war with the Indians was kept up during the whole of Lamar's administration, and when Houston became president again in 1841, a number of Indian prisoners, mostly women and children, were in the hands of the Texans, while the Indians held several white prisoners. Houston restored the policy of cooperation without delay, and it proved very successful. It is probable that Lamar's aggressive policy

contributed to some extent to Houston's success in keeping the Indians quiet during his second administration, for the savages were glad to welcome peace. But Lamar's policy was very costly and was counted by his critics as among the extravagances of his regime. It has been pointed out that in the entire five years of his two terms as president, Houston spent only \$294,092 in dealing with the Indians, whereas Lamar's Indian expenses amounted to more than two and a half million dollars in three years. In other words, Lamar spent in three years more than eight times as much as Houston spent in five.

Lamar moves the seat of government to Austin

Lamar had another idea, in keeping with his "ambitious nationalism," related to the founding of the town of Austin and the removal of the seat of government from Houston to that place. The people of Houston, of course, desired that the temporary location should be made permanent, but every ambitious town in the republic, which had any chance at all of capturing the prize, was opposed to this. There was an overwhelming sentiment, therefore, against leaving the capital at Houston. But there was a decided division between the "east" and the "west." Characteristically, Lamar sided with the advocates of a western capital, for his larger vision of an empire stretching to the Pacific included all of Texas, of course, and he expected the broad prairies of the west to be settled soon. The permanent capital should be near the center of population, and in a few years, he said, that center would be in the neighborhood of the then existing frontier. It was just like Lamar to think chiefly of the future. No one could agree on the location so, it was decided to build an entirely new town and to locate it on the frontier.

President Lamar promptly appointed Edwin Waller as the agent to establish the town. The site was almost a complete wilderness, only two families, those of Harrell and Hornsby, residing on the land. There were no settlements north of it on the Colorado, and the nearest communities to the northeast on the Brazos were sixty miles away. San Antonio was eighty-four miles to the southwest, with no settlements between, and there were only a few families on the Colorado between the site and the town of Bastrop. The new capital, in accordance with the law creating it, was named Austin, in honor of Stephen Fuller Austin, the "father of Texas," and on the first Monday in November 1839, the fourth congress of the Republic of Texas began its sessions there. By that time it was a community of about fifteen hundred people.

Critics of Lamar considered the placing of the capital at Austin as another of his sins. But the passing of time has confirmed his idea, for the only criticism that is likely to be heard today about the location of the capital is that it is too far east instead of west. Lamar's habit of looking to the future proved to work in this

instance, in spite of the fact that Houston, during his second term, tried to move the seat of government back to the town of Houston.

Lamar's vision for free education and land-ownership for all

Another example of Lamar's habit of "considering the future" was his insistence upon setting aside part of the public lands for use in public education. Indeed, in this respect he was far ahead of his contemporaries. Public free schools did not exist in most of the states of the United States, and in many of them the idea of education for all children at the expense of the public was regarded as extreme radical. Lamar, who was a great admirer of Thomas Jefferson, imitated him in his passion for education. He urged Congress, therefore, to see the importance of education as part of free government, and very wisely set aside public land for schools as a way to insure that it happened.

Congress was impressed by Lamar's proposal, and on January 26, 1839, passed a law providing land should be set aside in each county for the support of primary schools or academies. More land was added each year and standards were set for teachers. This was the foundation of the school system of Texas.

It was Lamar's dream that the great nation, which Texas was destined to be in the future, should be composed of self-reliant, independent and enlightened citizens. On the same day that the bill was passed appropriating land for education, it was also provided that every immigrant family that arrived during the next year should be entitled to six hundred and forty acres. Then, in order to ensure every family in the republic the possession of a home, Congress passed a Homestead Law. Texas became in a very true sense a "land of beginning again," and such measures as the Homestead Law were the natural product of the spirit that prevailed. Men went to Texas in those days to make a new start in life and many thousands succeeded in doing this in a marked degree.

New problems arise with Mexico

In Mexico, a group established a republic separate from Mexico and began to interact with Texas. Lamar saw the border of Texas and Mexico as a considerable coastline to defend. Therefore he proposed a new Texas navy. The vessels for the new Texas navy were delivered in 1839, and when the government of Yucatan proposed to Lamar a plan of naval cooperation he consented to the arrangement. The republic government agreed to supply the money for the support of the Texas navy if it would enlist in a war upon Mexican vessels and provide adequate protection to Yucatan's coast. This would relieve the Texas treasury of a considerable burden, and Lamar regarded it as a favorable arrangement for Texas. It did not turn out to be so favorable for Texas in the

long run. At one time, the Texas navy was almost completely devoted to the service of Yucatan. The Republic of Yucatan existed for three years, after which it peacefully went back to being part of Mexico again.

Lamar declined to form an alliance with the "Republic of the Rio Grande" for the reason that he was not particularly interested in extending the influence of Texas south of that river. But he was very much interested in extending, not only the influence, but also the actual jurisdiction of the Texan government in another direction...toward the west. When Lamar became president, however, he took the position that the government of the Republic of Texas should adopt measures to extend its authority to the upper waters of the Rio Grande, which would include Santa Fe. This was in keeping with Lamar's "ambitious nationalism" and his dream of "an empire extending from the Gulf of Mexico to the Pacific." Bills were subsequently introduced in both houses of Congress, appropriating money for an expedition to establish Texan authority over the territory. Congress did not approve of the project, however, Lamar continued to believe that it should be undertaken.

Lamar and the Santa Fe Expedition

Lamar sent a letter to the citizens of Santa Fe asking them to meet in September and to consider participating with Texas in trade. This letter was inspired by information Lamar had received to the effect that the people of Santa Fe and adjoining settlements in New Mexico were restless under the rule of the governor of the territory. Under the federal constitution of the Mexican republic, New Mexico had been classed as a "territory," and was subject directly to the authority of the national government. The governor of New Mexico was the absolute ruler and the chief beneficiary of the profitable trade, which Santa Fe had carried on with St. Louis since 1804. The purpose of Lamar's letter was to plant in the minds of the people of Santa Fe the idea that should they choose to get rid of this petty tyrant, the Republic of Texas would support them. However, Lamar received no reply to his letter and, due to legislative opposition, he did not send the promised commission in September.

But the project of sending an expedition to Santa Fe continued to occupy Lamar's mind even though many leaders in Texas disagreed. It took such hold of his imagination that he finally came to the decision to undertake it without congressional authority. Nor was it just the wish to extend the jurisdiction of the government that set him on this course. The trade with Santa Fe was considerable and very profitable, and if it could be diverted to Texas, great economic benefits would be gained. It was true that the region between the settled portions of Texas and Santa Fe was an unknown wilderness to the Texans, but Lamar believed that a good route and eventually a military road,

might become a great highway of commerce. Therefore, he began forming plans to send an expedition to Santa Fe.

Lamar's plan was to send a government commission, consisting of three members, whose duty it would be to invite the people of Santa Fe to place themselves under the protection of the Texan flag. A military escort would accompany the commission and a delegation of merchants and traders would be invited to go along for the purpose of establishing businesses with the people of the town. When his plans were complete in outline, Lamar announced the appointment of William G. Cooke, R. F. Brenham and Jose Antonio Navarro as commissioners, and issued an invitation to merchants to join the expedition. He then named Gen. Hugh McLeod to command the military escort, which should consist of two hundred and seventy men, and suggested that businessmen and others intending to accompany the expedition should rendezvous at Austin.

Lamar had little support from the government for this idea and Anson Jones wrote the following letter:

"The Santa Fe expedition was not only unauthorized by Congress, but, in effect, Congress is positively indifferent. I voted against it on all occasions, and the project received very few votes. The money for its expenses was made without the authority of law, and made by Lamar alone. Lamar's ideas can be described in two lines, as 'a chase of silly hopes and fears begun in folly, closed in tears.'"

Whether the quote by Jones justly characterizes Lamar's administration or not, it certainly describes the Santa Fe expedition very well. It was indeed "begun in folly" and "closed in tears." Here is what he said:

"President Lamar and his friends "believed that if a strong party of Texans showed themselves in New Mexico the inhabitants would gladly revolt and put themselves under the protection of the Texan government. They did not, however, realize that complaining about a governor of their own race and language was a very different thing from welcoming rulers from another country. So the Texan expedition made a huge mistake.

"Not only was the expedition inadequate in size, but it turned out also to be inadequately equipped for the hardships of the journey. In fact nobody knew anything about the country in which they were travelling and had no notion of where they were going. A Mexican who accompanied them had been a trapper on the headwaters of the Red River, and had been in New Mexico, but he was utterly lost long before he reached the Mexican settlements."

For about six weeks the journey was pleasant enough, for its course led them into country in which there was a plentiful supply of game for food, and in which there was an abundance of water and grass for the horses and cattle. But after that they entered country of a very different character. It was mountainous and arid, and when the last of the cattle was slaughtered and provisions ran short, the party began to encounter difficulties. To obtain food in a wilderness for a company of more than three hundred men would have been no small task under the best conditions. But in a country where there was neither vegetation nor game, and where even water was extremely scarce, it was practically impossible. Realizing that starvation would soon be an impending danger if provisions were not obtained, the commissioners decided to send three men ahead to announce the approach of the expedition and to return with food. The group was forced to eat snails and lizards, and to make matters worse, many of them were forced to proceed on foot, their horses having been lost in a stampede. Three weeks of such conditions brought the unhappy pilgrims to near starvation and, still they had no word from the three men sent ahead. They decided that the best-mounted men should push on ahead, while the rest established camp and remained in the wilderness until relief could be sent.

When the three scouts arrived at the Mexican settlements early in September, they were promptly placed under arrest, in spite of their arguments that the mission was a peaceful one, which claim they supported by displaying copies of President Lamar's proclamation, printed in the Spanish language. The governor of New Mexico set about immediately to alarm the people by circulating the report that the Texans were coming to conquer the country, and that they would kill them all and burn their homes. A condition of general excitement was created and soon the whole population was ready to join in repelling the "invaders." One of the three Texans escaped from his captors with the intention of making his way back to the main party to warn them of the situation, but he was recaptured and shot.

Eventually the whole company made it to Santa Fe. Most of them were now weakened and starving and were promptly made prisoners by a superior force of Mexicans. Thus the entire expedition was captured without the necessity of firing a single shot.

From the moment of their surrender, the prisoners were treated with great cruelty, and the march from San Miguel to the border of New Mexico at El Paso was one of almost constant torture. Many of the men were exhausted and found it extremely difficult to keep going. The commander of their guard had no sympathy for such men, and those who faltered in the march were

brutally treated and in many instances they were shot down in their tracks and their bodies left by the wayside. During the three weeks consumed by the journey to El Paso, the prisoners were in constant fear for their lives. But at the border they were turned over to troops of the national government and thenceforth they were treated more humanely. However, the journey was a long and hard one. To add to their other miseries smallpox broke out among the prisoners and a number of them died from this disease. A rather amusing aspect of the journey was the fact that it soon became evident to the prisoners that they were on exhibition. They were paraded through the principal streets of every city and town between El Paso and Mexico City, the object being to display before the gaping crowds this evidence of the great power of Santa Anna's government. American prisoners provided a spectacle worth going miles to see. For three months this march was kept up, and finally the survivors of the expedition which had left Texas in high spirits eight months before arrived at the Mexican capital early in February. There they were thrown into prison.

Some prisoners were freed by diplomatic negotiations, but the affair created great anger in the United States, and the newspapers printed vivid accounts of the sufferings of the prisoners. The Mexican government reluctantly released those who could claim the protection of the United States or of European governments, but the rest were kept confined in military prisons for four months. At the end of that time, most of the Texans were released.

Lamar's term ends

President Lamar's administration came to an end while the Santa Fe prisoners were being marched to Mexico City. Houston was inaugurated in December 1841, and immediately he announced a complete reversal of the policies of Lamar. He declared that three-fourths of the money consumed in Indian wars during Lamar's administration could have been saved by following a policy of cooperation with respect to the Indians, and advised the establishment of peace with them as soon as possible. Houston made budget cuts in the administration of the government, a reduction of the number of officers and the adoption of a pay-as-you-go policy. And while admitting that it would be futile to renew efforts to establish peace with Mexico, he recommended that no hostile moves should be made and that steps be taken to establish trade with the Mexicans on the border. Houston, however, was destined to reap what Lamar had sown.