

It's the economy, Santa Anna

(2 March 2007)

Gilberto Hinojosa

On March 2, 1836, a group of Texans met at Washington-on-the-Brazos and signed a Declaration of Independence from Mexico.

It was an act of bravery. But the die had been cast in the fall of 1835, when Texans staged a revolt against Mexico's national government that would surely have brought retaliation.

The declaration, which painted the war simply as an anti-Mexican conflict, facilitated as Texans getting money, arms and men from the United States. It also fanned latent anti-Mexican sentiments that lasted for decades.

This culture conflict theory ignores the participation in the revolt of Tejanos (Mexican-Texans), who had developed a strong regional identification with interests different from those of the Mexican heartland.

Indeed, the revolt should be framed in the political controversy within Mexico's politics. Since independence from Spain in 1821, Mexicans had debated, and fought over, the political character of the new nation.

Those in the outlying states, including both Anglo and Mexican-Texans, favored the continuation of the de facto provincial autonomy of the Spanish colonial system. In the new nation, they supported states' rights and a loose federation. Thus they were called Federalists.

Those in the Mexican heartland supported a strong national government and were called Centralists. Antonio López de Santa Anna, who came into power in the early 1830s, led this faction.

The Centralists appealed to the legal authority of the Spanish viceroy as the critical unifying rule from the center.

Historians today tend to see the Texas Revolution as a Federalist vs. Centralist controversy, at least initially. Some even say the flag flying over the Alamo bore the "1824" reference to the first (Federalist) Mexican Constitution.

Yet like the American vs. Mexican, or cultural theory, the Centralists vs. Federalist, or political theory, needs to be peeled off.

At the core of the revolt was the economy. The Mexican state of Texas had become economically linked to the United States and through the United States to the world trade system.

American immigrants to Mexican Texas had brought with them the same economic links all Americans on the westward movement carried.

Frontier families quickly turned from self-subsistence farming to cash crops that were sold through the U.S. system in world markets.

Settlers, in turn, imported American tools, clothing and food items.

Santa Anna stationed troops along the Sabine River, the Tejas-U.S. border in the early 1830s, to redirect the bustling Texas economy southward and connect it to that of central Mexico.

When he did this, Santa Anna threatened the livelihood of Anglo and Mexican-Texans — and he had a major revolt on his hands.

This economic reaction was expressed in political terms, thus the dominance of the political interpretation of the revolt.

There are a couple of other misleading interpretations. The slave state conspiracy theory, for example, argues that politicians and slave owners from the South plotted the revolt so that Texas, once separated from Mexico, would enter the nation as a slave state.

Southerners supported the revolt, and Texas did enter the union as a slave state, but it's a stretch to posit that Southerners actually plotted the revolution.

Similarly, ardent supporters of the revolution myths paint this war as a cosmic conflict between good and evil. Heart-wrenching retellings of the Alamo and Goliad battles lend themselves to this view.

But participants — and certainly the victors — in all wars paint their conflicts in this way.

At bottom, the American westward movement, fueled by a strong U.S.-world trade commercial network, brought settlers to Texas.

These settlers could not have survived and prospered if linked to a less dynamic economic system.

When Anglo or Mexican Texans' economic ties to the United States were threatened, Texans revolted.

Cultural tensions were certainly part of conflict between Texas and Mexico, but they weren't at the core of Texas Revolution.

Recognizing the political — and especially the economic — roots of Texas' Declaration of Independence from Mexico in 1836 will let us accept today's economic interdependence with Mexico and the Mexican component of our multicultural society.