

# FOREWORD



BY  
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Few episodes in the history of the Americas have ignited more lasting passions or generated more contradicting interpretations than the Mexican War that eventually resulted in the ceding of northern Mexico to the United States. To the present day, sharply conflictive emotions are stirred. Americans view the massacres at the Alamo and Goliad as martyrdom, prelude to the defining victory at San Jacinto. Some Americans view even today's Mexico through the lens of the bloody events of 1836. Many modern Mexicans are certain that the arrival of American colonists in the province of Tejas and the subsequent declaration of Texian independence was a planned process of imperial acquisition, the purposeful fomenting of war and the theft of territory.

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And then there are the Mexican-Americans of Texas, who embody those contradictions as persons of Mexican heritage, born and raised as citizens of the United States. Over the many generations of second-class status in Texas, it has not been unusual for Mexican-Americans to hear the hatefully delivered final argument in a discussion about whatever controversy of the moment: “Why don’t you go back to Mexico?”

But for many Mexican-Americans there is no “going back.” They are Texans by birth, rooted in this land since it was a part of Mexico. Mexico slid away from them when the border was fixed at the Rio Grande and home for them remained on the north side of the river. As such they are the spiritual sons and daughters of another man of contradictions—Don Juan Seguin—a Mexican citizen who fought against the government of Mexico, a gentlemanly observer of Mexican laws who broke with those laws out of love for the *tierra* of his birth, a mayor of San Antonio who supported independence from the government he swore to uphold, a loyal Texan stripped of his public responsibilities by the new Republic of Texas.

When in 1981 I became the first person of Mexican heritage to serve as Mayor of San Antonio since Juan Seguin in 1842, I learned a deep respect for him and felt a certain humble kinship with him. I was proud to be in a lineage—distant and broken as it was—traceable to this remarkable man. I imagined the conflicts he felt as he watched the growing presence of American colonists in Texas, heard their arguments against the central government of Mexico, experienced himself the heavy-handedness of Mexico’s dictatorship, and foretold the looming inevitability of bloodshed. He was a peace-loving man presiding over a seething cauldron of tensions.

He was an official of the Mexican government who could not defend the over-reaction and unreasonableness of his nation’s leaders. He appreciated the nation-building spirit of the colonists’ leaders—of men such as Stephen F. Austin—but recoiled at the hot-bloodedness of some of the newer American arrivals. I could

only imagine his fears for his beloved *pueblo*, squarely in the path of massive forces on collision courses.

I was mayor of San Antonio 150 years after the Mexican War. Passions should have long ago cooled and people in both nations should have come to terms with the intervening histories of both the United States and Mexico. But there was one moment during my tenure as mayor when I sensed how current those passions could be. The year was 1986—the year of the Texas Sesquicentennial—150 years after the Declaration of Independence and the fateful battles of the spring. The date was March 6th, the date of the fall of the Alamo.

As Mayor I was present at the Alamo at dawn that morning, as re-enactors prepared to commemorate the defense of the Alamo against the two major assaults Santa Anna's army unleashed on that date. I sensed an oddly hostile tone that morning, different from any other I had experienced in my five years as San Antonio's Mayor. I suddenly understood what it was: I was not welcome there. I was Mexican. Amidst the war whoops and the angry glares, I sensed on a microscopic scale the contradictions that Juan Seguin lived.

That same day, Mexican-American friends who I regarded as responsible, enlightened leaders of the community suggested to me that the city government erred in allowing the commemoration to proceed so one-sidedly as a Texas reflection of the martyrdom at the Alamo. They added that it would cost San Antonio its hard-earned, jealously guarded working relationship with the present leaders of Mexico. There they were again—the ambivalences, the contradictions, the complexities of even our modern duality as a city, as a people.

I reflected introspectively on my obligations as San Antonio's Mayor. I concluded that it was my duty to lead the commemorations of that year, no matter what anyone of any heritage might think. This is our history. Well-documented events transpired in our city, consecrating sacred ground with the blood of both sides.

It is not a Mexican history; it is not a Texas history. There is only *one* history, we the modern inheritors of Texas, people of many traditions and backgrounds. We honor those who sacrificed their lives to create that history. And we are to respect those such as Juan Seguin who worked in a hellish time to make possible the things we are trying to do in a more peaceful era. Amidst the whirlwind of hatred, through the storm of implacable forces, he strove to make a peace, to build a city, to create a new nation of freedom and opportunity.

His life is profoundly instructive as we work to build a modern society in which all human beings can emulate Juan Seguin's attributes: independence of thought, strength of character, and a commitment to justice and a better life for all. Juan Seguin: a worthy father of Texas and a knightly guardian of its enduring ideals.