Many U.S. historians have riddled the myths of the Alamo with dramatic in the mission as selfless heroes who sacrificed their lives to buy more time for their comrades-in-arms. Walter Lord, in an article entitled “Myths and Realities of the Alamo,” broke with the Texas story, which portrays the defenders of the Alamo as freedom-loving Texans who were protecting their homes. Actually, two-thirds of the so-called defenders had recently arrived from the United States, and only a half dozen had been in Texas for more than six years. The filibusters were adventurers who were spoiling for a fight.

The Defense of the Mexican Homeland

Santa Anna led an army of about 6,000 soldiers into Texas. The truth is that Mexicans were defending the homeland—of which Texas was a part. Many of Santa Anna’s soldiers had been forcefully conscripted into the army and then marched hundreds of miles over hot, arid desert land. They were largely poorly equipped Maya natives who did not speak Spanish. In February 1836, the main contingent arrived in Texas sick and ill-prepared to fight. In San Antonio, the filibusters took refuge in a former mission, the Alamo. The siege began in the first week of March. In the days that followed, the defenders inflicted heavy casualties on the Mexican forces, but the Mexicans eventually won.

Those inside the Alamo were hardly legendary characters. William Barret Travis had fled to Texas after killing a man and abandoning his wife and two children. James Bowie, an infamous brawler who had made a fortune running slaves, had wandered into Texas searching for lost mines and more money. The aging Davy Crockett, a legend in his own time, fought for the sake of fighting. Most of the filibusters had come to Texas for riches and glory, hardly the sort of men whom we could say were peaceful colonists protecting their homes.

As the story goes, William Barret Travis told his men that they were doomed and drew a line in the sand with his sword, saying that all who crossed it would elect to remain and fight to the last. Supposedly, all the men valiantly stepped across the line, with an old man in a cot begging to be carried across the line. Countless Hollywood movies have continued to support the myth by dramatizing the bravery of the defenders.

In reality, while the Alamo had little strategic value, it was the best-protected fort west of the Mississippi, and the men fully expected help. The defenders had 21 cannons to the Mexicans’ 8 or 10, and were expert shots equipped with rifles with a range of 200 yards, while the inadequately trained Mexicans were armed with smoothbore muskets with a range of only 70 yards. The walls of the mission protected the Euro-Americans, while the Mexicans advanced in the open and fired at concealed targets. In short, ill-prepared, ill-equipped, and ill-fed Mexicans attacked well-armed, professional soldiers. Moreover, from all reliable sources, it is doubtful whether Travis ever drew a line in the sand. San Antonio survivors, females and noncombatants, did not tell the story until many years later, when the story had gained currency and the myth became legend. Probably the most widely circulated story was that of the last stand of the aging Davy Crockett, who fell “fighting like a tiger,” killing Mexicans with his bare hands. The truth is that seven of the defenders surrendered, and Crockett was among them. The Mexican force executed them, and one man, Louis Rose, escaped.

Travis’s stand delayed Santa Anna’s timetable by only four days, as the Mexicans took San Antonio on March 6, 1836. At first, the stand at the Alamo did not even have propaganda value. Afterward, Houston’s army dwindled, with many volunteers rushing home to help their families flee from the advancing Mexican army. Most Euro-Americans realized that they had lost at the Alamo. Nevertheless, the Alamo battle and the Mexican victory at Goliad resulted in massive aid from the United States as volunteers, weapons, and money entered Texas. The cry of “Remember the Alamo” became a call to arms for Euro-Americans in both Texas and the United States.

Mexicans Win the Battles but Lose the War

After the Alamo and the defeat of another garrison at Goliad on March 20, 1836, southeast of San Antonio, Mexican troops under General José Urrea defeated troops under James W. Fannin, who had defended Goliad. On March 27 on the orders of Santa Anna, 342 prisoners were executed at Goliad. Mexican commanders condemned. Santa Anna was in full control; defiantly cries Goliad." The Mexican army ran Sam Houston out of the territory northwest of then camped an army of about 1,100 men near San Jacinto. There, Santa Anna...