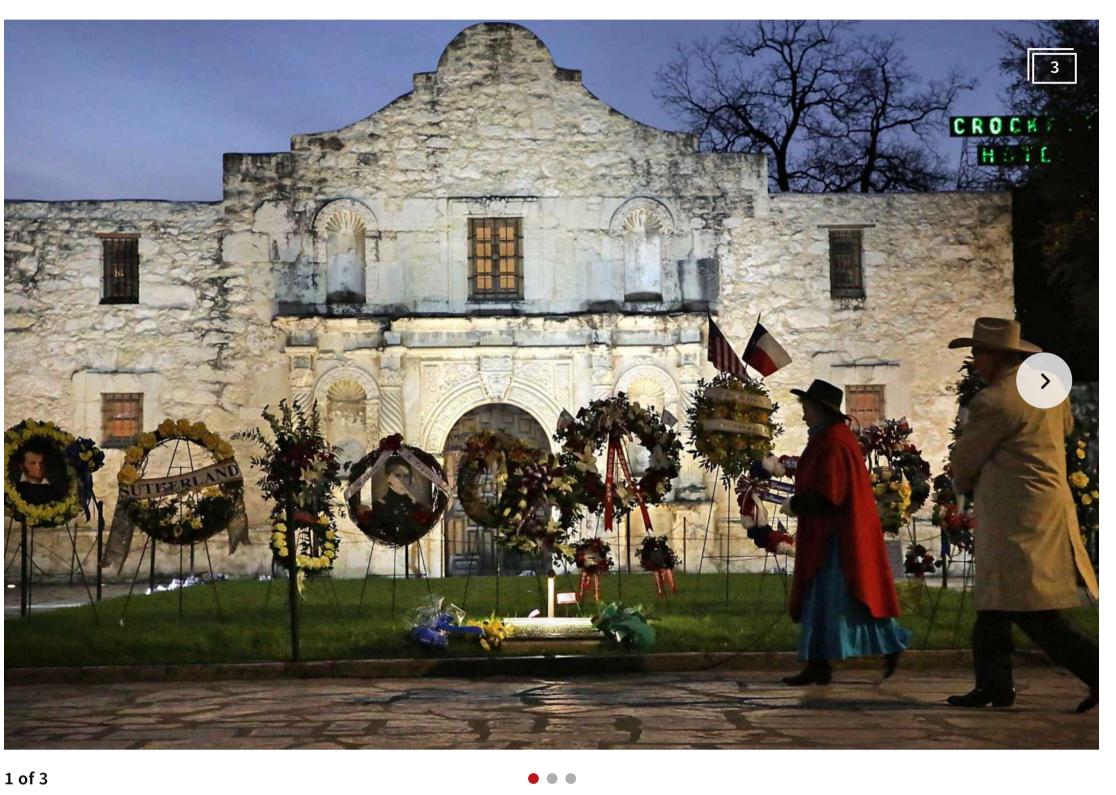


OPINION // COMMENTARY

Commentary: Forgetting - and remembering the Alamo

Paul Stekler, For the Express-News July 9, 2021



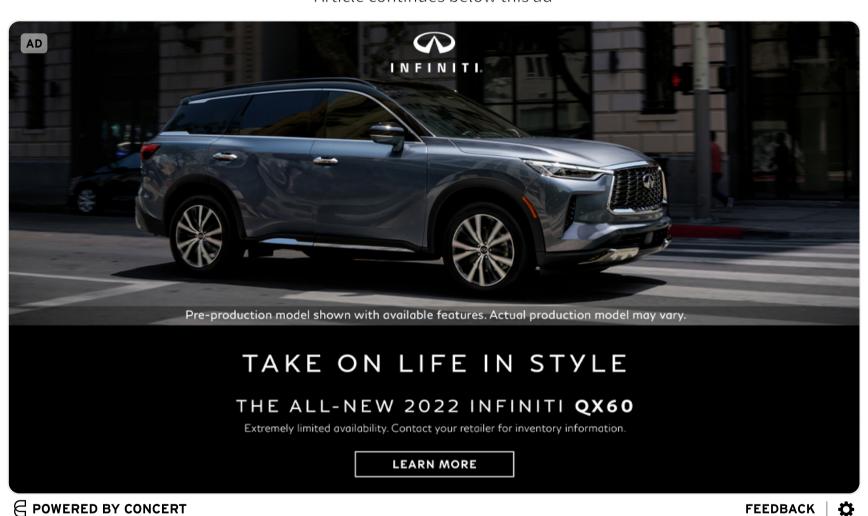
Descendants of Alamo defenders place wreaths in 2019. History is not set in stone. Over time, people discover diaries and documents. They learn about forgotten events. Bob Owen /San Antonio Express-News

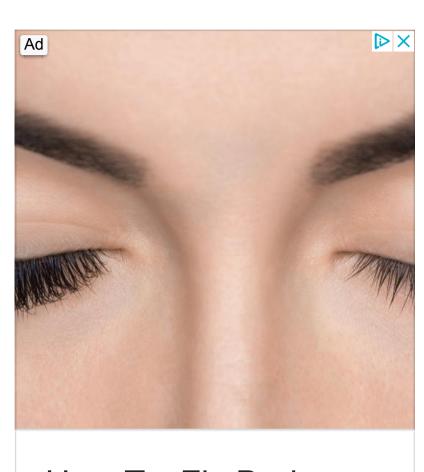
> The same week Gov. Greg Abbott signed bills establishing an 1836 Project advisory committee "to promote patriotic education" and bar public school teachers from linking racism or slavery to the founding "authentic principles" of the United States, a new book, "Forget the Alamo: The Rise and Fall of an American Myth," a take-no-prisoners attack on what the authors called the 1836's battle's "Heroic Anglo Narrative," became available for sale.

In a state rapidly becoming majority-minority, the legislation seemed like a last stand, turning back the clock to a heroes-only understanding of Texas' break from Mexico. Lt. Gov. Dan Patrick, not one to avoid an ideological battle, then forced the staff at the Bullock Texas State History Museum to cancel a discussion of the book with its authors, tweeting that "this fact-free rewriting of TX history has no place." The authors tweeted back that Penguin Press was already printing a second edition as sales mounted.

Who knew we'd still be fighting the battle of the Alamo 185 years later?

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Forget that the Alamo's authors are all Texans. Bryan Burrough writes for Vanity Fair and is the author of six books, including "Barbarians at the Gate." Chris Tomlinson is a columnist for the Houston Chronicle and the Express-News, and is the author of "Tomlinson Hill." Jason Stanford is a longtime political communications strategist and co-author of a Rick Perry appreciation, "Adios Mofo."

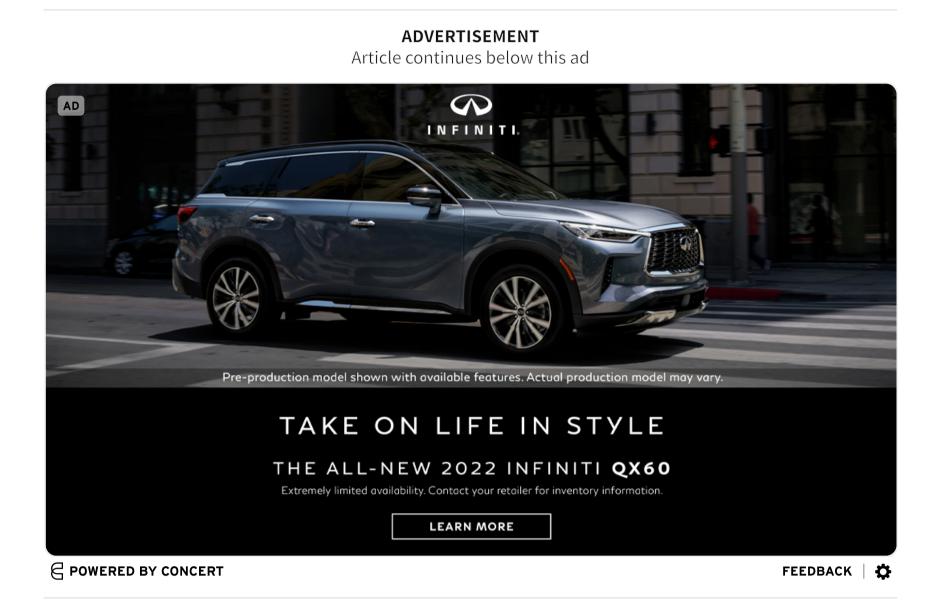
Their book, meant for both Lone Star residents who sat through state history classes in high school and non-Texans, covers the wider context of the Alamo, especially the events leading up to the famous defeat of the mission's defenders against the overwhelming forces of Antonio López de Santa Anna's Mexican army. Even more valuable is its focus on everything that came afterward in building the mythology and the current conflict over the future of the Alamo site. It's also a page-turner.

So underwhelming

I am not a Texan. I'm from New Jersey, best known for hazardous waste dumps, Bruce Springsteen, indicted state officials, "The Sopranos" and for being in between New York City and Philadelphia. They did not teach New Jersey state history in my high school. So when I moved to Texas 25 years ago, I was excited on my first visit to the Alamo, the crown jewel origin story of Lone Star history. And, boy, was it underwhelming. A barely filled old church, an old-style monument and rows of cheap commercial establishments nearby. There was basically nothing of substance to learn about the history there. No matter where you stand on the Alamo's importance, does anyone think what's there now is not kind of sad?

Why little has been done to improve the Alamo site is covered in great detail in "Forget the Alamo." The Daughters of the Republic of Texas, longtime stewards of the grounds, were barely competent to run a gift store. When the state finally intervened with a new master plan, embarrassing questions about the authenticity of some of British rock star Phil Collins' Alamo artifacts, which were supposed to be the centerpiece of a new Alamo museum, began to appear. And then there's Land Commissioner George P. Bush's political future, which may depend on people forgetting the Alamo, or at least his role in advocating the new plan and then opposing it in the face of Republican base opposition.

What's not up for any serious historical debate, if you care about actual facts, is that the Alamo, the 1836 battle and everything that came before and after, was a lot more complex than John Wayne's 1960 movie version, a poster of which hangs in Patrick's Capitol office. As "Forget the Alamo" and most of recent Texas historical research document, the American Texians fought for freedom, but in large part, that was the freedom to own slaves, on which their cotton-producing economy depended.



And what of the most famous heroes of the Alamo? Jim Bowie of knife fame started out as a trader of illegal slaves, arrived in Texas one step in front of a grand jury investigating a huge land fraud in Louisiana, and likely was killed in his bed, too sick with typhus to fight.

William Travis, the young commander of the mission's defenders, wrote great letters asking for reinforcements, but he also deserted his teenage wife and kids in Alabama, and bragged in his diary about his many sexual conquests – and there's no evidence he drew any lines in the sand at the Alamo.

As for Davy Crockett of the wild frontier, I had a Disney-inspired coonskin cap as a kid, but Crockett, who disliked being called Davy and was famous for writing his own mythmaking biography, was a defeated and broke politician when he left Tennessee for Texas. Unless you really want to discount early period reporting and the many eyewitness accounts, just because they're written in Spanish, he didn't go down fighting with his

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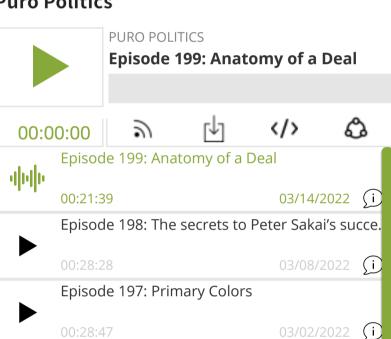
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trusty rifle, Old Betsy, but was captured and executed with a few last survivors.

History anew

To put any controversy over the Alamo in a wider context, we have the current firestorm over numerous states passing bills banning the teaching of critical race education in schools and fighting over the New York Times' 1619 Project. Race is not the easiest thing to teach about in a country where I suspect few people realize that slaves helped build the White House, the U.S. Capitol and the original wall that Wall Street is named after.

Read the 1836 Constitution of the Republic of Texas, which made it not only illegal to free a slave, but barred free people of color from living in the state. Sure, today's controversies work both ways ideologically, as in the recent desire of San Francisco's school board to remove Abraham Lincoln's name from schools. But it's pretty clear that trying to reconstruct any ideas like the Civil War being over state's rights and not the Southern states' rights to preserve slavery, is a fight that's likely to end in Alamo-like defeat.

So why is fighting over our history so important? Well, it's the way we remember our past and how that informs who we are, as a country and a people. But history is not set in stone. Over time, people discover previously unread diaries and documents. Or rediscover previously forgotten events. Such is the case with the burning and massacre of Black Tulsa in 1921, long not spoken of. My historian friend Dan Carter "rediscovered" the sordid railroading of African American teenagers on false rape charges in the Scottsboro Boys trial when he began talking to elderly participants in those events in Alabama back in the 1930s.

Historical revisionism is also not cancel culture or some plot against American values. It's what happens when a new generation of historians deals with those newly discovered facts. And when society changes enough to demand that history include more than dime-store mythological figures.

History is also always a debate. On the one hand, you can only write about the things you know. On the other hand, we are all products of our time, including the mythmaking that serves politics and societal needs more than unbiased truths. But facts are facts. Or as the intellectual lion of the U.S. Senate, the late Daniel Patrick Moynihan, once put it "You are entitled to your opinion. But you are not entitled to your own facts."

Truth already out

Our legislators can pass all the bills they want, but the revisionist train has already left the station. We're several decades past the rise of seminal Western revisionist histories like Patricia Limerick's "The Legacy of Conquest," Richard White's "It's Your Misfortune and None of My Own," Richard Slotkin's "The Fatal Environment," Michael Cronin's essay, "A Place for Stories: Nature, History, and Narrative" and others, who thought it prudent to re-include the Native and Spanish-speaking folks who were here before the Pilgrims landed, and to focus on some of the less romantic aspects of Manifest Destiny. As Limerick wrote: "If Hollywood wanted to capture the emotional center of Western history, its movies would have been about real estate. John Wayne would have been neither a gunfighter nor a sheriff, but a surveyor, speculator, or claims lawyer."

More recent work about Texas, books such as "The Injustice Never Leaves You," by Monica Muñoz Martinez, "Forgotten Dead" by William Carrigan and Clive Webb, and "Cult of Glory: The Bold and Brutal History of the Texas Rangers" by Doug J. Swanson, paint a different side of the state's history than T.R. Fehrenbach's outdated classic, "Lone Star."

There is also both Stephen Harrigan's giant history of Texas, "Big Wonderful Thing," and his wonderful novel, "The Gates of the Alamo." And if all that isn't enough, there's Andre J. Torget's, "Seeds of Empire: Cotton, Slavery, and the Transformation of the Texas Borderlands, 1800-1850," an entire book documenting the central role of slavery in the Texas cotton economy that thousands of Anglos brought with them to the far northeast of Mexico in the early 19th century.

My favorite film growing up was "They Died with Their Boots On," a movie about Custer's Last Stand, once the most written about and event depicted in film in American history. It's the mythic story of the long-haired, charismatic general, played by the dashing (and Australian) Errol Flynn, cut down by Crazy Horse himself (played by the Mexican American Anthony Quinn). Many years later, when I made a documentary about it, "Last Stand at Little Bighorn," seeing it from both white and Native sides in collaborating with Native American novelist James Welch, the reaction from Custer buffs mirrored the craziness of the online reaction against "Forget the Alamo." Go to the Amazon reviews and see for yourself. The book, which I suspect many of the critics never bought or read, clearly touched a nerve.

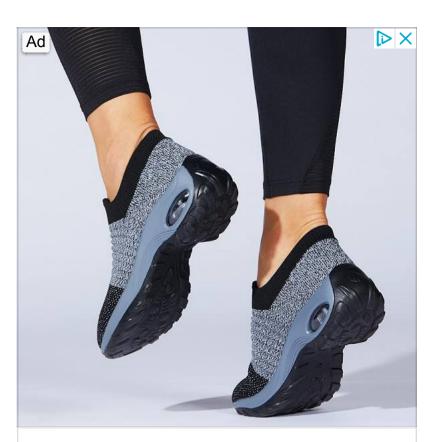
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Better than cliches

Listen, we all love heroes. There's the oft-quoted line from John Ford's "The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance," where John Wayne, ironically, has been forgotten as the real man who killed the villain. As the editor of a newspaper tells a young reporter who wants to write about what actually happened: "This is the West, sir. When the legend becomes fact, print the legend."

Our history is richer when our "heroes" become more than cardboard clichés. Travis, Bowie and Crockett are actually much more interesting the more we know about them, warts and all. The history of the Alamo is more interesting when we know something of the Native peoples who once lived there, the priests who built the missions and the early Tejano settlers, the broad context of the war in 1836 that includes the primacy of slavery, the sordid treatment of non-Anglos that followed, and why and how the myth of the battle of the Alamo rose from the long-neglected, falling-apart remains in San Antonio. This is the beauty of books like "Forget the Alamo" – they make us to want to know more, not less, about what really happened when we remember the Alamo.

Paul Stekler, whose documentary films are about American history and politics, teaches at the University of Texas at Austin. His film, "Last Stand at *Little Bighorn" can be found at https://vimeo.com/228699685.*

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