

Lorenzo de Zavala: Mexican Patriot, Texas Idealist  
by  
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Who was Lorenzo de Zavala and why did he end his days a traitor in the land of his birth and a patriot in the country he had first come to only sixteen months earlier? Zavala came to Texas in the summer of 1835 disappointed at the turn of events in his homeland. Antonio López de Santa Anna, who had been elected president under the Federalist banner, had led a coup against his own government and assumed leadership of the Centralist cause. Among the victims of this turn of events was Zavala, who had been appointed minister to France in late 1833. Santa Anna's transformation to Centralist left the federalist Zavala without a job, and rather than return to Mexico City to confront Santa Anna's wrath, he chose to travel to the country he most admired—the United States. From there, in the summer of 1835 he made his way to Texas, a land where like-minded men offered the prospect of creating the democratic society Zavala so longed for. A natural leader, Zavala soon joined the ranks of Santa Anna's Texian enemies and as the resistance to Centralist rule transformed into a struggle for independence, Zavala threw in his lot with the new nation.

No one could say that Lorenzo de Zavala was an ordinary opportunist. His accomplishments and reversals in a public career stretching over four decades were well known. By 1808, the year in which Napoleon's invasion of Spain triggered the age of Spanish American independence, a twenty-year-old Zavala was already publishing newspapers advocating for political reform. In 1814 he found himself in jail when the reactionary Ferdinand VII resumed the Spanish throne and short-circuited the republican reforms of the Spanish parliament. Prison did not break him, however; he used the time to not only teach himself medicine but to learn English, which allowed him to better understand the political writings from England and the United States that would come to govern his political ideology.

Despite his medical practice, Zavala was at heart a statesman. By 1820, just three years after his release from prison, he was again in the public sphere, first as secretary to the newly organized provincial assembly of Yucatan but, more importantly, as a delegate to the newly restored Cortes, the Spanish parliament in Madrid. Ferdinand had proven a disastrous disappointment to the Spanish people, and a mutiny within the army had forced him to restore the liberal Constitution of 1812, which at least superficially treated Spain's American provinces as equal members of the Spanish empire. Whatever frustration Zavala may have suffered after arriving in Spain and

discovering that no real equality was coming for the American territories, was relieved by the surprising triumph of Mexico's independence movement in the summer of 1821, which put him on the road back to Mexico within months of his arrival in Madrid.

Zavala returned to the newly independent Mexico determined to make a difference. An enemy of monarchy and privilege in all forms, he remained throughout his career a champion of the common man. And that frustrated him, because he perceived how declarations of liberty and democracy alone could not accomplish the lasting betterment of society. He served in the Constituent congresses of 1822, which sought to make Mexico a constitutional monarchy, and of 1824, which created the federal system that the Texas rebellion attempted to defend in the fall of 1835. He served as governor of the State of Mexico twice, attempting to bring about reforms that would create real social justice. In the process he lost faith in European liberals, whom he came to see as having a double standard—advocating true democracy in Europe while justifying military dictatorships in Spanish America owing to social conditions.

Zavala's *Ensayo histórico de las revoluciones de México desde 1808 hasta 1830*, published in Paris and New York in 1831-32, tells us much about the man who helped draft the constitutions of both Mexico and Texas. And his down to earth and brutally honest examination of the great issues confronting Mexico and the new American republics has much to say to us today. He singled out the contradiction between the newly espoused democratic principles of the new states and the perpetuation of the old order:

There is, therefore, a continual collision between the professed doctrines, the institutions that are adopted, and the principles that are established, and the abuses that are sanctioned, the customs that dominate, and the semi-feudal rights that are respected; between national sovereignty, equality of political rights, freedom of the press, and popular government, and military intervention in political affairs, corporate privileges, religious intolerance, and ownership of vast estates.

The solution he proposed was not a blind adherence to the constitution of the United States or the adoption of the principles of the Spanish liberal constitution, for neither remotely reflected Spanish America's reality. The federal system that he espoused for Spanish America was built on the regional

differences that characterized Spain's former possession. The rejection of the Spanish model was based on what he considered "the height of the absurd and the absence of all good sense in sanctioning corporate rights and special privileges in a popular government." If the Spanish American nations could not form honest republican states, they should at least form honest hierarchical governments. To sum up, he predicted Mexico's ongoing political and social troubles:

But a constitution founded on the most liberal foundations, on the model of the North Americans, while conserving a state religion with no tolerance of any other, of privileged troops and military officers in civil posts, of religious convents of both sexes answering only to Roman Church law, of three million citizens without property or known means of subsistence, half a million with political rights to vote in elections without being able to read and write, military tribunals adjudicating in privileged matters, and lastly the stimulus of unbounded liberty in the absence of social guarantees, cannot but produce a perpetual war between such heterogeneous parts and opposing interests.

And, in fact, Zavala's prediction came through and Mexico remained at war with itself to the point that in the 1860s desperate conservatives made a pact with Napoleon III to place a Hapsburg prince, Maximilian, on a restored Mexican Empire. That experiment also failed, and even the iron fist of Porfirio Díaz could not bring about the kind of social and economic justice that prevented revolution from breaking out in Mexico in 1910, exactly a century after Hidalgo first declared "death to bad government."

By the time he started writing the *Ensayo*, Zavala was a veteran of the partisan warfare that had made governing Mexico as a country virtually impossible. The initial exuberance of establishing a federal system that gave individual states a great deal of autonomy had also created an ideological perspective that came to be called Federalism. Unlike the American federalism that was associated with a strong federal government, Mexican federalism was associated with the distribution of power among the federated states. Given the distinct regional differences contained within the old viceroyalty, federalists believed that most government functions should remain among those who understood local conditions best—the people of the various states. Opposed to this idea of a federated national state stood the Centralists, who continued to see Mexico as a collection of corporate and ethnic groupings that needed the strong hand of Mexico City to remain an effective national state. Already by 1823

the southernmost portion of the viceroyalty—today's Central America—had broken off from Mexico and Centralists perceived federalism as the basis for disunion.

It is impossible to fully explain the complexities of Mexico's social, economic, political, and cultural fissures, but Zavala was a keen observer of it all and understood that if the masses were not up to the task of governing themselves, the elites, particularly those who espoused conservative values, would never allow Mexico to become a modern democratic state. The small percentage of the population capable of fully participating in the country's political life was woefully divided, as demonstrated by the failed presidential election of 1828, in which the federalists refused to accept the victory of the centralist candidate and imposed Vicente Guerrero as president, and the coup of 1830, in which the centralist vice president Anastacio Bustamante successfully overthrew Guerrero. Once in power, Bustamante pressed through congress Lucas Alamán's immigration reform project, the Law of April 6, 1830, which attempted to eliminate the threat of losing Texas by closing off immigration from the U.S. As Zavala the federalist observed, "Such is the problem that the wretched Bustamante administration attempted to solve with a law that involves declaring hostilities against a rich and powerful nation whose policy consists of preaching and, above all, making real the principles of maximum liberty."

If, in 1831, Zavala had any hope for Mexico, his aspirations were with the northern provinces, where the pernicious influences of hierarchy, militarism, and political intrigue were much attenuated by distance from Mexico City and proximity to the United States. Already at this time Zavala perceived Mexico's future in Texas. His introduction to Texas had come in 1822, when as a member of the first constituent congress's colonization committee he had met Stephen F. Austin and other Americans wanting a piece of the distant province's development pie. From Austin, from the former commanding general of the U.S. Army, James Wilkinson, and from the future Texas War of Independence hero Benjamin Milam, among others, Zavala learned of the potential of Texas as well as the entrepreneurial drive of Americans. Both of these first impressions would stay with him for the rest of his life and influence future behavior.

Consequently, in writing about the course of development in Texas in the *Ensayo*, Zavala was well aware of how the Texas experiment in foreign immigration had begun. Explaining that the state legislature of Coahuila y Texas, along with that of Veracruz, had been the first to take advantage of the national colonization law to establish generous conditions for foreign settlement, he described what

was happening in Texas:

Don Stephen Austin, a native of the United States of the North, started a vast colonization enterprise in 1820 between the Brazos and Colorado rivers in the vicinity of San Antonio de Béxar. This active and industrious foreigner worked tirelessly for many years to obtain the right to prosper, settling and cultivating that fertile wilderness. And, after all manner of continuous sacrifice, worthy of his English forebears, he has created a flourishing colony that offers the prospect of a fortunate and prosperous future for its inhabitants and their most remote descendants. Other concessions granted in the same state begin to take root and it is to be hoped that within two or three generations this part of the Mexican republic, richer, freer, and more enlightened than the rest of the country, will serve as an example to the other states that continue under a semifederal routine and are led by military and ecclesiastical influence, the baleful inheritance of Spanish domination.

Texas, for Zavala, was an exercise in American practices that had much to offer in light of Mexico's poor experience in the first decade of independence. His unbounded faith in American ideals found expression in what he advocated should be the alternative policy of Mexico:

If the Mexican government, instead of relying on the counterproductive obstacles [included in the Law of April 6, 1830,] made of the new society being formed in Texas a school of liberty and civilization, sending to that rich country the citizens it uselessly maintains in its army, and instead of keeping under arms 500 or a thousand men who consume but do not produce, and who can offer only a token resistance if the country is attacked, and instead established settlements of agricultural colonists, artisans, and merchants; if, leaving aside that system of violence and oppression that is increasingly impractical in the new republics and even more so among people who know their rights, it set an honest, generous, and liberal course of action, it would dispel those somber prophesies of a future marked by sad prospects and the Republic of Mexico would have nothing to fear regarding its territorial integrity.

These sentiments Zavala repeated in his other published work, *Viage a los Estados-Unidos del Norte de America*, which appeared in Paris in 1834 and reiterated his opinions from the perspective of a

defeated and embittered statesman. Basically, until Mexico learned to respect personal freedoms and equality of treatment before the law, there was little hope of avoiding continual civil conflict. This rather simplistic analysis of how the United States had avoided internecine warfare, ignoring as it did American attitudes toward native peoples and the problem of slavery and the recurrent sectional strife that eventually led to the Civil War, nevertheless highlighted an elemental truth, that social and economic inequality in Mexican society were rampant in a way that was not the case in the United States.

It is not surprising, then, that Zavala had invested in Texas and found his way there in 1835. The colonization contract he obtained to settle 500 families in East Texas did not make him the kind of oligarch against whom he railed, but it did make him much more human. Ideologically, it was an investment in a part of Mexico that looked to the future rather than hanging on to the past. Practically, he had a family to clothe and feed and he had no steady source of income, given his purge from office by the Bustamante administration and the confiscation of his property. His decision to sell his contract to the Galveston Bay and Texas Land Company, which also acquired the contracts of American businessman David G. Burnet and German-Mexican businessman Joseph Vehlein, was certainly a reasonable move. It would allow him to continue his political activities underwritten by the approximately \$100,000 he was paid by the company.

The Law of April 6, 1830, then was doubly repugnant to Zavala. Not only did it represent the exact opposite policy position that Zavala espoused, but it directly threatened his interests. He had sold his contract to the Galveston Bay and Texas Land Company with the understanding that the company could act in his stead to settle the tract assigned to him. The Law of April 6 had cut off further immigration from the United States and despite the company's claims that its recruited colonists were Europeans, Mexican authorities in Texas had prevented the company's first ship from landing its passengers. The prospect of having to return the payment he had received for his contract, must have weighed heavily on him for some time. When the national government reversed course in 1833 and 1834 and revalidated the colonization contracts that had been suspended by the Law of April 6, Zavala's interest in Texas was restored. In this respect, Zavala was like other prominent Texans such as Austin and Houston, for whom personal interest and public interest squared well with each other. The story of Mexican-era Texas is as much about land speculation as it is about the development of an Anglo dominated agricultural society, and few of the leading figures of the time, Anglo or Mexican, were not involved in land deals of

one sort or another.

When he came to Texas in 1835, then, Zavala was not coming in blind. It may have been his first and only trip to Texas, but he was not ignorant either of the people, the land, the resources, or the political situation. His interest in Texas remained high, even though his connection to the Galveston Bay and Texas Land Company had ended. He had bought large tracts of land from former governor Coahuila y Texas Victor Blanco and Fernando del Valle along the upper San Jacinto River and lower Trinity Rivers. In choosing Texas as his new home, Zavala was coming to the part of Mexico with the cultural, economic, and political attitudes most like his own. It is quite possible that he saw it as a political refuge considering the weight of his political enemies in the interior.

Zavala had sent his bilingual son Lorenzo Jr., who went on to serve as a translator between Houston and Santa Anna following the battle of San Jacinto, to locate a suitable residence in Texas. Lorenzo Jr. purchased a home for the family near the confluence of the San Jacinto River and Buffalo Bayou, where Zavala felt quite comfortable among old acquaintances, including fellow Galveston Bay and Texas Land Company empresario David G. Burnet.

Although at first he received a cold welcome, once Texians understood who he was and where his sympathies lay, Zavala was asked to take part in the debate over how to respond to Santa Anna's government's actions. It could not hurt that the news had spread quickly that an arrest order existed for Zavala and that Zavala addressed the issues in terms familiar to the Anglo settlers. After Austin returned to Texas at the beginning of September 1835, he and Zavala entered into correspondence over the strategy to be followed in Texas's resistance to the Centralists. Zavala's advocacy for Federalism meant that he supported Texas taking independent action to assert its state rights WITHIN the Mexican federation. He remained opposed to a complete break from Mexico, but clearly supported the growing sentiment for a break from Coahuila. This course of action led him to support a group of Federalists including the man Santa Anna deposed, Valentín Gómez Farfás, who met in New Orleans to plan the overthrow of Santa Anna. By October he had been elected as a delegate from Harrisburg to the Consultation, and a month later he was serving on the Committee of Twelve, which was tasked with writing a declaration of causes for Texas's rebellion.

Although Texas experienced a considerable rise in anti-Mexican sentiment, Zavala's standing among friends and neighbors seemed to exempt him from the growing hostility. As the most experienced political leader in Texas, Anglo or Mexican, he was respected and admired. By a large margin he was elected in

January 1836 to represent Harrisburg at the Convention that was to meet at Washington on the Brazos on March 1. There Zavala, having become disillusioned of any possible reconciliation with the rest of Mexico, signed the Texas Declaration of Independence, helped draft the Constitution of the Republic, and reluctantly became interim Vice President of Texas. He fell out with President Burnet, whom Zavala found incompetent, and on at least two different occasions tried to resign his office. In the fall, after Houston and Lamar were elected president and vice president respectively, Zavala was at last able to resign. Although he may not have sensed it, his services for Texas were at an end.

The last few months of Zavala's life are rather sad. The forty-eight year-old was ill with malaria most of the time, which certainly contributed to the onset of the pneumonia caused when his row boat overturned in Buffalo Bayou in November of 1836. A supporter of quick annexation, it had already become clear that the transition of Texas into his beloved United States might not happen as quickly as he hoped. A Mexican amid an overwhelming and growing Anglo population, his political fortunes probably did not appear very bright, and perhaps he had already realized that the status of Mexican Texans was on the ebb.

But we are not here today to dwell on the disappointments, which of course come to all men and women hoping to do great things. After all, Sam Houston would see his life's project of securing a place for Texas in the American Union undone by secession. And he too died before the ultimate reconciliation took place. Today we should remember that Lorenzo de Zavala saw the great promise of America reflected in Mexican Texas and in the nascent Republic. His ideals should be ours and those of our children—Thank you.

#### Further Reading:

There is only one published English-language biography of Lorenzo de Zavala, Margaret Swett Henson's *Lorenzo de Zavala: The Pragmatic Idealist* (Fort Worth: TCU Press, 1996). It is based in part on Raymond Estep's doctoral dissertation, "The Life of Lorenzo de Zavala," (University of Texas at Austin, 1942). Estep published the chapter on Zavala during the Revolution as an article, "Lorenzo de Zavala and the Texas Revolution," *Southwestern Historical Quarterly* 57 (January 1954). An accurate short summary of his life is an article also written by Estep, "Zavala, Lorenzo de," *New Handbook of Texas Online*. Finally, although Zavala's *Ensayo histórico de las revoluciones de México desde 1808 hasta 1830* has not been translated, his *Viage a los Estados Unidos* has under the title *Journey to the United States of North America*, translated by Wallace Woolsey (Austin: Shoal Creek Publishers, 1980).