"VALOR, WISDOM, AND EXPERIENCE": EARLY TEXAS RANGERS AND THE NATURE OF FRONTIER LEADERSHIP

by

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Spurred by Napoleonic notions of glory, Luther Giddings followed General Zachary Taylor into Mexico in 1846. As an officer in the First Regiment of Ohio Volunteers, he was no spit-and-polish regular. The Ohioan nonetheless shared a number of assumptions with West Pointers. Giddings believed, for example, that a soldier identified himself by wearing an assigned uniform; a soldier observed a code that demanded obedience to superiors; a soldier belonged to a fellowship of arms, and members of that exclusive fraternity—even the enemy—deserved respect and professional courtesy. Finally, Giddings held that a soldier was an agent of the state, protecting his nation's interest, at his country's beck and call. Although he had not read the Prussian military theorist Carl von Clausewitz, Giddings would have endorsed his oft-misquoted dictum, "War is the continuation of political intercourse with the intermixing of other means."

Then, at Camargo, Giddings encountered fighting men who challenged most of his preconceptions. To categorize these outrageous partisans he sought analogies from history:

> The character of the Texas Ranger is now well known by both friend and foe. As a mounted soldier he has had no counterpart in any age or country. Neither Cavalier nor Cossack, Mameluke nor Moss-trooper are like him; and yet, in some respects, he resembles them all. Chivalrous, bold and impetuous in action, he is yet wary and calculating, always impatient of restraint, and sometimes

> unscrupulous and unmerciful. He is ununiformed, and undrilled, and performs his active duties thoroughly, but with little regard to order or system.

Giddings did not know what to make of these merciless Texans. They had already established a reputation as *Los Diablos Tejanos,* devils who viewed war as an opportunity for personal vengeance. He admitted their brute efficiency in a "chaparral skirmish," but was reluctant to accept them as real "soldiers." It was no accident that Giddings compared these unrestrained primitives to Cossacks, those savage denizens of the steppes. Indeed, to Giddings and others of Taylor's Army of Observation, Texas Rangers seemed conspicuous by their "loose discipline" and their indulgence in "mad-cap revels." In brief, provincials who knew little of the sanctioned customs of civilized war. Giddings was mistaken. Rangers understood the protocol: they simply rejected it.

A system that tyrannized their ancestors had conditioned Anglo-Celtic Texans to cast off some three hundred years of Western military culture. The seventeenth century witnessed the rise of nation-states and war became, in John Dryden's phrase, "the trade of kings." In such a form of government, armies founded on strict discipline, centralized administration, and trained troops were inherent. The professional soldier, formerly a "free-lance" who sold his services to the highest bidder, enrolled in the service of the state. This new system demanded discipline and obedience to lawful superiors. It drew sharp distinctions between the "lawful bearer of arms" and the rebel, freebooter, and brigand.

By the eighteenth century, wealth generated by trade financed standing soldiers and the regiment became the pre-eminent unit of military establishments. In war, regulars

were instruments of policy; in peacetime, they often became toys for bored monarchs who paraded them around palace grounds for the amusement of visiting dignitaries.

Increasingly, garrisons withdrew from the populace. As English historian Sir John Keegan observed: “[Regiments] had been founded to isolate society's disruptive elements for society's good, though that had been forgotten. They ended by isolating themselves from society altogether, differentiated by their own rules, rituals and disciplines.” A recruit who took the king's shilling expected to do his bidding. Many civilians began to see regulars as bullyboys who had turned against their own people for royal silver.

That apprehension was keen during revolts against the monarchy. At the battle of Culloden, during the Jacobite Rebellion of 1745-1746, British redcoats killed some one thousand Highlanders in combat and captured a thousand more. The British regulars slaughtered most of their prisoners out of hand. After all, as civilians, the rebels were no part of the regimental order and could hardly expect the honorable treatment normally accorded professionals. During the subsequent Highland Clearances, many of the defeated Scots fled to the southern colonies of North America, bringing with them their contempt for the English redcoats or, for that matter, any royal authority.

The American War for Independence only intensified that animosity. Between 1760 and 1775, a tide of popular resistance rose against Parliament's taxation plans. The use of British regulars to suppress protesters at Golden Hill, and later during the Boston Massacre, convinced Americans that redcoats were simply royal thugs. Major John Pitcairn's command to the “minute men” assembled on Lexington Common—“Disperse,

ye damned rebels"—indicated that a replay of Culloden was in the offing. Indeed, atrocities committed at Paoli in 1777, where redcoats bayoneted scores of Americans as they tried to surrender, demonstrated the British contempt for those who challenged the king's authority.

Following the Revolutionary War, Americans codified a mistrust of regulars into their constitution, demonstrating a preference for "well-regulated militia." Most civilians believed a standing army incompatible with republican institutions. Nevertheless, the treasured American vision of a civilian militia proved chimerical as militia units were almost never "well regulated." Their parochial temper clashed with centralized authority, rendering unity of command impossible.

This problem was especially apparent during the War of 1812 when New York militiamen declined to cross state borders to invade Canada. At Bladensburg in 1814, militia units broke and ran at the first glimpse of a red coat; the British subsequently captured Washington D.C. and torched its public buildings. In the South, militia units did conduct a successful campaign against the "Redstick" faction of the Creek tribe. There, however, a desire to avenge the 1813 Fort Mims massacre strongly motivated volunteers under the dynamic authority of Andrew Jackson. Even then, he had to shoot six of them for desertion before the rest abandoned the assumption that they could return home whenever they pleased.

Jackson's victory at New Orleans appeared to validate the superiority of rustic vigor over the affected and effete. "Their system it is true, is not to be found in Vauban's,

Steuben's or Scott's military tactics," declared a congressman of the stalwarts at Chalmette, "but it nevertheless proved to be quite effective." Even "Old Hickory" explained that the British, fresh from victory against Napoleon's marshals in Spain, expected scant opposition from "men whose officers even were not in uniform, who were ignorant of the rules of dress, and who had never been caned into discipline."

Among southerners of the 1820s and 1830s, ingrained resentment of the military establishment ran deep. This abhorrence for regulars went hand-in-glove with a growing grass roots political movement that sought to advance the "common man" over those privilege and education had favored. One of the few bills Tennessee Congressman David Crockett ever introduced called for the abolishment of the US Military Academy, which he blasted as a government boondoggle for the "sons of the rich and influential" who were "too nice to work." In the Old Southwest, frontiersmen fearing Indian raids soon learned that Washington, and even state capitals, were too far away to provide protection. By grim necessity community defense grew intensely personal. Every backwoodsman became a "lawful bearer of arms."

Southerners relied on a time-honored agent: the ranger. During the 1600s, Scots termed "ranger" any armed man who *ranged* a tract of countryside against raids by hostile clans. The practice migrated to the American colonies where as early as 1739 James Oglethorpe raised a Georgia unit, the Troop of Highland Rangers. Later, settlers employed the term for gunmen hired to patrol the woods against Indian attack. In times of immediate crisis, the militiamen mustered but they looked to the local ranger to organize

and lead them. He was the professional.

Along with other trappings of Celtic culture, southern immigrants to Mexican Texas brought their ranger traditions and disdain for professional soldiers. In 1823, *empresario* Stephen F. Austin employed ten men he termed “rangers” to patrol his colony against Indian raids. In the beginning, since these irregular partisans were defending their families, settlers expected each man to arrive for duty well mounted and well armed from his own pocket. They wore no uniform, fought under no flag, expressed little esprit de corps. Except for paid captains, the troopers responded only in times of crisis and took their leave the instant they deemed the threat concluded.

Texians asked no man's permission to take up arms; they simply disregarded the prerogative of the state and defended their settlements. The antithesis of the regimental ideal, these civilian volunteers regarded war not as a “continuation of political intercourse” but as a matter of survival.

During the revolt against Antonio López de Santa Anna's centralist regime, Texian officials formalized ranger organization, but only slightly. On 24 November 1835, the interim Texas government approved an ordinance providing for a corps of mounted gunmen. Gone were the casual enlistments of the past. Privates signed on for a full year and earned $1.25 per day for “pay, rations, clothing, and horse service.” While rangers saw some action against Mexican centralists, their primary mission remained fending off Indian incursions. As Bastrop resident John Holland Jenkins recalled, “Indians were growing more and more troublesome, and Captain John

Tumlinson raised a minute company of the few men and boys left at home. These held themselves in readiness for protecting

. . . homes and families."

Even when notables such as Stephen F. Austin, William B. Travis, and Sam Houston declared the need for regulars, the traditional scorn for professional soldiers went unchecked. Robert Morris of the New Orleans Greys spurned a regular commission. He informed Houston that none of his men would "enter into any service connected with the Regular Army, the name of which is a perfect Bugbear to them." The revolutionary rhetoric sought to awaken "the principles of 1776" and portrayed Santa Anna as a despot in the George III mould and his minions as Mexican redcoats. Indeed, to stress the comparison, many revolutionaries labeled the centralists "bluecoats." The overwhelming majority of Texian fighting men were civilian volunteers and contentiously egalitarian. An 1835 broadside proclaimed their contempt for Mexican regulars: "Rise up, then, with one accord, and shoulder your rifles, march to the field of battle, and teach the hirelings of a tyrant that they can not battle successfully with citizen freemen." Reporting the death of his brother John at the Alamo, a vengeful Benjamin Briggs

Goodrich jeered Santa Anna. "We will meet him and teach the unprincipled scoundrel that freemen can never be conquered by the hirling *[sic]* soldiery of a military despot."

Following victory at San Jacinto, Texians envisioned their infant republic

stretching westward toward the Pacific but harsh realities frustrated dreams of empire. The Texas government was bankrupt. It possessed a bantam regular army, which was expensive to uniform, arm, and deploy. Furthermore, regulars proved useless against Indians. In 1840, the approach of Comanche braves at Plum Creek unmanned General Felix Huston of the regular army. Although the nominal commander of the Texian force, he offered tactical command to ranger captains Edward Burleson and Matthew Caldwell. Veteran frontiersman James Wilson Nichols recorded the general's rationalization to the pair:

> Gentlemen, those are the first wild Indians I evar saw and not being accustom to savage ware fare and both of you are, I think it would be doing you and your men especially great injustace for me to ta[ke the] command ... Now give me a deciplined civ[ilis]ed command and a deciplined enemy to fight [and] I would redily take command.

Sadly, for General Huston and his fastidious regulars, Texas suffered a genuine scarcity of "deciplined" Comanches. Conditions required an inexpensive partisan force that mustered in minutes, supplied its own mounts, provided for itself in the field, and required no fancy uniform: in brief, rangers.

The inherited animosity against professionals remained at the core of the ranger ethic. Volunteers defending hearth and home thought themselves on higher moral ground than brass-buttoned hirelings. As ranger Nelson Lee explained: "Discipline, in the common acceptation of the term, was not regarded as essential." Ranger Samuel C. Reid's description of Texans preparing for campaign ridiculed the pretention of the professional military.

> No mock show of the pomp and pageantry of war was seen—no tap of spirit-stirring drum, or note of piercing fife—no trumpet-call, or bugle sound, was heard on the border side. But there was wiping of rifles and moulding of bullets—cleaning of pistols and grinding of knives—packing of wallets and saddling of steeds; in short, every step of preparation made, amid the encouraging smiles of mothers, wives, and sisters, . . . giving evidence that the frontier men knew full well the importance of the duty which they had to perform; and every movement which they made was an earnest that that duty would be gallantly done.

Commanding those who rejected conventional authority required a leader who shared his men's egalitarian values. A ranger captain was merely first among equals, but then that was the source of his power. Texans followed a man not because he had gone to an academy or perused treatises, but because he had proven his worth in the field. Edward Burleson, roughhewn and barely literate, would never have qualified as an "officer and gentleman" in the regular army. Jack Hays always minimized his contribution, quipping, "Any of us can command Texans. All they ask is to be shown the road to the enemy's camp." Yet, Nelson Lee and other rangers admired men like Burleson for their "valor, wisdom, and experience."

Once a captain earned the respect and confidence of his men, he had no need to "pull rank." Lee described Hays's command style: "Hays called us together, as was his custom always under circumstances of peculiar peril, and addressed us. After setting forth the imminent dangers that evidently surrounded us, he stated the course he had resolved to adopt, if it met our approbation, which it did, unanimously." Sam Reid attested that off duty Hays was a "pleasant companion, and the men familiarly call him Jack," although he also observed, "there is that about the man which prevents one from taking the slightest liberty with him."

Even when under the command of tested captains—perhaps especially then—Texans were capable of astounding brutality. Contemporary observers noted their viciousness. Luther Giddings denounced them as “unscrupulous” and “unmerciful.” While numerous incidents illustrate those traits, two are remarkable. The first occurred before the battle of Plum Creek. A lone Comanche brave galloped toward the Texan line, pulled up before it, and challenged the whites to send out their champion for single combat. The warrior ethic of the Plains Indians promoted a competition among braves. By performing feats of brazen physical courage, a young man attained status within his tribe and the respect of his enemies. These adversaries, however, did not share that ethic. One of them leveled his rifle and casually blasted the Indian off his pony.

Then, there is the account of Jack Hays's 1846 duel with a Mexican colonel. Outside Monterry, an enemy lancer regiment surprised a ranger company. Hays realized his command must take up a defensive position but that required time and he intended to buy it. He ordered his men to withdraw and then, according to James “Buck” Barry: “[Our colonel] rode out front with his sabre in his hand and challenged the colonel of lancers to meet him halfway between the lines to fight a sabre fight.” Doffing his helmet, the enemy officer graciously bowed in acceptance. The actions of his commander perplexed Barry who recalled, “Hays knew no more

about sabre fighting than I did.” The lancer colonel's horse “seemed to dance rather than prance,” as the two antagonists advanced like cavaliers of old. At the last moment, Hays jerked to the right, ditched the blade, and—Comanche style—swung under his horse's neck. Too late, the Mexican discerned that “Devil Jack” had swapped cold steel for a hot

pistol. The Paterson Colt chambered five shots, but at that distance, Hays required only one. The slug took the gallant Mexican squarely in the chest and a corpse toppled from his charger.

Like Giddings, modern critics find such churlish actions, well, unsporting. Yet, surely, that was the point. For Texas Rangers, war was not a sport. They viewed the battlefield as a killing ground, not a stage to display bravado. Unlike the proud Mexican colonel, rangers disdained codes of conduct established by the same "gentlemen" who had hoisted the red flag of no quarter at the Alamo, who had perpetrated the massacres of Fannin's and Dawson's men, and the infamous Black Bean episode during the Mier Expedition. Warfare in Texas was a savage, dirty pursuit, unrestrained by codes of civilized behavior.

While tales of Indian raids abounded, one is sufficient to suggest their horror. About 1850 a Comanche war party swept into present-day Llano County and left behind a token of their loathing. The Indians murdered a white infant and impaled his head on a pole for his surviving family to find. The memory of such occasions branded the Texan psyche and landscape. When travelling State Highway Sixteen between Llano and San Saba, one should pause a moment to reflect on the origins of Babyhead Cemetery.

Rangers who frequently witnessed such outrages experienced a psychological transformation. They silently vowed to be as hard and unforgiving as the land itself. "Texans," Nelson Lee asserted, "had no other alternative than to return blow for blow, and to demand blood for blood." Terror became a weapon.

The traditional hostility toward professional soldiers died hard. When the republic joined the union, Texans assumed that federal troopers would shoulder the burden of frontier defense. US regulars, however, were no more competent than the republic's. “This fact the Indians soon learned,” bemoaned “Buck” Barry, “and they soon became so active that the people began to call for someone who could cope with them.” Bowing to pressure, the regulars requested assistance. State rangers attached themselves to federal units—but not to their regulations. Later, during the War Between the States, home guard units and rangers patrolled the frontier and resisted Confederate authority as much as they had any other.

Giddings was correct. The early rangers had much in common with Cossacks. The name “Cossack,” by the way, derives from a Turkic word translated as *freeman*. Both Cossacks and rangers fought as free men and, as such, both cast aside western military culture. The early ranger was no dupe of the state; he did not fight for procedures, policies, or pay. His motivation stood over the hearth cooking game he had bagged, napped in the crib he had constructed, grew on land he had planted. Because his imperatives were so personal, he slaughtered any who threatened them. As the consummate individualist, he did not aspire to be part of a unit or belong to any establishment.

Yet, what began as a temporary defense of farm and family ended as a sanctioned institution. By 1876, marauding tribes no longer harried the frontier and leaders of acumen and foresight understood that rangers must convert from Indian fighters to lawmen. Many chafed in their new role: “We hardly knew whether we were Rangers, or

court officers," one old-timer groused. Of course, court officers *were* what they had become. And that was, perhaps, the supreme irony. In a bid to remain relevant, the ranger became the object of his grandfather's greatest scorn—a disinterested professional, an agent of the state, and the "legal bearer of arms."

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