Sam Houston and the American Southwest Study Guide

Sam Houston and the American Southwest by Randolph B. Campbell

BOOKRAGS

Contents

Plot Summary

Sam Houston was a soldier and statesman, who was one of the fathers of Texas. He was a hero in the battle for Texas independence and later he served the state as U.S. Senator and Governor.

Sam Houston was born in 1793 and his formative years were spent in Tennessee. He was a reckless and impatient youth and spent much time away from civilization in Cherokee country, where he learned the Cherokee language and was mentored by a Cherokee chief. He spent his early 20s in the army, where he was wounded in a battle with the Creek Indians, a battle directed by General Andrew Jackson.

After some time as a lawyer, Sam Houston became friends with Jackson and became a campaign manager and adviser in Jackson's presidential campaign. Continuing in politics, Houston became a U.S. Representative and then governor of Tennessee, before his young wife left him, causing a scandal and forcing Houston into exile.

Houston made a triumphant return to politics with a well-publicized House of Representatives trial, in which Houston defended himself for caning a congressman who criticized him in a newspaper. Though Houston earned an admonishment from the House, he was put back in the public eye.

Houston moved to Texas, a Mexican territory, at a time when Anglo Texans were threatening to break away from Mexico. Houston became caught up in the struggle, helping to organize a provisional Anglo government, and becoming elected commander in chief of the Texas army. Houston navigated a series of skirmishes and hostilities with common sense and thoughtfulness. General Santa Anna of Mexico invaded Texas intent to break up the government, and Houston defeated and captured Santa Anna at the battle of San Jacinto, cementing his place in Texas history.

Houston was soon elected president of Texas, and he dealt with such things as Texas' growing debt, Indian hostilities, and the threat of Mexico. He preached justice for the Indians and peace with Mexico, both very unpopular views. He also played a shrewd political game to annex Texas with the United States, playing off Great Britain and the United States' animosity towards each other.

Houston was next elected to the U.S. Senate. He continued to work toward annexation, which was achieved. In later years, he fought against southern secessionists and for the preservation of the Union. In his last years, he was elected governor of Texas. Despite all of his efforts, Texas seceded during his term and when he refused to take an oath of loyalty for the Confederacy, Houston was forced from office. He died from a prolonged illness in 1863, as the Civil War was raging.

Chapter 1

Chapter 1 Summary and Analysis

Sam Houston was descended from Scottish-Irish immigrants from Pennsylvania. His grandfather, John Houston, established the Timber Ridge plantation in Virginia. His father, Samuel, was a member of the revolutionary army, attaining the rank of major. Sam was the fifth of nine children born to Samuel in 1793. Samuel's military service forced the plantation to suffer, and in 1806, Samuel was bankrupt, prompting him to sell Timber Ridge and move west to Tennessee. Samuel never made the trip, dying in 1806. The family nonetheless made the move. Tennessee was frontier country, but had been settled for over a decade.

Sam was a rebellious and restless child. He had very little formal education, and did not take to farm or storekeeper work. Despite lack of education, he read voraciously. After a couple years in Tennessee, Sam ran away, crossing the Tennessee river to live among the Cherokee Indians. His family found him, and thereafter he spent time between the white culture and the Indian culture, a lover of nature with a dislike for civilization. Sam spent time in the tribe of Chief Oo-loo-te-ka, and he learned the Cherokee language and customs. From his mentor the chief, Sam gained an appreciation for Indians, as well as a respect for attempting peace first and war second, that would serve him in later years.

Financially-challenged, Sam opened a school in nearby Maryville and was successful for a term. And then the War of 1812 broke out. Sam did not volunteer to join the army, instead opting to study mathematics at a proper academy. However, for one reason or another Sam decided against a teaching career, and in 1813 he joined the Seventh U.S. Infantry.

Sam rose quickly in the ranks to third lieutenant. He proved his courage and mettle in the decisive battle in the Creek War on March 27, 1814. Somewhat bull-headed and reckless, Sam charged toward a well-guarded Creek fortification, even as the men around him hesitated. He was wounded in the thigh and twice in the shoulder with arrows. The army ended winning the war, and Jackson was made a hero. Sam suffered through a year or so of painful recovery. He petitioned to remain in the army, and soon he became known to Andrew Jackson, who took a liking to Sam and respected his courage and determination. They became friends.

Jackson appointed him as a federal agent, and charged him to resolve a sticky issue: the removal of Cherokees from Tennessee and surrounding areas, as part of the whites' never-ending move West. Sam, using his knowledge and relationships with the Cherokees, managed to use diplomacy in order to avoid war. With a delegation of Cherokee, Sam (dressed as an Indian) had a meeting with Secretary of War John Calhoun to negotiate a settlement treaty. John Calhoun scolded Sam for dressing like an Indian. Stung by Calhoun, and unhappy in the first place with being the agent of his beloved Cherokee's removal, Sam resigned from the army at the age of 25 in 1818.

Chapter 2

Chapter 2 Summary and Analysis

Sam returned to Tennessee and, under the direction of Judge James Trimble, an old family friend, he managed to learn enough to pass the bar exam and become an attorney in a mere six months. He moved to Lebanon, Tennessee, and engaged in a successful practice, which allowed him to use his considerable oratorical skills. He became somewhat of a celebrity in Nashville and Lebanon. Jackson also lived near Nashville, and the two remained close. Through Jackson, Sam received an appointment as colonel in the Tennessee militia. In 1819, Sam was elected attorney general of the state.

Sam experienced a meteoric rise as a politician, after initially resigning as attorney general in favor of lucrative private practice. He supported Andrew Jackson's presidential campaign in 1822-24, and in 1823 he was elected to the House of Representatives. He spent his first term learning and campaigning for Jackson. In this time, he also struck up a secretive romance with Mariah Campbell, sister of a fellow congressman, though it eventually fizzled given Houston's political ambitions.

In 1824, amid a deadlock, the House of Representatives chose John Quincy Adams as president. Many saw this choice as rigged and corrupt, especially since the Speaker of the House, Henry Clay, influenced the decision and then was chosen by Adams as Secretary of State. Sam spent a second and final term in Congress fighting Clay and Adams to set up an 1828 Jackson win. These divisive politics were a bitter business, and at one point Sam was compelled to duel a Clay/Adams partisan. He won the duel, and the other man was shot but survived.

In 1827, Sam campaigned for and won the governorship of Tennessee, preferring the executive to the legislative branch. He simultaneously served as Andrew Jackson's unofficial campaign manager. The 1828 presidential election was a particularly vicious one, with wild rumors and innuendos dominating both sides. However, the Jackson camp emerged with an overwhelming win. The victory was short-lived, however. Jackson's wife, Rachel Jackson, died of complications from a cold soon after. Jackson blamed her death on the mudslinging of the election.

Sam Houston, meanwhile, had courted Eliza Allen, daughter of a wealthy planter. Though Eliza's love for Sam was uncertain and he was fifteen years older than her, Sam asked for permission to marry her. Her family was thrilled with the prospect. Eliza conceded and they married in 1829. Sam then embarked on a reelection campaign for governor. He seemed certain to win. His runaway success was shattered, however, when Eliza suddenly left him.

Sam attempted several acts of reconciliation, including begging, but Eliza would not return to him. Neither Sam nor Eliza spoke of the nature of their separation for the rest

of their lives; presumably, she simply did not love him, and could not bear a lifetime of marriage. The break-up caused quite a scandal and Sam was forced to resign from the governorship. His fall from grace was short and spectacular.

Chapter 3

Chapter 3 Summary and Analysis

Sam went into a kind of voluntary exile. With a drifter companion named H. Haralson, he journeyed down south via rivers, drinking whiskey. Sam ended up in Arkansas, where his Cherokee friends had ended up. Sam met with his surrogate father, Chief Oo-loo-te-ka, and learned of the Cherokees' plight, including promises broken by the government and forced moves. Sam dressed like an Indian and next acted as an adviser and diplomat for the Cherokee. He met with several tribes and organized councils.

In 1829, he officially became a member of the Cherokee nation. He traveled to Washington D.C. on the Cherokees behalf in 1830, to air Indian grievances. One of these grievances included promised government payments coming in the form of paper rather than gold. Paper was worth much less because Indians felt it was worthless and traded it away freely. Sam, dressed in full Indian regalia, was greeted warmly by President Jackson.

Sam traveled back to Arkansas, and established a home on the Neosho River he called Wigwam Neosho. During this time, he took a part-Indian wife named Tiana. Sam and Eliza had never formally divorced, but Cherokee custom did not recognize U.S. marriage and so the Cherokee marriage was allowed to take place. Sam opened a trader's post to raise money for his family. In the meantime, he worked as an advocate for the Indians, writing several newspaper articles.

Unfortunately, Sam fell into drunkenness during this time, leading some Cherokee to call him, in their language, "Big Drunk." He struggled to keep his reputation among the Indians.

1832 brought a change for Sam. A newspaper article written by Congressman William Stanbery openly questioned an agreement made in 1830 between Secretary of War John Eaton and Sam Houston with respect to Indian rations. Stanbery was trying to score political points against the Jackson administration. Sam was incensed and started to carry a hickory cane around town to threaten Stanbery. They met on a street on April 13, 1832, and Sam gave Stanbery a good caning.

The House of Representatives passed a resolution to call for Houston's arrest. Houston appeared before the House, and he was essentially put on trial. Houston obtained counsel in the form of Francis Scott Keys, author of the Star-Spangled Banner, but Houston soon fired him in favor of representing himself. Houston gave an eloquent closing argument, and won public support because of his oratorical skills and personal charm, even though he was likely drunk for a good part of the proceedings. Nevertheless, Houston was found guilty, and was officially admonished by the House.

Around this time, Houston was in talks with James Prentiss, a financier, to do some survey work in Texas. Though he never formalized an agreement with Prentiss, Sam decided to head out to Texas anyway, always driven by a sense of adventure, and wanting a new beginning. Jackson burdened Houston with the additional task of trying to placate Texas' fearsome Comanche Indians into signing a peace treaty.

Chapter 4

Chapter 4 Summary and Analysis

Though owned by Spain, Texas in the 1820s was home to only a handful of Spaniards, and its vast empty land was ripe for colonization. Though officially part of Mexico, many Americans flocked into Texas. Mexico became a federal republic in 1824, and in 1825 the Mexican government passed the Colonization Act, which encouraged white settlement. This, along with colonization schemes headed by men like Stephen Austin, caused a great spike in Texas' population.

Cultural and language differences between Anglo Texans and Tejanos (or Mexican Texans) soon led to unease. Mexicans became convinced Americans were intent on conquering Mexico. Americans held a racist disdain for Mexicans (something Sam Houston shared), and disliked the relative instability of Mexico's government.

In 1826, the so-called Fredonian revolution marked the first outward sign of rebellion. Brothers Haden and Benjamin Edwards declared their own nation within Texas, which was quickly put down, in part by Anglo Texans. Partially in response to this unrest, the Mexican government sent one General Teran to survey Texas and advise on how to keep it in Mexican hands. Teran saw that Anglos outnumbered Tejanos ten to one, and advised colonization of Texas by native Mexicans, as well as an increased military and trade presence, if they had any chance to keep Texas.

In 1830, the Law of April 6, 1830 prohibited all American immigration and imposed custom duties on imports and exports. A skirmish at a place called Anahuac, where a man named John Davis Bradburn stopped granting land titles, ended in the deaths of 10 Anglos and 5 Mexican soldiers. This skirmish demonstrated that Anglo Texans could force aside the Mexican military.

Colonists, headed by Stephen Austin, gathered in late 1832 to create a series of demands to the Mexican government. Most at this point were not in favor of open revolution: they asked for separate statehood and such things as a school system and immunity from custom taxes for three years). The government denied these requests because they were not formally submitted by official representatives. Into this environment came Sam Houston.

Sam entered Texas to the town Stephen Austin helped to create, San Felipe de Austin. He met Jim Bowie there, a local leader who had large landholdings. Sam met with the Comanche Indians and reported back to the government. Sam's opinion of Texas, as stated to the government, was that Texas was governed poorly, and was ripe for revolution if not better administered. Sam also brought up the fear of Texas getting acquired by Great Britain, which the United States definitely did not want to happen.

Sam participated in a second colonist convention. The delegation was split between "war party" hawks, such as William Wharton, and "peace party" members who were loyal to Mexico, such as Stephen Austin. Wharton was elected as chairman, but Sam recommended that Stephen Austin bring the colonist requests to the Mexican government, since Austin was well-respected by the government.

Unfortunately, Austin went to central Mexico and was told by the acting president, Gomez Farias, that Texas statehood was impossible. Austin wrote back to Texas to have them draw up plans for a state government anyway; this letter was intercepted, and Austin was jailed for a year and a half. Meanwhile, dictator-like General Santa Anna seized the presidency and engaged in a ruthless centralization of power, a centralism in stark contrast to Anglo Texans' desire for federalism. Several skirmishes began to break out as Anglo Texans resisted attempts at centralism.

Austin was released from jail, and was convinced war and revolution was Texas' only recourse. Sam Houston preached a measured, conservative approach. He slyly gave lip service to the idea of remaining with Mexico and honoring the Mexican constitution, at the same time he asked Anglo Americans to come to Texas armed and ready to fight.

Sam Houston helped to organize "The Consultation" on October 16 and 17, 1835. This important event established a provisional Texas government. Henry Smith of the "war party" was made governor while Sam Houston was elected as commander in chief of the Texas army.

Chapter 5

Chapter 5 Summary and Analysis

Sam Houston set up headquarters in San Felipe and began to plan a defense against the Mexicans. He recruited a young soldier named James Fannin to become an inspector general, but the proud Fannin refused. This was not the last time Houston would butt heads with Fannin.

Meanwhile, the volunteer militia under Stephen Austin stormed and successfully took San Antonio, forcing Mexican General Cos to surrender. This emboldened the small militia, who thought the war was over. Sam Houston was unconvinced that the war was over and his pessimism annoyed the provisional government, who forced him to re-headquarter at out-of-the-way Washington-on-the-Brazos. Sam had to fight ineptitude and bureaucracy at every turn.

The militia plotted a pillage run into Mexico, specifically Matamoros, and they abandoned San Antonio except for about eighty soldiers left in the fort there, Alamo. Houston thought the Matamoros expedition was a fool's errand, and he left to meet the militia and dissuade them.

Word arrived that General Santa Anna had crossed the Rio Grande into Texas. Jim Bowie left the Matamoros expedition with several men to go back to Alamo. Houston traveled to a town called Refugio to try to catch more soldiers caught up in the Matamoros expedition. Upon arriving, Houston found that the soldiers were under the command of Fannin and a man named Johnson, and they had no intention of stopping the expedition. Houston also learned that the governor, Henry Smith, was deposed by the legislature, and was refusing to resign. Dejected, Houston bided his time until March 1, 1836, when a meeting of the government was to convene. In the meantime, he visited with Texas Cherokees and assured them the U.S. government would honor their treaty commitments.

Close to the March 1 meeting, Santa Anna besieged the Alamo, trapping the few soldiers inside. Many wanted to march to San Antonio, but Houston thought it was more important to remain in Washington-on-the-Brazos to solidify the government. They did so, drafting a declaration of independence. David G. Burnet was made temporary president. Houston then marched for San Antonio with a few hundred men. Houston sent word for Fannin's men to join his army, but Fannin, ever-stubborn, delayed.

The Alamo was taken on March 6, with Santa Anna cruelly killing everyone. The Alamo massacre frightened the population and hurt the army's morale. Houston was forced to retreat toward the Colorado River, miserable and through rain-drenched earth, in what would later be called the "Runaway Scrape."

Houston then pursued a game of "wait-and-see," in regards to the Mexican army. Santa Anna had a three-pronged attack planned, with the Mexican army divided into three divisions that would slowly move eastward. Even as several war hawks in his army sought to turn and face the enemy, Houston continually retreated, waiting for the correct time. The provisional government got spooked and fled eastward to Harrisburg, something Houston scolded them for due to an appearance of cowardice. Fannin's Matamoros expedition soldiers, meanwhile, were overcome and had to surrender, dealing the small Texas army another blow. On March 27, Palm Sunday, Fannin's men were marched out and executed at a town called Goliad. This further terrorized, but inflamed, the Anglo Texans. The president, David Burnet, meanwhile, wrote Houston mocking letters, demanding that he turn and fight, telling Houston that he was becoming a laughingstock.

Houston reached Harrisburg, three days after Santa Anna, and learned that the government officials had fled. He pursued Santa Anna as well as the Texas government. At this time, Houston received crucial intelligence: Santa Anna was one of three divisions, and the other two divisions were still days away. Houston saw this as the opportunity to finally fight. Uttering the famous phrase, "Remember the Alamo!" Houston prepared his men to fight.

Houston and Santa Anna finally met at the San Jacinto River. The two armies initially felt each other out, exchanging some artillery fire, but that's it. Night came, and the two armies camped within a few hundred yards of the other. Houston had several men saw down a nearby bridge, effectively cutting off Santa Anna from receiving reinforcements. Then at around 3:30 in the afternoon, Houston's army advanced on Santa Anna's position. They sneaked up close enough to engage in close combat, using their muskets as clubs. After eighteen minutes, Santa Anna's army was on the run. Houston was wounded in the ankle by musket fire and his horse caught musket balls and died. Houston did what he could to stop his men from the wholesale massacre of the fleeing Mexicans. At the end of the day, the victory was regarded as a miracle: 630 Mexican soldiers died and another 730 were captured at a cost of 2 dead and 23 wounded Texans. Moreover, Santa Anna was caught. Houston spared his life, knowing he was more valuable alive than dead and forced Santa Anna to declare an armistice.

Houston left Texas for treatment of his ankle and his heroism was written into Texas history.

Chapter 6

Chapter 6 Summary and Analysis

Houston arrived in New Orleans and his ankle was operated on. Remaining committed to Texas, he returned as soon as he could, arriving in early July. David Burnet's government had been chaotic. Burnet signed two peace treaties with Santa Anna at Velasco, a public one calling for an end to hostilities, and a second secret one agreeing to release Santa Anna back to Mexico eventually. Santa Anna remained imprisoned, with many calling for his head because of his part in the Alamo and the massacre at Goliad.

Meanwhile, the army was falling apart. Burnet brought up again the idea of a Matamoros expedition, in order to placate the more bloodthirsty elements in the army, but cool-headed Houston prevailed and urged against the expedition. An election was announced, with Stephen Austin and former governor Henry Smith running for president of Texas. Houston initially had no intention of running, but he was concerned about both Smith's and Austin's leadership abilities; plus, many urged him to run. So he was elected to run at a convention, and Houston was elected president overwhelmingly. Also a landslide was a vote to agree to annex Texas to the United States.

Around this time, a few investors created a settlement they called Houston. Sam Houston made this city the seat of the government.

Houston entered his presidency facing many problems. Texas was in debt; the army was ragtag and still intent on warring with Mexico; Indians remained a threat; Texas had not received any diplomatic recognition as a nation; and Mexico seemed on the verge of renewing hostilities. Additionally, Stephen Austin died of pneumonia at a young age, suddenly.

The United States, fearful of hostilities with Mexico, officially recognized Texas as a nation, but did not entertain immediate statehood. Houston continued to work toward annexation. Meanwhile, he issued furloughs to some of the more hotheaded soldiers in the army, essentially breaking the army up so that a newer and more professional army could be established. Indians remained a problem, and Houston had to call on the militia to squelch a minor rebellion spurred on by a man named Vicente Cordova, along with Indian allies. At this time, the Texas congress also created a "General Land Office" to help negotiate the complicated issuance of land and real estate deeds in Texas.

With a desperate budget deficit and no revenue, Houston reluctantly urged the congress to print paper money, a less than ideal solution considering the paper quickly declined in value.

Houston's term only lasted two years, and per the new law he was unable to run for a second term consecutively. His political enemies, Mirabeau B. Lamar and David G. Burnet, became president and vice-president respectively.

Chapter 7

Chapter 7 Summary and Analysis

For a brief time after his term as president expired, Houston started a law office, and he also started a land development called Sabine City with several other investors. He traveled to Mobile, Alabama, in order to spark interest in Sabine City, and there he met a 20-year-old woman named Margaret Lea. He was immediately struck by the young woman and became intent on marrying her, even though he was more than two decades older than her. She shared his affection, but for now they parted.

Houston returned to Texas to find that he had been elected to congress, and he became eager to right some wrongs of the Lamar administration. For one, Houston's pride was wounded when Lamar moved the capital from Houston to a settlement now called Austin after Stephen Austin. Even more infuriating for Houston was Lamar's belligerent treatment of the Indians. Despite what Houston had promised the Cherokee, Lamar reneged on all promises of land, and threatened the Cherokees into moving to make way for white settlers. A skirmish had resulted in the massacre of several Indians.

Houston spoke out publicly against the government policy. The vast majority of Anglo Texans were anti-Indian, making Houston's views quite unpopular, to the point a soldier even attempted to assassinate Houston. Houston's views were quickly dividing Texans politically. In 1840. Houston returned to Alabama, and he wed Margaret Lea, who returned with him to Texas. The couple had a son, Sam Jr., on May 25, 1843.

Houston continued to battle with Lamar over his Indian policy, his irresponsible fiscal policies, and his aggressive tendencies towards Mexico. In advocating for peace and caution, rather than an offensive war, Houston was again in the minority among Texans. Houston was convinced Texas did not have the resources to wage an effective war, and this was his reason for continually pouring cold water on warlike tendencies. Lamar advocated for a military expedition to Santa Fe, but Houston convinced the Congress to not consider it.

In the next presidential election, despite some unpopular views, Houston handily defeated David Burnet (Lamar, per law, could not run). Houston then started to institute his policies and reverse Lamar policies. He put in place a strict fiscal policy, limiting the printing of paper money. He established trading posts and put several peace treaties in place with the Indians, ending those hostilities for the most part. Houston was less successful with Mexico, given the popular sentiment. Lamar, undeterred, organized his expedition to Santa Fe, and the soldiers were promptly captured by Mexican forces. The Santa Fe expedition's fate further enraged the populace. To complicate matters, the Texas Navy under Commodore Edwin Moore was somewhat of a rogue element, independently aiding Mexican federalists against Mexican centralists.

In March 1842, Santa Anna invaded Texas and took San Antonio, leaving a couple days later with prisoners. Congress declared war against Mexico, and Houston did his best to delay to avert the crisis. Despite Houston's delay tactics, several hundred soldiers disobeyed orders and headed south into Mexico to a city called Mier. These soldiers were captured by Mexico, and one in ten was executed. Pressure again intensified on Houston to war with Mexico. Houston did everything he could to play a game of "wait and see."

At the same time, Houston was dealing with the fallout from his unpopular desire to move the capital from Austin to Houston. Houston was doing this primarily at the urgings of wife Margaret, who due to respiratory problems greatly preferred Houston. Government papers were attempted to be smuggled out of Austin to travel to Houston, but Austin citizens tracked down the smugglers, setting off what would be known as the "Archives War," an embarrassment for Houston. Meanwhile, Houston had to deal with rogue Commodore Moore, eventually stripping him of his post, causing further embarrassment.

Chapter 8

Chapter 8 Summary and Analysis

Houston continued to work toward annexation with the United States. He played a wise game of politics, taking advantage of the enmity between the United States and Great Britain. Towards the United States, he showed a friendliness towards Great Britain and vice-versa, making each country want to snatch up Texas so that the other country could not. Houston was so successful in making himself appear friendly to Great Britain that old friend Andrew Jackson wrote him to question his pro-British sentiment. However, Houston was hoping to join the United States.

Still, the United States under the Tyler administration was not yet willing to annex Texas, viewing it as risky politically, although a new secretary of state, Abel Upshur, seemed willing. As with his strategy before San Jacinto, Houston played his hand close to the vest, remaining cautious and noncommittal. Houston continued to have close communication with Texas' minister to Washington, Isaac Van Zandt. Meanwhile, the Texas Congress was becoming impatient, and threatened to pass a resolution calling for immediate annexation.

Abel Upshur died in a freak accident aboard a navy warship, delivering a blow to annexation talks. He was replaced with Houston's old enemy John Calhoun. Pro-slavery Calhoun saw annexation as a way to guarantee slavery in Texas. Texas thus became embroiled in the slavery issue, and so many abolitionists began to oppose annexation. Texas annexation was defeated by U.S. Congress in mid-1844. However, James K. Polk emerged to win the presidency on a platform of manifest destiny. The American public seemed more interested in expanding the United States into the southwest than being concerned with slavery.

Houston's two-year term came to an end, and his political ally Anson Jones was elected president. He continued to exert public and private pressure for annexation. Meanwhile, he planned a plantation at a place called Raven's Hill. Annexation was finally approved, but Houston's had little time to celebrate, because Andrew Jackson died in mid-1845. The Texas Admission Act was signed by Polk on December 29, 1845. Texas drafted a new state constitution, and in new elections, Sam Houston was elected as one of the U.S. Senators from Texas.

The major issue Houston faced when arriving as a new senator was Oregon, which the U.S. and Britain were battling over. Polk wanted to end joint occupation and take Oregon, risking bad relations and even war with Britain. Houston supported Polk and gave a lengthy speech on the senate floor. Meanwhile, Mexico was still a problem, having reacted negatively to the U.S.'s annexation of Texas. They disputed that the Rio Grande was the true border. In response, Polk sent the army under General Zachary Taylor to Texas, to show force and protect the Rio Grande. Mexico soldiers killed a small platoon of Taylor's soldiers, and the U.S. had what it needed to declare war on Mexico.

The U.S. proceeded to score several victories against Mexico in small battles. The so-called Wilmot Proviso emerged in Congress, which tried to ensure that slavery would be prohibited in any territories taken from Mexico. This was of course hotly contested. Southerners became to talk of secession.

Houston argued fiercely against secession. He also argued for further expansion, using a racist argument that the Anglo race was superior to the Hispanics. At the Democratic National Convention in 1848, Houston was lukewarm on the slavery issue, not really wanting to deal with it, angering nemesis Calhoun. Calhoun continued to agitate for secession. In 1850, Henry Clay offered a series of complicated compromises on the slavery issue involving new states like California and Utah, known as the Compromise of 1850, that somewhat placated both sides. Around this time, Houston scored a victory for Texas by getting Texas a payment of 10 million by giving up land claims in the act that made New Mexico a state.

Chapter 9

Chapter 9 Summary and Analysis

The Compromise of 1850 created a fragile sense of goodwill for a few years. Houston continued to preach for peace and the importance of the Union versus Southern secession. There was some talk of Houston becoming a presidential candidate, but Houston seemed content to remain in domestic bliss with his wife Margaret and several children. In 1852, Franklin Pierce, a relative unknown was elected and the author wonders whether Houston "missed his shot" by not running in 1852.

At the beginning of 1853, Houston was elected to another term in the Senate. In December 1853, the relative national peace was shattered when the controversial Kansas Nebraska Act was crafted, which would provide 'popular sovereignty' to newly created states, such that they could choose, by vote, whether to have slavery or not. The Act would also repeal the Missouri Compromise of 1821, which established a northern geographical limit to slavery. There was, then, potential for slavery to be taken up not just in the south, but in the northwest. The Act was viewed as a victory for the South, and abolitionists were outraged. Houston argued against the Kansas Nebraska Act, because he (accurately) predicted that the North would use the fear of slavery expansion to further agitate and break the peace. Houston also expressed worry about the treatment of the Indians with further U.S. expansion. Both of these stances were extremely unpopular in the South and in Texas, and Houston began a slide toward alienation with his constituents, and with the media. Beyond anything else, Houston craved peace, but the majority seemed to want war, sentiment which would of course culminate in the Civil War.

Reflecting popular unhappiness, a new political party emerged, known as the Know-Nothings, who were anti-immigration and anti-Catholic. Houston saw in the Know-Nothings a way to advocate for unionism, and implicitly, he threw his support behind the movement, outraging friends and political allies alike. Houston saw his own Democratic party as moving toward the extremism of John Calhoun and away from the ideals of his hero, Andrew Jackson. However, the Know-Nothings were badly beaten in elections, and the movement died.

Houston ran for governor of Texas in 1857, and his unpopular views proved too much; he was defeated. The Texas Congress further elected someone to take Houston's place as U.S. Senator, making Houston essentially a "lame duck" senator. He continued to argue for unionism, and he participated in such projects as a Texas railroad, before ending his U.S. Senate term in 1859 and returning for good to Texas.

Chapter 10

Chapter 10 Summary and Analysis

In 1859, Houston appeared to be retiring from public life. Public sentiment, and the media, appeared to turn back toward supporting Houston; perhaps his policies had not been so wrongheaded, many argued. There was then talk of Houston running for governor again. Houston invited the public to vote in his favor, but he did not campaign. He did not attend the Democratic National Convention, tiring of party labels in general, and stressing that he was a man of the people, not any political party. In August, he was elected governor. In his inaugural speech, he promised funding for such things as schools and railroads, and that he would be a strong defender of Texas should Mexico try any more hostility. On slavery, as always, he was a political moderate, neither a strong proslavery nor pro-emancipation governor. He stressed the importance of the union above all else.

In Indian policy, he set up a series of ranger stations and trading posts, to an extent that Indians no longer posed much of a threat after 1860.

The union threatened to dissolve with the pending 1860 presidential election. Many southern Democrats were ready to quit the union should a Republican get elected. Some petitioned Houston to run for president, as a moderate that might keep the union together, but he refused to participate in the national convention after a lifetime of party politics. Predictably, the Democrats' ticket was split between moderate Democrats and radical southern Democrats. The Republicans elected Abraham Lincoln. Another southern party, the Unionists, only added to the splintering in the South.

Lincoln was elected, and the stage was set for secession. Houston did everything he could to prevent Texas secession. The Texas Congress, undeterred, called for a convention to decide the issue in early 1861. Seeing the writing on the wall, Houston next urged that, should secession happen, Texas should become an independent nation, rather than join the southern confederacy.

Congress voted to secede. As a last-ditch effort to stave off secession, Houston called for a public referendum, but the public also voted to secede. A month or so later, Texas Congress voted to join the Confederacy. To quiet Houston, legislators next required all state officials to take an oath of loyalty to the Confederacy. Houston would not do it, and it was clear he would be forced from office. New president Lincoln offered to give him U.S. military help, but Houston refused, not wanting Texans to shed the blood of Texans.

Houston, as a father to his child, had no choice but to back Texas, even as he stepped down. Houston and his family moved to Galveston, and he was there when the first shots of the Civil War were fired. Houston's son, Sam Jr., joined the Confederate Army, and was presumed dead at the Battle of Shiloh, only to miraculously emerge six months later, alive.

In October 1862, U.S. forces took Galveston, and Houston had to move to Huntsville. There, in the winter of 1863, Houston's health failed and he died after a prolonged illness on July 26, 1863.

Characters

Sam Houston

Sam Houston is the subject of the biography. He was an impatient youth who yearned for adventure and so he spent several years in Cherokee country. He then joined the army and was gravely injured in a battle with the Creek Indians.

Recovering back in Tennessee, Houston became a diplomat for the Indians, and later joined Andrew Jackson's successful presidential campaign. A charming man and powerful orator, Houston rose in politics, becoming U.S. Representative and then Governor of Tennessee. He married Eliza Allen, a woman many years younger than him who did not really love him. This became apparent when Eliza left him and fled to her family home. The resulting scandal forced Houston to resign from office.

Sam's true political fortunes were made after a move to Texas, where he joined the other Anglo-Americans fighting for independence from Mexico. He was elected commander of the Texas army, and he defeated Mexican General Santa Anna at San Jacinto, becoming a military hero. He later became president of Texas, then U.S. Senator, and finally Texas Governor.

Sam Houston was a political moderate who preached caution and peacefulness. He was loyal to the South and approved of slavery (he kept several slaves himself), but fought against radical pro-slavery elements that wanted to aggressively expand slavery into new territories. He was also a unionist who fought against southern secession that ended in the Civil War.

David G. Burnet

David G. Burnet, along with Sam Houston, was one of the fathers of Texas, and he was chosen to be interim president in the time when Texas had just set up a provisional government, and its future was greatly in doubt. Author Randolph B. Campbell paints Burnet as a somewhat short-tempered, short-sighted man, and he became a chief nemesis of Houston, both during the fight for Texas independence and later when Houston became president of Texas.

Burnet was a "war hawk" who urged military action towards Mexico. By contrast, Houston worked toward peace rather than open hostility. Burnet, furthermore, wanted to essentially invade Mexico, to take the battle to Mexico, so to speak, a popular view with many Anglo Texans thirsty for revenge. When Houston repeatedly engaged in strategic retreat during his struggle against Santa Anna, Burnet mocked him as a coward and laughingstock, and demanded Houston turn to fight. Houston was merely buying time for the correct moment to strike, which would come at the San Jacinto River.

After Santa Anna was defeated, Burnet negotiated the Treaty of Velasco with Santa Anna. In addition to the public treaty, Burnet secretly negotiated with Santa Anna to spare Santa Anna's life in exchange for Santa Anna being an advocate for Texas independence back in Mexico. When the so-called "secret treaty" was exposed, many regarded Burnet as a traitor who let a murderer go free.

Burnet was defeated by Houston in a bid for the Texas presidency and continued to be a thorn in Houston's side for several years.

Chief Oo-loo-te-ka

Chief Oo-loo-te-ka was a Cherokee whom Houston met with as a young man. The chief became a mentor and surrogate father to Houston. Through the chief, Houston became a member of the Cherokee nation, and later advocated on the Indians' behalf.

Congressman William Stanbery

Stanbery wrote a newspaper article questioning the ethics of Sam Houston in regards to a deal involving Indian rations. Enraged, Sam Houston beat the man with a cane in the middle of a street. Houston was arrested and forced to defend himself in a trial on the congressional floor. This incident, though it ended in Houston's official admonishment, put Houston back on the road to political prominence.

Andrew Jackson

Military general and then president, Andrew Jackson exerted a profound influence on Houston's politics. Through working for Jackson's presidential campaign, Houston was introduced into the public eye. Throughout his life, Houston considered himself a Jacksonian Democrat, and was disappointed when he perceived that the Democratic party was moving away from Jacksonian principles.

Santa Anna

Santa Anna was a military general who violently seized dictatorial power within Mexico. Santa Anna personally led armies into Texas after the Anglos there declared their independence. Houston defeated Santa Anna at the battle of San Jacinto. David G. Burnet then negotiated the Treaty of Velasco with Santa Anna, allowing him to return to Mexico, where he again seized power and tried a weak invasion of Texas a few years after that.

John Calhoun

John Calhoun was a leading politician from South Carolina. Taking the stance of extremely pro-slavery, he was one of the most outspoken and well-recognized proponents for expanding slavery, which he called a "positive good." Houston placed himself in opposition to men like Calhoun, and preached a much more moderate approach to slavery and secessionism.

Margaret Houston

Description

James K. Polk

President James K. Polk was a proponent of "manifest destiny" and expanding U.S. territory. Under his administration, Texas became annexed to the United States, and war was waged with Mexico, resulting in the U.S. acquiring California and large parts of the modern southwest United States.

Abraham Lincoln

A political moderate, Abraham Lincoln was elected by the northern Republicans in 1860. His election was the "last straw" for many pro-secessionists Democrats in the South. Lincoln's election led to secession and eventually the Civil War.

Objects/Places

The Creek War

In a battle against the Creek Indians, young Sam Houston was severely wounded while leading a charge. His heroism began to catch the eye of his general, Andrew Jackson and eventually they struck up a friendship.

Tennessee

Sam Houston grew up in Tennessee and after a successful law practice, he entered Tennessee politics to aid Andrew Jackson in his presidential campaign. He rose to governor of Tennessee but resigned in disgrace after his wife left him.

Indian Dress

For several years, Sam Houston worked as a diplomat for the Indians, and especially the Cherokee Indians. In many meetings with U.S. officials, Houston showed his solidarity with the Indians by dressing like them. In one famous encounter with John Calhoun, Calhoun scolded Houston for his costume, and Houston and Calhoun became lifelong enemies.

San Jacinto

Sam Houston, as commander of the Texas army, defeated Mexican General Santa Anna at the San Jacinto River, thereafter ensuring Texas' independence from Mexico.

The Archives War

Houston wanted to move Texas' capital from Austin to Houston, mostly because of personal pride. Houston officials tried to smuggle government papers out of Austin to accomplish this move, but Austin citizens stopped them. The "Archives War" proved an embarrassment for Houston.

The Consultation

Sam Houston helped to organize "The Consultation" on October 16 and 17, 1835, a meeting of Texas politicians and citizens. This important event established a provisional Texas government.

Paper Money

Houston's first years as president of Texas were plagued with financial problems. As part of an effort to stabilize the Texas economy, Texas released paper money. This was a less than ideal solution, because the paper money became quickly devalued, and Texas' public debt continued to increase.

Alamo

The Alamo was a fort in San Antonio. After Texas forces ousted Mexican forces from the city, they became overconfident and placed only a handful of men to guard the Alamo. Mexican forces returned and surrounded the Alamo, eventually killing the Alamo soldiers to a man. The Alamo massacre spurred the Texans in their war against Mexico, and Houston motivated his troops by urging them to "remember the Alamo."

Annexation

As Texas president and later as U.S. Senator from Texas, Houston worked hard to ensure Texas' annexation to the United States, and its eventual joining of the Union was a great victory for Houston.

The Kansas Nebraska Act

The Kansas Nebraska Act, among other things, repealed the Missouri Compromise, which stated that slavery could not be practiced in states above a certain latitude line. Houston rightly predicted that this repeal would give the North the ammunition it needed the fear of slavery expansion to agitate the South. Houston's stance on the Act was very unpopular.

Themes

A Philosophy of Moderation and of Peace

Author Randolph B. Campbell stresses that many of Houston's personal beliefs and public actions were motivated by his practical, level-headed, and grounded nature. Some of this personality may have developed during Houston's formative years when he lived both with his family and with the Cherokee Indians under Chief Oo-loo-te-ka. Houston saw the effects of war and strife upon the Cherokee people, instilling in him a desire to pursue justice for Indians, and a desire to pursue peace.

These desires guided him as a leader of Texas. He feverishly argued against overt military action against Mexico, and certainly against ill-fated assaults like the Matamoros expedition. Houston's military strategy was guided by both a pacifist streak as well as a realist streak. He knew that Texas did not have the kind of military or manpower to survive a sustained offensive war; instead, he advocated for a defensive war in which he could conserve energy and strike only when the moment was ripe. Many, including interim president Burnet, disagreed with Houston's ostensibly cowardly tactics of retreat, but no one could argue with Houston's success with his victory at San Jacinto.

In later years, Houston displayed a similar philosophy in the issue of Texas' annexation. Playing his cards close to the vest, so to speak, Houston remained noncommittal and at all times practical. His measured, subtle overtures to the United States helped Texas to become a state. Later, Houston was a staunch advocate of unionism. He wished to avoid discontent and war, and he accurately predicted the coming of the Civil War. His opposition to the Kansas Nebraska Act is typical of Houston's practical nature. He knew that the Act could bring war, and he opposed it on those simple grounds.

Public Versus Private Life

Throughout his life, Sam Houston maintained a balance between public aspirations and private desires. Although his heart yearned for a quiet homestead, a loving wife, and many children, he was continually attracted to public life, and his biography cycles between stretches of domestic bliss and periods of intense political battles.

No doubt, Houston enjoyed the public esteem and fame that his political career afforded him. A former war hero, he displayed brilliant political smarts and oratorical skills in his rise in Tennessee politics. He seemed destined for greatness, and yet he fell hopelessly in love with a much younger woman, Eliza Allen. Author Campbell chronicles Houston's attraction to much younger women. Houston essentially ruined his Tennessee political career by marrying Eliza, who did not love him. Houston's private desires got the best of him in this circumstance. He fell into alcoholism, which would plague him for much of his life.

Houston underwent a phoenix-like resurrection in Texas, but even here, Houston still searched for a way to raise a family. He married Margaret, and his dream was realized. Still, Houston vacillated between a quiet home life and a busy political life. In correspondence with Margaret, Houston frequently expressed regret at not being with her and his growing family. Houston felt that Texas needed him to represent its interests and he was compelled to enter the fray again and again.

Houston and the Peculiar Institution

Houston had a complicated and nuanced view on the "peculiar institution" of slavery. Houston owned several slaves himself and he recognized slavery as an important factor in the South's economy and a cultural tradition besides. A child of the South, Houston felt strongly connected to the region. Campbell describes Houston's relationship to Texas as akin to a father's relationship with his child. As a father, Houston defended his child, and that included defending slavery. And Houston, like the vast majority of Americans in his time, also felt that whites were superior to blacks and this racism no doubt helped to justify his views on slavery.

Nevertheless, Houston described slavery as a "calamity," a kind of necessary evil that needed to be continued only with reluctance. And Houston soundly rejected the increasing radicalism in the pro-slavery camp, as exhibited by John Calhoun and others. Houston did not agree with those that felt slavery was of such importance that the South should secede from the Union. He also did not agree that slavery should be expanded to new U.S. territories like Kansas and Nebraska.

Above all, Houston wished to keep the peace, and his moderate stance on slavery was an attempt to do just that. However, Houston's moderation was not shared by the majority of southerners and Texans, and men like Houston were pushed aside as forces gathered to battle in the Civil War, in order to settle the slavery issue with violence.

Style

Perspective

Author Randolph B. Campbell is a professor of history at the University of North Texas. He has written several books on 19th century Texas and the South in general. He is thus eminently qualified to discuss Houston, especially in regards to larger issues like Texas independence and secession.

Campbell takes an objective and impassioned look at Houston, pointing out personal failings such as alcoholism and political failures such as his failed bid for the governorship along the way. However, Campbell also admires Houston's life, especially Houston's philosophy of thoughtfulness, moderation, and caution. In the final section of the book, Campbell talks about Houston's practical nature, and how this practicality allowed Houston to navigate some very rough times in Texas' early period. Campbell notes the irony that such a grounded and practical man was involved in a lifetime of rather romantic adventures, such as his leadership of a ragtag group of Texas soldiers and the defeat of Santa Anna at San Jacinto.

Campbell himself also takes an objective look at Houston's racism where he advocated for U.S. expansion because of perceived Anglo superiority to Hispanics and his pro-slavery leanings. In these aspects, Campbell shows Houston to be merely a man of his time, reflecting views held by the majority of Americans at the time. At the same time, Houston did show some progressive spirit in his human treatment of the Indians, as well as his refusal to give in to extreme pro-slavery sentiments. Unlike John Calhoun, who regarded slavery as a "positive good," Houston regarded it as a kind of necessary evil.

Tone

As a history text, the book adheres closely to factual reality and there is a sense that the author is taking pains to remain objective. Sam Houston is shown "warts and all," and while Campbell clearly has respect and admiration for the man and his adventurous life, Campbell also describes Houston's political failures such as his Tennessee exile and his failures to stop the Texas secession, as well Houston's personal failures such as his long-term alcoholism.

Still, Campbell has a strong sense of pacing and the book proceeds at a fairly breezy clip. Campbell has a strong sense for the tangential details and ironies that enrich such a biography, such as Houston's lack of formal education but love for Homer's Iliad. The text also betrays a certain tongue-in-cheek fun with the episode in which Houston canes Congressman Stanbery. Houston strikes Stanbery in the testicles and Campbell wryly avoids the obvious description, opting to use a quotation stating that Houston struck Stanbery "elsewhere."

Campbell's tone is not dry, but is in fact quite engaging. Campbell's history of Texas is one of great men like Houston, Burnet, Austin, and others, their personalities clashing, and their emotions bared. Campbell is able to effectively communicate this more personal and more emotional approach to history with a liberal use of quotations from Houston's letters and speeches. Frequent quotations allow the reader to get into the heart and mind of Houston, a method which, arguably, is a more satisfying and effective rendering of history than a dry recitation of facts.

Structure

The book is divided into ten chapters of approximately equal length. Essentially, the book proceeds in chronological order, with a final section of the last chapter offering an overview of Sam Houston and his importance to the American Southwest.

Chapters are usually divided according to major changes in Houston's life or political career. For example, Chapter 2 ends with Houston's voluntary exile from Tennessee after his scandalous separation with Eliza Allen. And Chapter 5 ends with Houston's victory at San Jacinto and his travel to New Orleans to get medical treatment for his war wound.

Author Randolph B. Campbell provides some amount of historical context necessary to understand Houston's overall contributions to the United States and to Texas, but otherwise the focus is centered fairly sharply upon Houston's own actions, from birth until death. While it is clear the book is thoroughly researched, there are no lengthy footnotes, though there is an author's note on sources used. Campbell provides frequent quotations from Houston's various correspondences as well as public speeches. A "Study and Discussion Questions" section lists several questions intended to spark classroom discussion and debate, indicating the text, as part of the "Library of American Biography" series, is intended for high school and college study.

Quotes

"Stubbornly independent and courageous to the extreme, [Sam Houston] could stand almost anything except boring routine" (Chapter 1, pg. 12.)

"Less than three months after his marriage, as he campaigned for reelection, Sam Houston's world fell apart. Eliza Allen Houston left him and went home to her family. Why this happened, why the marriage failed, will never be known with certainty" (Chapter 2, pg. 23.)

"[Sam Houston] came to Texas not as a revolutionary schemer but as a restless man seeking a new beginning, and he was not positive, even as he entered Texas, that his future lay in that direction" (Chapter 3, pg. 41.)

"Texas's vast expanses of open land had attracted thousands of Anglo settlers during the decade and a half before November 1835. Their future now depended on success on the battlefield, and it was Sam Houston's to win or lose, provided that somehow an army could be raised, unified, and convinced to fight under his leadership" (Chapter 4, pg. 62.)

"Some of the Texans wanted to execute Santa Anna immediately in retaliation for the Alamo and Goliad, but Houston knew that, alive, his prisoner was the key to removing all Mexican soldiers from Texas without further bloodshed" (Chapter 5, pg. 85-86.)

"Houston's presidency had brought significant progress, but the infant republic remained far from secure. Establishing a successful government in a huge, sparsely populated new nation presented problems too great to solve in two years. Texas still needed the ex-president's political leadership" (Chapter 6, pg. 105.)

"Through the remaining years of the republic, and to a large extent for the rest of his life, views of Houston and his policies constituted a major basis for political divisions in Texas" (Chapter 7, pg. 111.)

"[Houston] returned to a favorite subject, the relocation of the capital. The recent invasion had proven that Austin was too exposed to the enemy, he said; the seat of government should be moved to a more secure and convenient location. Houston also knew that relocating the capital would make Margaret happy" (Chapter 7, pg. 121.)

"Glowing with optimism, [Houston] described for [Isaac] Van Zandt the consequences of the annexation negotiations: 'Millions will realize their benefits; but it is not within the compass of mortal expression to estimate the advantages to mankind'" (Chapter 8, pg. 132.)

"Houston not only survived the crisis of 1850, but also came home that fall a victor with an enhanced national reputation. [...] In less than ten years, Houston had led his republic into the Union and become a successful national political leader as well" (Chapter 8, pg. 154.)

"The [Kansas-Nebraska Act] had split the Whig party and led to its replacement in the North by the Republican party. [...] Democrats across the South began to threaten secession the moment any 'Black Republican' candidate won the presidency. Houston's prophetic fears about the impact of Kansas-Nebraska had begun to come true" (Chapter 9, pg. 167.)

"The personal key to Houston's greatest achievements lay in his good sense. What an irony for a man whose life was so filled with romantic adventure" (Chapter 10, pg. 199.)

Topics for Discussion

What was the nature of Sam Houston's fall from grace from Tennessee politics? Why did Houston repeatedly refuse to talk about the scandal publicly?

What were some of Houston's admirable personal qualities? What were some qualities that were less than desirable?

What was Houston's view of slavery? How did Houston address the matter of how slavery should be handled on the national level?

How did Sam Houston win the fight against Santa Anna that resulted in Texas' independence? What military strategy did he employ throughout the campaign?

What issues did Sam Houston have to contend with during his first term as Texas president?

Why was Sam Houston attracted to the so-called "Know-Nothing" party? How did Houston hope to use the party to advance his interests?

What events and factors led to Texas' fight for independence?