

## Strategy:

# A RETREAT IS NOT A ROUT

by Joseph W. Varela

“The enemy advances, we retreat; the enemy camps, we harass; the enemy tires, we attack; the enemy retreats, we pursue.”

Mao Zedong<sup>1</sup>

The Western military tradition scorns retreat. Ever since classical Greece, honor accrues to the man who stands and fights, even unto death, while ignominy rewards those who fall back. Retreat is seen at best as an admission of failure; at worst it is cause for accusations of incompetence, cowardice or treason. I maintain that this bias is a critical limitation on flexibility in all kinds of conflict and contributes to defeat more often than it does victory.

The popular image of a retreat, at least in the West, is exemplified by the response of the Soviet Union to the German invasion of June 1941. It was a true rout on a scale unmatched in history. Surprised and utterly unprepared, lashed by the panzers and the Luftwaffe, the Red Army lost 40,000 men a day in a wild dash east.<sup>2</sup> Leadership at all levels was paralyzed. Within days, entire armies ran out of food, fuel and ammunition and were encircled and destroyed. Weaponless, leaderless soldiers staggered down roads choked with fleeing civilians. It was September before the Red Army stiffened enough to stop the Germans at Leningrad. It would cost the Soviet Union almost four more years of war and thirty million lives to assure victory.

The common concept of retreat is flawed. The annals of warfare are filled with examples of retreats that contributed to victory.

General MacArthur, caught with his pants down in the Philippines on December 8, 1941, could have given in to panic. Instead, he led an orderly retreat, maneuvering brilliantly to save the bulk of his army and inflict heavy casualties on the crack Japanese units sent to pursue him. Russia, reeling under Napoleon's invasion in 1812, fell back into its endless expanses, and even abandoned Moscow before launching the counterattack that destroyed the *Grand Armee*. Mao's Long March is the stuff of legend. Communist troops "fought backwards" for thousands of miles and in the process wore out much of the Nationalist army.

George Washington longed to command a disciplined European-style army, and only lack of resources compelled him to fight otherwise. But General Nathaniel Greene, America's first and best guerrilla soldier, had no such pretensions. Leading a motley force of Continental regulars, local militia, and armed citizens, he fought while withdrawing, dragging Lord Cornwallis through the South to the latter's immense cost.<sup>3</sup> The tactics he used would not have been out of place in Vietnam.

But I want to focus on a smaller example, closer to home: The Texas Revolution.<sup>4</sup>

In 1836 Texans<sup>5</sup> were in the midst of a revolution against the dictatorial government of General Santa Anna.<sup>6</sup> Most of the Anglo Texan fighters were recent immigrants from the southern United States.<sup>8</sup> They were few, but they were woodsmen and sharpshooters and they were armed with American rifles which could kill out past 200 yards. They were loosely disciplined and fought as irregular light infantry.

Their Mexican opponents were Santa Anna's regular troops, drilled in the art of Napoleonic warfare. Most of the Mexican foot were armed with muskets with an effective range of 70 yards and trained to fight as mass infantry. The quality of these troops varied. Some were convicts pressed into service. But Santa Anna's cavalry were well trained professionals who could also fight as dismounted dragoons. The regular forces were supplemented by *rancheros*, born to the saddle. They acted as guides and light skirmishing cavalry.

The American volunteers considered themselves to be horsemen. They met their masters on the South Texas plains. There they were out-riden and out-fought by Santa Anna's dragoons and his *ranchero* irregulars, as Fannin and his army discovered at the cost of their lives on the fields near Goliad. Nor did garrisons fare any better. The strategy that caused the battle of San Antonio de Béjar, fought to secure the Alamo as a Texan outpost, revealed the inadequacy of Texan logistics and troop strength when the Alamo was later retaken and Travis and his garrison were killed.





*The Alamo at San Antonio de Béjar*

Sam Houston watched from his stronghold in Gonzales. It appears that he was the only Texan general with the gift of strategic thinking. Nominally the top field commander of all Texan armies, in reality his authority did not extend much past his own garrison. He knew his Texans could not compete with the Mexicans on the

plains, and that Texas lacked the numbers and logistical wherewithal to secure forts. The loss of the Alamo confirmed his suspicions of the worthlessness of garrisons.

He had a critical decision to make, and he made it: He burned Gonzales and withdrew east.



*Goliad flag. Houston took its advice literally.  
Replica in the 183rd District Court  
(Photo by author)*



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## Continued

As Mexican forces pursued, he prepared a stand at Burnham's Crossing on the Colorado River. Faced with envelopment, he burned the ferry and withdrew again, to Beason's Crossing, further down the Colorado.<sup>9</sup> There he learned of the annihilation of Fannin at Goliad. Now his small army was all that was left. The military situation of the Texas Revolution was dire. He withdrew again, this time to San Felipe, on the Brazos.<sup>10</sup> All the while he endured the taunts of his army and the protests of the Texan government. Houston suspected that even if he won a tactical victory at San Felipe, his tiny army might be damaged beyond further usefulness. He stayed at San Felipe one night before burning it and retreating yet again, to Groce's Plantation twenty miles to the north.<sup>11</sup> There he was able to refit and train his troops and nurse his hospital-cases.

While at Groce's he received a letter from President Davis Burnett, delivered in person by Secretary of War Rusk:

Sir:

The enemy are laughing you to scorn. You must fight them. You must retreat no further. The country expects you to fight.<sup>12</sup>

But Houston again withdrew, this time towards Lynchburg—and Santa Anna's army. All the while he had been backing into terrain familiar to his sharpshooters, the forests and river bottoms of East Texas. Santa Anna's army was now struggling in alien territory. Long gone were the South Texas plains, which Mexico's disciplined cavalry and mass infantry were designed to dominate. Here they were less mobile and therefore less effective, and their quartermasters were at the end of a long logistical rope. Houston made his stand at San Jacinto and the rest is history.<sup>13</sup>



Statue of Sam Houston  
at the city of Houston.  
He is riding east  
and pointing towards  
San Jacinto.  
(Photo by author)

Many times the defense lawyer will be presented with a setback. It could be in plea negotiations. It could be in oral argument at the Court of Criminal Appeals. It could be in the middle of cross. What is to be done?

One choice is to flee in panic, never a productive stratagem. Another option is standing fast and going down in flames fighting. This tactic seldom results in strategic victory; one thinks of Thermopylae and the 4000 Greeks who stood against the hosts of Xerxes.<sup>14</sup> It can also bring about disaster; one might recall Hitler's orders never to retreat and the loss of Paulus's Sixth Army before Stalingrad.<sup>15</sup>

The middle course might work best: Avoiding direct engagement and retreating in good order to familiar ground. Faced with overwhelming strength, that is what Houston did, albeit against opposition from above and below. Fannin, Travis and Bowie earned immortality; but even as they died, Houston was withdrawing and thereby winning the war. The defense lawyer confronted with a setback might consider backing up into more familiar territory and preparing to fight anew.

<sup>1</sup> *Selected Military Writings* (1966).

<sup>2</sup> Constantine Pleshakov, *Stalin's Folly: The Tragic First Ten Days of World War Two on the Eastern Front* (2005); Harrison Salisbury, *The 900 Days: The Siege of Leningrad* (1969).

<sup>3</sup> Russell F. Weigley, *The American Way of War* (1973), chapter 1.

<sup>4</sup> Weigley, *op. cit.*, chapter 2.

<sup>5</sup> The best, almost the only, military history is Stephen L. Hardin, *Texian Hero: A Military History of the Texas Revolution* (1994).

<sup>6</sup> The historically-correct demonym was "Texians" or "Texicans." But I have chosen to use the modern term.

<sup>7</sup> Antonio de Padua Maria Severino López de Santa Anna y Pérez de Lebrón, the self-styled "Napoleon of the West."

<sup>8</sup> They were in fact illegal aliens. Their presence galled the government in Mexico City.

<sup>9</sup> Near Weimar, about halfway between Béjar and downtown Houston.

<sup>10</sup> San Felipe is on Interstate 10 about 45 miles west of downtown Houston. There is a park with a statue of Stephen F. Austin.

<sup>11</sup> Near Hempstead. Houston's retreat should not be confused with the "Runaway Scrape," which was a panicked flight of civilians toward the US border.

<sup>12</sup> Quoted in Hardin, *op. cit.* Rusk was authorized to relieve Houston if he deemed it necessary.

<sup>13</sup> There is evidence that Houston intended to retreat even further, up into the dense forests of East Texas, but circumstances forced a fight at San Jacinto. Houston's withdrawal was the stuff of bitter controversy years after Texas independence. See Hardin, *op. cit.*, chapter 10.

<sup>14</sup> Thermopylae and the simultaneous sea battle of Artemisium (480 B.C.) have literally defined the heroic last stand, as does the Alamo. But both Persia and Mexico were only delayed, and were decisively defeated later. See Paul Cartledge, *Thermopylae: The Battle That Changed the World* (2006).

<sup>15</sup> Erich von Manstein, *Lost Victories* (1955), trans. Anthony G. Powell (1958).