

SECESSION IN TEXAS PUBLIC MEMORY:
AN ANALYSIS OF TEXAS NEWSPAPERS
FROM 1870 TO 2020

by

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ABSTRACT

Although attempts to justify secession date back to 1861, Texan's desire to secede again is a modern phenomenon. The alteration of secession's place in Texas historical memory is responsible for secession becoming a part of today's Texans' cultural identity. This paper aims to uncover how Texans' conceptualization of secession has changed over time to clarify past historical inaccuracies and prevent future ones. A deeper look into secession's place in Texas public memory reveals many examples of how memory, time, and the desire of Texans to distance themselves from slavery and its legacies have distorted historical narrative. This paper examines secession in the Lone Star State by looking into how Texans discuss secession during three periods: 1870-1900, 1900-1980, 1980-2020. After the Civil War and Reconstruction, conversations surrounding secession in Texas feature an overwhelming feeling that secession was a mistake. In the twentieth century, however, events outside of the United States sparked new defenses of secession. Texans' efforts to write a version of secession absent of slavery marks a new place for secession in Texas's historical memory. In the last period, secession emerged as an aspect of Texas cultural identity because of the alteration of secession in Texan's memories and minds. This paper draws heavily from contemporary Texas historians and analyzes keyword search results for "secession" in online newspaper databases.

INTRODUCTION

While Texans have attempted to justify their secession in 1861, but the desire to secede again, however, is a much more recent sentiment. This paper explores the history of secession in the Lone Star State by examining how Texans remember secession. By first providing a summary of the history of secession and the death of Unionism in the state, this paper constructs a baseline for what secession originally meant to Texans. This section draws heavily on sources such as *Texas Divided: Loyalty and Dissent in the Lone Star State* by James Marten, *Secession and the Union in Texas* by Walter L. Buenger, and *The Shattering of Texas Unionism: Politics in the Lone Star State During the Civil War Era* by Dale Baum. Unraveling the different arguments for and against secession, and understanding which Texans were for and against leaving the Union when Texas seceded, allows the reader to understand how views on secession have changed in Texas public memory since 1861. The knowledge of how historical memory has altered Texans' conceptualization of secession is an important part of revising past historical inaccuracies and preventing future ones. A clarification of how secession has evolved into a facet of many Texans' cultural identity is important because it reveals many examples of how memory, time, and the desire of Texans to distance themselves from slavery and its legacies have distorted historical narrative.

An analysis of newspapers from throughout the state from 1870 to the present day explains how arguments defending secession have changed as the issue's place in the state's history has evolved. This section discusses views on secession following the Civil War to demonstrate a general acceptance among Texans that secession was wrong. This acceptance came with rhetoric centered around the idea of reunion signaling that Texans preferred to put the past behind them than face the cultural consequences of the war in the years to come. This

section also provides an analysis of examples of Texans pushing the blame for secession back to the North and the arguments of those still defending secession from this early period. As these newspapers reach the twentieth century, reactions to President Theodore Roosevelt and the United States' support for the revolution in Panama signal a shift in attitudes as new arguments defending the legality of secession emerge in Texas. During the twentieth century, the image of Governor Sam Houston and his loyalty became prominent in Texas newspapers. Texans used Houston's image to contrast and subdue new arguments for secession. In the 1950s, reactions in newspapers to *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) and public-school desegregation led to a reemergence of Texans defending secession. For the first time since before the Civil War, Texans threatened to secede again. This is important as it marks the shift from Texans remembering secession as a past event, to a concept they could employ in the future.

Finally, this paper next explores and explains the push for a second Texas secession that appeared in the late 1990s. An analysis of this period shows that neo-secessionist groups such as the Southern League and the Republic of Texas viewed secession not as something to remember but as an action to take. Newspaper sources indicate that Texans did not initially think much of Governor Rick Perry and the Texas Republican Party's talk about secession during the 2000s. However, Republican Texas State politicians' reaction to President Donald Trump's loss in the 2020 Presidential Election demonstrates how drastically the idea of secession has changed in Texas since 1861. This paper helps to answer the question many people find themselves asking today: Why has secession re-emerged as a political issue in modern times? The following analysis clarifies how the current secessionist rhetoric of some Texans, including certain politicians, differs from mere defenses of the possible legality of the issue and how secession's place in Texas historical memory influences this current view. An awareness of historical

memory's effect on the issue of secession in Texas history is significant for anyone interested in why they think the way they do about the past. An analysis of this process is important because it reveals how easily false conceptions of history can establish themselves in public narrative.

SECESSION IN TEXAS

Understanding Texas's decision to secede from the Union in 1861 requires considering the individual interests of the different regional and ethnic groups in Texas.¹ Unlike the citizens in majority of the other states which would make up the Confederacy, Texans were less homogenous and had varying levels of ties to the Union. As a result, in the decade leading up to secession many Texas maintained cultural identities that set them apart from the rest of the lower southern states. Among Texans in 1860, less than a fourth could claim to have been present in the state at the time the United States annexed Texas in 1846.² Additionally, while as many as 80 percent of those who had migrated to Texas during the time between annexation and secession came from southern states such as Mississippi, Alabama, and Tennessee, Texas's place on the edge of the Old South created a set of conditions that caused the lives of Texans to vary from those of southerners in other states.³

Geography heavily shaped Texans' interests at the time of secession. Regionally, Texans living in East Texas and the Houston-Galveston area had the most in common culturally and economically with those in other southern states.⁴ Access to transportation, waterways, migration from the Southern United States, and a climate suited to growing staple crops from these states were responsible for many of the similarities between these two groups. Slavery in Texas was most concentrated in the eastern areas of the state as well.⁵ However, outside of these areas the similarities between Texans and others in the South diminished. Instead of the lucrative

¹ James Marten, *Texas Divided Loyalty and Dissent in the Lone Star State 1856-1874* (Lexington, Kentucky: The University Press of Kentucky, 2009), 2.

² Walter Buenger, *Secession and the Union in Texas* (Austin, Texas: University of Texas Press, 1984), 8.

³ Buenger, *Secession and the Union*, 64.

⁴ Buenger, *Secession and the Union*, 10.

⁵ Campbell, Randolph, "Slavery," Handbook of Texas Online, <https://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/entries/slavery>.

plantations and cotton fields that characterized much of the Lower South, farming in Central Texas more closely resembled semi-subsistence farming.⁶ Living on the frontier influenced Texans' opinions as well. The presence of the United States Army uniquely shaped the loyalties of those living on Texas's frontier.⁷ Many of these Texans relied on the U.S. Army for protection against Native American groups such as the Comanches and Apaches. Texans living on the frontier sold excess livestock and crops to the army causing them to rely of the army economically as well.⁸ However, when protection from the Union proved ineffective, relationships between Texans on the frontier and the Union strained.⁹ At the time of secession in 1861, each of these groups confronted the question of whether it was in their best personal interests to remain part of the United States.

German and Mexican Texans also contributed to the diverse range of interests within the state. By 1860 German Texans made up over 7 percent of Texas's free population, and Texans with Mexican surnames made up 7 percent by 1850. These numbers may seem unassuming but because the two groups tended to live among their own communities, German and Mexican Texans had enough concentrated political power in several counties to carry local elections and the numbers in others to be influential ethnic voting bloc. This is not to say that there was a single consensus among these groups but instead to explain why their presence in the state is an important part of understanding the different interests at play in Texas in 1861. Mexican Texans' general opposition to slavery and the efforts of some Mexican Texans to aid slaves in escaping across the border to Mexico alienated many White Texans. The religious differences between

⁶ Buenger, *Secession and the Union*, 10.

⁷ Buenger, *Secession and the Union*, 107.

⁸ Buenger, *Secession and the Union*, 109.

⁹ Buenger, *Secession and the Union*, 107.

Catholic Mexican Texans and the Protestant southern immigrants further increased White Texans' distrust of Mexican Texans in a way that was not a problem for German Texans. Some German Texans opposed slavery, but the majority were indifferent to the institution. A common element to the interests of both Mexican and German Texans was the pressure to act and vote like other Texans. For example, the possibility that their fellow Texans might think that German Texans were abolitionists led leaders of the German community to go out of their way to combat this image. Finally, most Mexican and German Texans lacked the cultural and social ties to the Union that complicated the issue of secession for other Texans. This increased the likelihood of that personal interests instead of residual loyalty to the United States influenced Mexican and German Texans' opinions on secession. The interests of German and Mexican Texans were unique to the Texas experience and contributed to views on secession in Texas that differed from those in other southern states.¹⁰

Racial fear and perceived neglect on the part of the federal government expedited the secessionist movement in Texas in the years leading up to 1861. John Brown's raid on Harper's Ferry in October of 1859 increased White southerners' (and Texans') tension and fear of a racial reckoning and northern interference with the institution of slavery. The Texas slave panic of 1860—the so-called “Texas Troubles”—less than a year later further fueled these fears. While Texans later discovered faulty phosphorus matches to be the real culprit behind this series of fires in North Texas, at the time they blamed the fires on northern abolitionists from the Methodist Episcopal church and Black slaves. The hysteria of that summer and the sharp increase in vigilantism and lynchings that came with it helped ripen Texas for secession.¹¹

¹⁰ Marten, *Texas Divided*, 26; Buenger, *Secession and the Union*, 83-87, 107-109.

¹¹ Buenger, *Secession and the Union*, 47-58; Reynolds, Donald, “*Texas Troubles*,” Handbook of Texas Online, <https://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/entries/texas-troubles>.

Modern historians cite the Texas Troubles, alongside the election of Abraham Lincoln, as one of the major contributing events to Texas secession, but other stressors within the state contributed to Texas's secession as well.¹²

During an increased number of Indian raids from 1857 to 1860 on the Texas frontier, the Texas Rangers and other local militia groups had to intervene as the defenses the U.S. Army provided proved ineffective. This contributed to the sentiment that the United States government lacked either the means or the concern to protect Texans. A dispute in the U.S. House of Representatives caused by neither the Democrats nor Republicans having a clear majority further contributed to Texans' dissatisfaction when the inability to elect a speaker delayed the reinforcement of frontier defenses. Finally, despite the inability of the Democratic Party to settle on a single candidate during the election of 1860, the election of Republican Abraham Lincoln to the presidency signaled to many Texans the end the federal government considering southern interests.¹³

On February 23, 1861, Texans decided leaving the United States would best protect their interests, and voted for secession by a margin of 46,188 to 15,149. Many Texans believed that the future of their state and its economy was in line with those of the other southern states despite the current differences between them. For example, the desire for growth that required an expanded railroad network, more slaves, and large plantations was a defining characteristic of the aspirations many had for both themselves and Texas. Voting for secession and aligning themselves with the South was what many White Texans considered their best chance of preserving these possibilities. However, secession and the Civil War would ultimately destroy

¹² *Longview News-Journal*, July 15, 2018, A2.

¹³ Buenger, *Secession and the Union*, 46, 59, 109.

not only slavery but also dash the state's dreams of economic prosperity for several decades following the conflict. During those decades, the experiences of defeat, military occupation, and poverty helped to define secession in the memories of Texans as a failure and mistake, no matter what they might have believed in 1861. This is an important distinction because the loss and pain Texans would have associated with secession following the Civil War sharply contrasts with modern sentiments on the possibility of Texas secession. The following analysis of Texas newspapers from 1870 to 2020 unravels how historical memory contributed to this disconnect.¹⁴

¹⁴ Dale Baum, *The Shattering of Texas Unionism: Politics in the Lone Star State During the Civil War Era* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1998), 42; Buenger, *Secession and the Union*, 9.

ANALYSIS OF TEXAS NEWSPAPERS: 1870 – 1900

By the 1870s, the dominant narrative in Texas's major local and state newspapers was that Texans had abandoned the concept of secession. Texans at this time resolved that secession had failed to accomplish what they had hoped it would and was a mistake they would not make again. This does not mean that resistance to Reconstruction and resentment for the North did not still exist five years after the end of the Civil War, but that at least on paper Texans were able to admit secession had failed. Many Texans writing about the mistake of secession during this period appealed to their audience through calls for reunion. Also, during this period some Texans begrudgingly began to repudiate secession while suggesting that it would be best to suffer through Reconstruction by quietly cooperating. Many Texans also pushed back against claims of the presence of another secession movement demonstrating the belief that to many, secession was no longer a viable means to a political end. Whether Texans were satisfied with the outcome of the war or not, most were willing to accept that losing meant the death of both slavery and secession.¹⁵ For example, in the *Daily Democratic Statesman* one Texan wrote in 1877 that “Secession was a grand mistake, a terrible error, for we accomplished only one thing—the freedom of the slaves, and that certainly wasn’t what we started to do [I]f the plan of secession was not an error, then I don’t know the meaning of the term.”¹⁶ The following analysis seeks to characterize the most common themes surrounding discussions on secession from 1870 to 1900 to demonstrate the place this issue in the minds Texans in the decades immediately following the Civil War. It is essential to determine how Texans viewed secession immediately after the Civil War to understand just how drastically these opinions have changed and to

¹⁵ *El Paso Herald*, June 18, 1898, 5.

¹⁶ *Austin Daily Democratic Statesman*, September 30, 1877, 2.

demonstrate the ability of historical memory's to erase elements of history that the majority culture might want repressed.

The prevailing opinion of Texans through the period following the Civil War and Reconstruction up into the 1900s was that the Civil War had killed secession and it was now a non-issue. When writing about secession during this time Texans quickly pointed out that secession was no longer a political option. One Texan writing for the *Dallas Weekly Herald* about their state wrote in 1875 that “The war has happily settled some questions that will eventually prove a blessing to her. Slavery is dead, and the doctrine of secession equally defunct—no one wishes to revive them—let them sleep in the records of history.”¹⁷ Even when Texans attempted to justify their decision to leave the Union or fight against it in 1861, they did not hesitate to condemn the concept. For example, in the same breath a writer for the *Galveston Daily News* in 1871 stated that “no State now has the right of secession, because the sword settled that,” and then the writer went on to defend Confederate General Robert E. Lee from accusations of perjury for taking Virginia out of the Union.¹⁸ Writers defending secession and its leaders excused their actions by reasoning that the act of secession had severed these leaders’ political ties and commitments to the Union. Another writer for the *Galveston Daily News* in 1870 went as far as to compare Lee to George Washington and declared that “Washington took the same oath to the British Government that Lee and the other Confederates took to the Federal. If Lee committed perjury, then Gen. Washington did the same.”¹⁹ Newspapers from this period indicate that regardless of whether Texans considered secession justified or constitutional in 1861, by 1870 Texans considered secession a moot point.

¹⁷ *Dallas Weekly Herald*, June 19, 1875, 2.

¹⁸ *Galveston Daily News*, June 13, 1871, 2.

¹⁹ *Galveston Daily News*, November 2, 1870, 2.

What Texans' acceptance of the death of secession means is that even when debating its merits or defending its previous legality, Texans by and large believed that the outcome of the Civil War and the ruling in *Texas v. White* destroyed their possibility of seceding again. In *Texas v. White* the United States Supreme Court ruled in 1867 that actions of neither individuals nor the government could dissolve the Union. Many Texans believed peaceful secession to be impossible and that any future right to secession was merely the right of all oppressed people to mount a revolution against a tyrannical government, as Thomas Jefferson had argued in the Declaration of Independence.²⁰ Phrases such as, "the sword settled it," most often signaled the belief that secession was dead. Sentiments such as this were a common occurrence in postwar conversations about secession in Texas newspapers. For example, statements like "the states rights question was put to the sword and perished in 1865," or, "there will be no more secession, because the government has tested its power to preserve its integrity against the most powerful opposition," are a common characteristic of this period and demonstrate Texans' abandonment of secession.²¹ Each of these quotations from Texans writing about secession in the years following the civil war demonstrate an acceptance of secession's failure and are devoid of desire to secede again. Texans' abandonment of secession sharply contrasts contemporary rhetoric surrounding secession and points to a disjuncture in Texas historical memory.

A source that stands out from this period is a book review published by the *Galveston Daily News* in 1895 of "Textbook on the History of the United States Divested of Sectionalism." The paper described this book as an "unbiased history . . . written by Southern men" but containing "nothing to which the Northern citizen can take exceptions," before sharing the

²⁰ *Waco Daily Examiner*, October 6, 1875, 2.

²¹ *Galveston Daily News*, July 21, 1894, 6; *Galveston Daily News*, December 16, 1889, 7; "Texas v. White," Handbook of Texas Online, <https://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/entries/texas-v-white>.

work's key points.²² On the issue of secession, the textbook stated that "The south believed in the right of secession. It appealed to the sword in defense of its belief. The north held the doctrine that the union was indestructible and took up arms to enforce its belief. The north won. And so it was settled by force that no state can leave the union."²³ From the review commending this "unbiased history" it appears as if Texans looking back on secession truly considered it to be an issue of the past. However, this source also reveals that as early as 1895 the South and Texas were constructing a memory of secession and the Civil War devoid the reason they seceded, slavery. In the two decades following the Civil War, Texans' foremost interpretation of their recent history presented secession as a concept rendered moot on the battlefield.

The responses of Texans to occasional whispers of a second secession movement during this period also demonstrate Texans' belief that secession was a thing of the past. For example, a Texan writing for the *Galveston Daily Times* in 1877 stated that while the southern cause was not quite dead, "all prudent men deprecate its revival at the South."²⁴ Many arguments denying the possibility of a second secession grounded their logic in the contention that now that slavery had been abolished, there was no longer a reason for Texas or the other southern states to secede.²⁵ Unlike many latter-day defenders of the Lost Cause, these nineteenth-century Texans understood clearly what secession and the Civil War had been about: the need to preserve slavery. As one Texan wrote in 1879, "The South believes no longer in secession or slavery . . . there is no longer the broad dividing line of slave States and free States."²⁶ With slavery no longer an option, many Texans accepted being part of the United States. An open letter in published in the

²² *Galveston Daily News*, September 9, 1895, 8.

²³ *Galveston Daily News*, September 9, 1895, 8.

²⁴ *Galveston Daily News*, March 6, 1877, 2.

²⁵ *Galveston Daily News*, August 22, 1879, 2.

²⁶ *Galveston Daily News*, October 30, 1885, 4.

San Marcos Free Press in 1885 expressed this sentiment, stating that “there are not ten thinking men in the south who feel to-day (no matter what their feelings may have been in the hot days of war, and the hotter days of reconstruction), that secession would give them say rights or advantages as valuable as those they now have as citizens of the states that are a part and parcel of the American Union.”²⁷ Once again, discussions of secession in Texas newspapers indicate a disconnect between Texans’ understanding prior to the twentieth century that secession was no longer an option, that the Civil War was about slavery, and the narrative that the South seceded over states’ rights that is common-place today.

For some Texans after the Civil War though, abandoning the possibility of another secession movement did not preclude their ability to defend their decision to secede in 1861. Such defenses, however, were almost always grounded in reasoning that they did not yet know secession was unconstitutional because no state had truly tested it and that the North’s actions prompted their secession. Significantly, they did not the claim that secession was a remedy allowed under the US Constitution. Defenses of secession from this period ground themselves in comparisons to United States founding fathers and documents from the revolutionary war. For example, some Texans used parallels between George Washington’s actions against the British during the Revolutionary War to protect General Robert E. Lee from claims he committed treason. Texans, however, drew a clear distinction between the right of revolution and treason. In one fairly ingenious feat of logic, a writer for the *Galveston Daily Times* suggested that “The oath to support the Constitution of the United States does not extend, as does the marriage vow, until death, but so long as the individual continues a citizen thereof.”²⁸ By making this argument the writer was able to defend those who fought for the Confederacy from charges of treason by

²⁷ *San Marcos Free Press*, January 22, 1885, 1.

²⁸ *Galveston Daily News*, November 2, 1870, 2.

claiming they believed the action of secession to have terminated their obligations to the United States. Arguments like these likely enabled Texans who had voted for secession or fought for the Confederacy to reconcile their position that held secession to be wrong without having to label themselves as traitors or admit any intentional wrongdoing.

Post-Civil War White Texans' opinions on secession potentially placed them in an uncomfortable position when it came to the doctrine of states' rights. If secession was the ultimate expression of states' rights, then might not a repudiation of secession also mean a repudiation of states' rights? To avoid this conundrum, they drew an interesting distinction between the two concepts, a distinction that permitted southern states' rights activists to reconcile the narrative that secession was dead with their continuing promotion of states' rights. In a newspaper from 1884, one Texan suggested that secession was an idea of "extreme state rights" and that while all Democrats believed in states' rights, not all believed in secession.²⁹ Such an argument created the opportunity for White Texans to continue their fight to limit federal power in government in areas such as voting rights for Black Americans by placing the doctrine of states' rights outside of the context of secession and the Civil War. As one Texan clearly understood in 1884, southerners "laughed at the idea of any more secession during this century, or perhaps for all time, but they feared and nervously apprehended the encroachment and abuse of federal power."³⁰ This is important because it shows that Texans after the Civil War saw states' rights and secession as separable concepts, contrary to the way people often view it as today.

While Texans were willing to abandon secession, many still spoke out about their dislike of Reconstruction and the Thirteenth, Fourteenth, and Fifteenth Amendments. In 1875 the *Daily*

²⁹ *Galveston Daily News*, October 17, 1884, 5.

³⁰ *Dallas Weekly Herald*, October 16, 1884, 4.

Democratic Statesman printed an excerpt of a speech from Georgian politician Benjamin Harvey Hill which mirrored the thoughts of Texans and other Southerners who accepted secession was an error but were still critical of Reconstruction. In the speech Hill, a Unionist who later supported the Confederacy, stated that “Secession was a mistake—a terrible mistake; but secession was no crime.” But, referring to the Republicans who had implemented Reconstruction, he declared, “Radicalism is no mistake. It is deliberate, intentional, wicked, ever-increasing crime.”³¹ Some Texans, however, seem more resigned to their contempt for the postwar amendments to the Constitution. For example, one Texan writing for the *Dallas Daily Herald* stated that “We did not approve of the new amendments to the constitution or the manner in which they were obtained, but we have accepted them as of as much binding force as other portions of the Constitution.”³² The tone of this article is indicative of the general begrudging acceptance many Texans had for the amendments and the results of the war. Perhaps the relationship between resentment of Reconstruction and acceptance of the outcome of the war in Texas is best characterized by this piece from the *Galveston Daily Times* where a Texan wrote that “the old adage says what cannot be cured must be endured, and we have concluded that it is wisdom,” and that “we are powerless in the premises, and will show wisdom by making the best of which we cannot avoid.”³³ Texans’ disdain for the Reconstruction amendments would fuel new defenses of states’ rights, but this resentment did not prevent Texans prior to the nineteenth century from accepting that secession was no longer a political option.

Finally a theme that first emerged in this period and continued to come up afterward is that of Texans arguing that secession was a northern idea, first pioneered by the Federalists who

³¹ *Daily Democratic Statesman*, April 25, 1875, 1.

³² *Dallas Daily Herald*, August 3, 1872, 2

³³ *Galveston Daily News*, October 16, 1870, 2.

opposed America's actions against Britain in the leadup to the War of 1812.³⁴ For example, in an 1880 article in the *Dallas Daily Herald* one Texan opined that "In fact and in truth, secession, like slavery, was first planted in New England."³⁵ To distance themselves even further from secession, one Texas wrote in response to rumors of Maine seceding in 1886 that "it might be well to warn Maine that Texas will tolerate no secession movement. Maine must remain in the Union and must conduct herself properly."³⁶ In their willingness to acknowledge that secession was a mistake, Texans were even eager to shift the blame for secession onto the North.

The reason so many Texans were willing to accept secession as a failure likely has less to do with their belief that they were wrong and more to do with their desire to put the Civil War and Reconstruction behind them. Many of the newspaper articles from this period expressed this inclination to embrace reunion and condemn secession as a means of moving forward, as opposed to waving the bloody shirt. Alternatively, perhaps in the years after the war it was easier to say that secession was wrong than to attempt to defend it. After the war Texans had more to gain by realigning themselves firmly within the Union than resisting it, and unlike other southern states they had not suffered nearly as much destruction or property damage. Though many newspaper articles from this period present attitudes that resent Reconstruction, they view the Thirteenth, Fourteenth, and Fifteenth Amendments begrudgingly, or refuse to concede that seceding was an act of treason; no Texans during this period called for a second secession movement. From 1870 to 1900 secession was something Texans remembered, mostly as a mistake, and not something they proposed to do or believed could be done again. This is important because it is a clear contradiction to how many Texans view secession today, and

³⁴ *Dallas Weekly Herald*, June 19, 1875, 2.

³⁵ *Dallas Daily Herald*, July 14, 1880, 2.

³⁶ *Galveston Daily News*, May 21, 1886, 4.

indicates that over time Texans' attitudes and understanding of secession have shifted dramatically. The next portion of this analysis seeks to exhibit how historical memory, and the desire of some Texans to write issues such as slavery out of the history of secession and the Civil War, caused this change.

ANALYSIS OF TEXAS NEWSPAPERS: 1900-1980

In the twentieth century, conversations on secession in Texas newspapers slowly redefined secession by placing it outside of the context of the Civil War, with the goal of slowly building back up defenses for the moral right of secession. These new arguments first took shape in response to the United States' interference in secession movements and revolutions in foreign countries such as Panama. Though many arguments defending secession during this period retained similar elements to arguments prior to 1900, arguments during this period used those points to reach a different conclusion: that secession was perhaps a right they possessed and could still practice. As a counter-image to reemergence of mainstream justifications of secession, articles on Sam Houston and secession became a common occurrence in Texas newspapers. Texans found a useful narrative in the image of the governor who resisted secession in 1860-61 but who went along with the will of his state once secession was an accomplished fact. The fiftieth and one hundredth anniversaries of secession and the Civil War resulted in the publication of numerous articles devoted to Texans' memories of secession, as well as several local histories on secession. By the mid-twentieth century, secession had once again emerged as a potential action rather than merely a memory, as some Texans reacted to *Brown v. Board of Education* and school desegregation in the state by threatening to secede again.

International affairs sparked new conversations about secession in Texas at the beginning of the twentieth century. The word secession appeared much more frequently in Texas papers in the years between 1900 and 1980 than in the previous decades, though many of these instances had no relation to Texans or their opinions on the Civil War or secession in Texas in 1861. Instead, Texans commonly referred to revolutions and civil wars in foreign countries, as well as fractures of political and social groups, as secessions. This is not to say that these cases of

secession are without relevance in attempting to understand secession in Texas public memory. Conversations about secessionist movements on foreign soil gave groups in Texas the opportunity to reintroduce the topic in a context that did not have the same limitations as discussions that placed secession within the context of 1861. Debating the legality of an independence movement happening outside of the United States provided opportunities for Texans to defend the concept of secession without violating any social norms.

Texans' reactions to the United States' support for Panama's revolution and secession from Colombia are an example of events overseas shaping Texans' understanding of secession. On November 3, 1903, Panama declared its independence from Colombia. The United States recognized Panama as an independent country on November 6 with the intent of gaining control of the zone that would become the Panama Canal, which they successfully acquired in 1904. Colombia criticized the United States for its interference in Colombia's affairs, and Theodore Roosevelt's support for Panama's secession gained widespread attention in Texas, particularly from Texas's United Daughters of the Confederacy chapters.³⁷ In a resolution published in Victoria, Texas's *Daily Advocate*, the heritage group wrote, "Resolved, that we extend so the president the hearty thanks of the Daughters of the Confederacy of the state of Texas in convention assembled, for his endorsement of the principles of his vindication of the cause for which the Southern people fought so disastrously in the war between the states."³⁸ Just like that, presidential action on secession outside of the United States opened the door to new debate on an issue Texans up until this point had abandoned.

³⁷ *El Paso Herald*, May 28, 1912, 4; *Houston Post*, December 14, 1903, 4.

³⁸ *Victoria Daily Advocate*, December 5, 1903, 1; "A Guide to the United States' History of Recognition, Diplomatic, and Consular Relations, by Country, since 1776: Panama." U.S. Department of State. U.S. Department of State. Accessed April 14, 2021. <https://history.state.gov/countries/panama>.

Reporting on this event failed to clearly explain the Daughters' exact intent behind this proclamation. However, an article on the Texas UDC chapter's resolution from the *Chattanooga Times* published in the *Houston Post* in 1903 stated that:

It is possible the Daughters meant to thank the president for a display of courage very few men of the North have hitherto exhibited and which it appeared to them ought to be recognized. Or more likely the good women only intended to assure the president that whether it was his purpose to do so or not, his policy towards the rebels in Panama was an official vindication from the head of the United States government of the principle involved in the act of secession on the part of the Southern States in 1860-1861.³⁹

This incident marks the beginning of conversations about secession in Texas newspapers that took on the issue of secession outside of the context of 1861 and eventually led to new arguments defending secession.

Defenses of secession from 1900 to 1980 were much more common than from 1870 to 1900. Even so, there were few new points that Texans made in defense of secession besides events such as U.S. support of Panama's secession. Because of this, many defenses of secession during this period are similar to those from before the twentieth century in terms of content. For example, a piece published in the *Waco Times-Herald* in 1918 defended secession by listing historical events that Texans could equate to southern secession in 1861, including the thirteen colonies' secession from England, Texas's independence from Mexico, and Cuba's revolt against Spain.⁴⁰ Using previous instances of revolution to defend Texas's right to secede was a common way of justifying why Texans would have believed it possible for them to leave the

³⁹ *Houston Post*, December 27, 1903, 12.

⁴⁰ *Corsicana Daily Sun*, February 23, 1918, 2.

United States following the Civil War and Reconstruction. Other earlier defenses of secession that were also present during this period include shifting the blame for secession and slavery onto the North and referencing the American Revolution and the United States founding fathers breaking away from Great Britain.⁴¹

Despite the arguments defending secession from the late nineteenth century and the early and middle twentieth century having these previously mentioned similarities, defenses of secession in the twentieth century were different from these previous cases. In the twentieth century Texas defenses of secession no longer came with the concession that while it might be justifiable that Texans thought they could secede, looking back on the issue they were clearly mistaken. Instead, these new arguments used the same points to reason that secession could still be a political option. For example, a Texan wrote in the *Waco Times-Herald* that “Secession is not always advisable. It is not always expedient. But it has been going on since the world began. Right now, this country is promoting secession in Europe. Keep the record straight.”⁴² This steady shift towards Texans no longer actively disavowing secession and instead leaving room in their recollections for secession to remain an option helped open the door for new secession movements in the state.

By the mid-twentieth century, a discernable shift in Texans’ use of the memory of secession was taking place. This shift refocused the southern narrative from slavery to states’ rights as the cause of secession and the Civil War. Part of this defensiveness over acknowledging slavery as a cause of the war stemmed from the emerging “Lost Cause” ideology, which southerners used to justify the massive cost in blood and treasure that had resulted from the war

⁴¹ *Tyler Courier-Times*, December 9, 1962, 7; *Austin Statesman*, August 14, 1948, 4; *Tyler Courier-Times*, December 23, 1956, 20.

⁴² *Corsicana Daily Sun*, February 23, 1918, 2.

and to commemorate the southern war dead. But another major factor in the downplaying of slavery and the rise of a new states'-rights defense of secession involved southerners' efforts to defend Jim Crow in the face of the budding Civil Rights Movement. As the history curator of the Texas Memorial Museum contended in a 1948 article in *the Austin American*, "The present political bickerings over such subjects as 'the poll tax,' 'the Jim Crow law' and all other elements of 'segregation' are profiting by the wrong impressions such discussions agitate" when they refer to the belief that slavery was the primary cause of secession. "Serious students of American history who have delved into the pages of the past know full well that the War Between the States was not a slaveholder's war."⁴³ This clear distortion of history in many was unfortunately successful at modifying secession in Texas public memory as the resulting disassociation between secession and slavery enabled the emergency of new conversations about secession and states' rights groups.

This shift towards some Texans attempting to distance Texas secession in 1861 away from slavery can also help explain the emergence of Sam Houston as a popular figure in discussions about secession in Texas newspapers. Articles that detailed Houston's ill-fated attempt to delay secession and keep Texas in the Union were abundant in every decade during this period. In fact, newspapers articles about Houston and pieces written about secession unrelated to 1861 were the most abundant results of database searches using the keyword secession of Texas newspapers during this time. Texans were able to create a version of their history that memorialized secession while still presenting a tactful image that avoided any mentions of slavery by enshrining the most notable Texan to oppose secession while highlighting his willingness to ultimately acquiesce in the act.

⁴³ *Austin American*, August 14, 1948, 4.

These anecdotes focused on two points to construct an image of Houston that Texans could view as being both loyal to Texas and the Union. The first point that these histories of Houston never failed to mention was his desire for Texas to remain in the Union but his willingness to ultimately go along with the will of his fellow Texans. For example, a Texan wrote in the *Big Spring Daily Herald* in 1946 that “Houston fought tigerishly to halt the spreading flames of secession. Not only was he fighting the tides of history; he must have known that he also opposed the will of his people.”⁴⁴ Ironically, few of these fond memories of Houston’s loyalty to the Union bother to mention his colleagues removed him from office because of it. Additionally, many papers also chose to highlight the fact that Houston refused to accept Lincoln’s offer to send federal troops to keep Texas in the Union. The second point is that these stories about Houston also almost always mentioned something about Houston ultimately accepting secession, especially after his eldest son enlisted in the Confederate army. For example, a 1960 article in the *Fort Worth Star-Telegram* reminded readers that “When secession became an accomplished fact, he accepted it as such. True, he was unfriendly, even hostile to the Confederacy and urged Texas to keep her young men at home. But he gave the Union no further service, and he did not become a scalawag as many did.”⁴⁵ This second point is important because it differentiates Houston from those who left Texas after secession, fought for the Union, or participated in Reconstruction.⁴⁶ By crediting Houston for his loyalty to both Texas and the Union, Texans were able to create a version of history that differentiate them from the other southern states by an implied residual allegiance to the United States that still complied with the traditional Lost Cause narrative. The use of Houston as a model Texan is important because it

⁴⁴ *Big Spring Daily Herald*, June 18, 1946, 5.

⁴⁵ *Fort Worth Star-Telegram*, April 17, 1960, 20.

⁴⁶ *Sunday American-Statesman*, May 30, 1937, 17.

demonstrates both Texans' desire to change the cultural perception of Texas and secession, as well as their ability to use public memory to do so successfully.

This basic story line appeared in numerous biographical accounts of Houston's life during this period and served the purpose of constructing a version of Texas secession that would be palatable to most Texans. But why would Texans want to canonize a narrative of one of their most famous political leaders that so carefully toes the line on the issue of secession and loyalty during the Civil War? Perhaps it is because doing so provided a contrast to these new arguments defending secession as an expression of states' rights while attempting to help prevent actual future secession movements by the state. Lifting Houston up for his pre-Civil War foresight that secession would be a catastrophic mistake could certainly help remind twentieth-century Texans that secession was not a viable political option. However, the methodical construction of this narrative around Houston also actively preserved elements of Houston's story that in some ways seemed to justify secession since Houston ultimately went along with it. This would suggest the desire to present a version of Texas secession that could stand up to a contemporary audience while still maintaining a feasible defense of the issue could have been in play as well.

Anniversaries of the Civil War provided Texans the opportunity to remember secession. Additionally, several towns and counties took time to remember their own histories during secession around these anniversaries. Many papers published articles on the topics of secession and the Civil War or historical editions of their local publication. For example, in 1937 the *Paris News* ran an article entitled "Lamar Country Goes to War" and the *Victoria Advocate* published a historical edition on the Civil War and Reconstruction in 1968.⁴⁷ Most of these articles, however, provided only very basic retellings of Texas's decision to leave the Union and unfortunately do

⁴⁷ *Victoria Advocate*, May 12, 1968, 150; *Paris News*, July 25, 1937, 7.

not provide much insight on what individuals Texans might have thought about secession decades after the event. What these newspaper articles do reveal, though, is that on those commemorative occasions when Texans focused on remembering secession, they did not present any signs that they were considering seceding again.

The first public discussions among twentieth-century Texans suggesting secession as a modern-day possibility emerged as a response to the United States Supreme Court case *Brown v. Board of Education* and the desegregation of the Texas public school system. For example, in an article published in the *Tyler Courier-Times* in 1954, a state representative stated he had “never issued a more sincere statement than that if there were no way possible to keep segregation in Texas then I would urge and fight for secession from the United States... and would favor abolishing the public school system altogether in Texas.”⁴⁸ However, the articles that brought up secession as a reaction to *Brown* were relatively rare and mostly confined to 1954, suggesting that many Texans did not take these threats of secession seriously. This is not to say that White Texans reacted positively to school desegregation but that the act of seceding from the United States in response to *Brown* did not seem to pick up any actual traction based on the newspapers from this period. Nevertheless, these first real threats of a second secession signaled a shift in Texans’ conception of secession towards viewing secession as a contemporary political issue. By this time secession in Texas historical memory was significantly different than what it had been before 1900. The alterations to Texans’ conception of secession during this period resulted in an understanding without the sense of failure and loss that characterized secession after the Civil War. The idea that Texas could secede again that emerged as a result of this shift set the

⁴⁸ *Tyler Courier-Times*, March 21, 1954, 1.

groundwork for the contemporary view of secession in Texas as an element of Texan identity that is present today.

ANALYSIS OF TEXAS NEWSPAPERS: 1980-2020

From 1980 to 2020 secession in Texas public memory went from being a possible but improbable concept to a facet of Texan identity for many in the state. By the 1990s several states' rights groups had emerged in the state, purporting that Texas had a right to secede and often that declaring the state should exercise that right. Reactions to the existence of such groups in Texas newspapers suggest that such groups held little legitimacy in the eyes of most Texans. However, their public existence was a contrast with the past. In the 2000s mainstream Republican politicians in Texas picked up the topic, marking a key shift from secession being an issue embraced only by fringe political groups to instead becoming a topic that found support from the state's majority political party. Once again Texans responded to these politicians in a way that did not suggest widespread public support for secession, but it had become clear that the idea of secession's legitimacy had become firmly implanted in the minds of many in the state. By the 2020s secession was the card many Texans keep in their back-pocket, ready to pull it out at the first signs of discontent with the federal government or partisan politics.

The idea that secession was a modern possibility gained visibility in this period of newspapers as Texans defended their discovery of the right to secede. In an article from the *Galveston Daily News* from 1986 entitled "U.S. Constitution needs to be studied by all concerned," one Texan argued that there are five ways to overturn a Supreme Court decision, one of which being secession. Echoing a long-discredited nullificationist argument, the writer claimed that "A State may secede "if it disagrees strongly with either a Supreme Court ruling, or a law posed by the Central Government."⁴⁹ A columnist in the *Tyler Morning Telegraph* in 2003 wrote that "Every single bit of evidence shows that states have a right to secede. There's

⁴⁹ *Galveston Daily News*, November 9, 1986, 7.

absolutely nothing in the Constitution that prohibits secession. What stops secession is the brute force of a mighty federal government, as witnessed by the costly war of 1861.”⁵⁰ Such arguments, of course, chose to ignore the United State Supreme Court’s ruling in *Texas v. White*, which clearly and specifically denied that Texas has the constitutional ability to secede. Once again Texans appeared to no longer consider secession the moot point it was back in the nineteenth century. Some of these opinions also suggest that this reawakening of the issue of secession may have been sprung from the continuing reaction of some White Texans to the Civil Rights Movement. Most expressions of pro-secessionist sentiment, however, in the early 2000s still did not illude to a second secession movement in Texas being likely, a belief shared by most Texans. The exception to this was an increasingly vocal set of pro-secessionist cultural and political groups.⁵¹

Beginning in the late 1990s, newly formed groups such as the Republic of Texas and the Southern League moved from remembering secession and theorizing about its legality to actively endorsing and pushing for it. Established in 1995, the so-called Republic of Texas maintained (and still does) that the United States’ annexation of Texas was illegal and that therefore Texas by rights should still be independent. Although from a technical standpoint the group presumably did not advocate for secession—a state can’t secede from a union that it never actually belonged to—for practical purposes its stance in favor of Texas’s independence from the United States places it in the ranks of the neo-secessionist movement. The Southern League, or League of the South, originated in Alabama in 1994. By 1998 Texans were among the group’s four thousand-plus members. The League apparently started as a heritage organization venerating the memory of the Confederacy; one of its founders was Grady McWhiney, a history professor at Texas

⁵⁰ *Tyler Morning Telegraph*, December 24, 2003, 4.

⁵¹ *Victoria Advocate* (Victoria, Texas), July 26, 1994, 10.

Christian University. But it soon morphed into a neo-Confederate White nationalist group advocating not only a second secession from the United States but also the creation of a Christian theocracy run by White southerners. (The Southern Poverty Law Center called it a hate group, and McWhiney eventually resigned from the organization, complaining that it was “taken over by ‘the dirty fingernail crowd.’”) Unlike other Texans who defended the legality of secession in Texas newspapers at this time, members of the Southern League began actively pushing for a second secession which would include in the 1990s. Similarly, members of the Republic of Texas began advocating for Texas independence which could be equated with secession during this same period. Though the Southern League is not an exclusively Texas group, some Texans defended the groups in the state’s papers, signaling support for the group’s platform and presence in the state. For example, one Texan from Arlington wrote in the *Fort Worth Star-Telegram* in 2002 that they were “deeply disturbed by the lack of understanding and one-sided portrayal of the movement,” and that “it was, and remains, the constitutional right of all member states in the United States to secede, as stated in the 10th Amendment.”⁵² The emergence of these groups in Texas during this time is important because it signaled some Texans’ acceptance of the altered view of secession as a result of historical memory.

In the late 2000s, mainstream Texas Republican politicians gave credence to the idea that Texas has maintained the right to secede. For example, in 2007 Texas Governor Rick Perry attended a Tea Party protest in Austin and endorsed the possibility that Texas could still secede from the United States. Responding to a reporter’s question, Governor Perry stated that “if Washington continues to thumb their noses at the American people, you know, who knows what

⁵² *Fort Worth Star-Telegram*, August 12, 2002, 18; “*League of the South*”, Counter Extremism Project; “*Republic of Texas*,” Terrorism Research & Analysis Consortium; “*League of the South*”, Southern Poverty Law Center; “Grady McWhiney Dies; Historian of South Was 77,” *New York Times*, May 1, 2006.

might come out of that? . . . We are very proud of our Texas history, people discuss and debate the issues of can we break ourselves into five states, can we secede, a lot of interesting things that I'm sure Oklahoma and Pennsylvania would love to be able to say about their states, but the fact is they can't because they're not Texas."⁵³ Many Texans did not receive these claims well, and both Perry and the state soon became the butt of the jokes in Washington DC and elsewhere. Articles covering this story suggest this point as well, with many papers taking the opportunity to poke fun at Perry and other Texas Republican politicians with headlines such as "Pouncing on Perry," "Perry has flunked this history lesson," and "If at first you don't secede, just talk the subject to death." While these jokes at Perry's expense suggest that most Texans were not taking his claims too seriously, but they still added validity to the concept of secession. Perry's statements and the support of other right-wing Texas Republican politicians since then have contributed to making secession a part of many Texans' identity.⁵⁴

Some Texans spoke out during the 2000s to correct the misconception of history that gained popularity in response to the shift in many Texans' views on secession. Most Texas historians refused to adopt the narrative of secession and the Civil War being the product of the South defending states' rights instead of slavery. Newspapers from the 2000s record some Texans speaking up to clarify this point. For example, one Texan wrote in the *Longview News-Journal* in 2007 that "Defenders of the Confederate States confuse justification with motive. Texans didn't secede to defend their right to secede. They seceded to protect their way of life and slavery was central to that way of life."⁵⁵ Additionally, the image of Unionist Sam Houston as a model Texan, which became popular in the twentieth century, persisted into the twenty-first

⁵³ *Odessa American*, April 19, 2009, 17.

⁵⁴ *McAllen Monitor*, April 17, 2009, 3; *Fort Worth Star-Telegram*, April 26, 2009, 4. *Odessa American*, April 19, 2009, 17; *Fort Worth Star-Telegram*, April 17, 2009, A2.

⁵⁵ *Longview News-Journal*, February 23, 2007, 12.

century as well, though at a lesser degree of frequency. Despite efforts from some Texans to combat the existence of the new secessionist narrative, the association of secession and the Civil War with states' rights instead of slavery continued to exist in Texas and other southern states, most likely because versions of history that ignored race as a factor were less uncomfortable for White Americans.⁵⁶

By the 2010s secession in the memories and minds of many Texans had evolved into a part of their cultural identity that though it supposedly had deep roots in Texas tradition and history, ironically did not exist in newspapers in the state fifty years prior. This shift in attitudes toward the various secession movements again can be traced in the pages of Texas newspapers. For example, in 2012 the *Longview News-Journal* ran a story detailing facts and fiction regarding Texas secession after an Arlington man, responding to the reelection of Barack Obama, created a petition to the United States government to allow Texas to secede. Several points came up in the article that demonstrated the evolution of secession in Texas public memory from a catalyst for the Civil War into a cultural element in the state. In reference to the secession petition, the author of the article said that, "Legal questions notwithstanding, the movement has reinvigorated a longstanding question found in the independent Texas spirit." Several individuals interviewed for the article were in favor of secession, and one Texan stated "Yeah, I would love to secede. We have the right. We retained the right when Texas became a state." As this quote demonstrates it was only in the 2010s that outside of radical political groups the supposed 'right' to secede existed to ordinary, everyday Texans.⁵⁸

⁵⁶ *Harlingen Valley Morning Star*, January 30, 2011, A3; Buenger, *Secession and the Union*; Marten, *Texas Divided*; Baum, *Shattering of Texas Unionism*.

⁵⁸ *Longview News-Journal*, November 18, 2012, A7.

Others interviewed were more reserved, questioning whether current events justified secession, even if they may have been willing to concede the hypothetical legality of the issue. As one interviewee reasoned, “Many Texans may not like who won the last election, but to say Texas doesn’t have a representation in the government is difficult . . . the federal government in Washington D.C. maybe be corrupt, but to compare them to the British Empire in 1776 would be hard to prove.”⁵⁹ However, some Texans reacting to this event acknowledged the independent spirit of the state while calling attempts to actually become independent an embarrassment. An editorial from the *San Angelo Standard Times* republished in the *Odessa American* in 2012 over the incident stated that “The Texas mystique is enormous and recognized worldwide, and we should cherish that. The grit and independent spirit that build the Republic of Texas, and then the great state of Texas, remain part of our DNA. It’s fun to brag at barbecues and parties about who great we’d be as an independent nation, but most of us have the good sense to know it would be disastrous if it actually happened.”⁶⁰ It is important to note, though, that while these Texans disapproved of secession and debated the likelihood of Texas seceding again, they maintained its place in some Texans’ cultural identity.

Finally, another example that secession had evolved into a cultural element in the minds of some Texans is the decision of the 2017 Texas Boys State group to approve secession from the United States. While attending the leadership program sponsored by the American Legion intended to “develop civil leadership and pride in American citizenship,” the group of Texas high school seniors instead decided to sponsor and pass a bill to take Texas out of the Union. An article which covered the story in the *Austin American-Statesman* stated that “the declaration of independence approved by the boys says it is Texans’ right, ‘nay their obligation, to break the

⁵⁹ *Longview News-Journal*, November 18, 2012, A7.

⁶⁰ *Odessa American*, December 3, 2012, 4.

chains and throw down the regulations that bind them. As it stood, the United States merely served to regulate Texans and no more.”⁶¹ While it is likely that the novelty of being the first Boys State session to secede from the United States attracted some of these teenage voters, this example demonstrates that to many young Texans secession is neither illegal nor entirely improbable. The statement that seceding is a right and obligation presents a clear contrast to how Texans viewed the issue after the Civil War and Reconstruction. Even the light-hearted way the reporter handled the event—“Secession obviously would be tricky, fraught with questions about economics and defense and whether the Texas Longhorns still would be eligible for bowl games”—suggest an acceptance that in our own era, conversations about Texas secession are not abnormal and even a common topic for friendly debate.⁶² The omissions and alterations to secessions place in Texans’ historical memory distanced the Civil War from slavery, and made secession more palatable to Texans in the late twentieth century allowed for this version of secession to arise as a symbol of Texas identity.

⁶¹ *Austin American-Statesman*, June 28, 2017, B6.

⁶² *Austin American-Statesman*, June 28, 2017, B6.

CONCLUSION

What is clear from newspapers is that Texans view secession today much differently from 1870. Different groups and interests modified the place of secession in Texas public memory into an aspect of Texas culture that, based on these newspapers, did not appear to have ever existed outside of Texans' minds. Up until the twentieth century, Texans discussed secession as an issue the Civil War had laid to rest, and this applied to even Texans who considered secession to have been justifiable. However, new conversations initiated in the early twentieth century such as those around Panama's secession enabled Texans remembering secession to begin to view the issue as a modern possibility. By the end of the twentieth century many Texans considered secession to be constitutionally possible despite the United States Supreme Court's ruling in *Texas v. White*, but the desire to secede again was found primarily amongst radical groups such as the Republic of Texas. The adoption of secession by mainstream Texan Republican politicians such as Governor Rick Perry enabled secession to become an issue accessible to Texans beyond fringe southern- and Texas nationalist groups. In the minds of such people, secession ultimately became not the terrible mistake and failure Texans considered it in 1870 but instead a dangerously misconstrued element of Texas culture.

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