

In Mexico as part of General Zachary Taylor's army, Luther Giddings did not know what to make of the Texas Rangers:

The character of the Texas Ranger is now well known by both friend and foe. As a mounted soldier he has had no counterpart in any age or country. Neither Cavalier nor Cossack, Mameluke nor Moss-trooper are like him; and yet, in some respects, he resembles them all. Chivalrous, bold and impetuous in action, he is yet wary and calculating, always impatient of restraint, and sometimes unscrupulous and unmerciful. He is ununiformed, and undrilled, and performs his active duties thoroughly, but with little regard to order or system.

To Giddings, Texas Rangers seemed conspicuous by their "loose discipline" and their indulgence in "mad-cap revels." In brief, provincials who knew little of the sanctioned customs of civilized war. They were mistaken. Rangers understood the protocol: they simply rejected it.

A system that tyrannized their ancestors had conditioned Anglo-Celtic Texans to cast off some three hundred years of Western military culture. The seventeenth century witnessed the rise of nation-states and war became, in John Dryden's phrase, "the trade of kings." In such a form of government, armies founded on strict discipline, centralized administration, and trained troops were inherent. By the eighteenth century, wealth generated by trade financed standing soldiers and the regiment became the pre-eminent unit of military establishments. In war, regulars were instruments of policy; in peacetime, they often became toys for bored monarchs who paraded them around palace grounds for the amusement of visiting dignitaries. Increasingly, garrisons withdrew from the populace. A recruit who took the king's shilling expected to do his bidding. Many civilians began to see regulars as bullyboys who had turned against their own people for royal silver.

Following the Revolutionary War, Americans codified a mistrust of regulars into

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

Among southerners of the 1820s and 1830s, ingrained resentment of the military establishment ran deep. This abhorrence for regulars went hand-in-glove with a growing grass roots political movement that sought to advance the “common man” over those privilege and education had favored. In the Old Southwest, frontiersmen fearing Indian raids soon learned that Washington, and even state capitals, were too far away to provide protection. By grim necessity community defense grew intensely personal. Every backwoodsman became a “lawful bearer of arms.”

Along with other trappings of Celtic culture, southern immigrants to Mexican Texas brought their ranger traditions and disdain for professional soldiers. In 1823, *empresario* Stephen F. Austin employed ten men he termed “rangers” to patrol his colony against Indian raids. They wore no uniform, fought under no flag, expressed little esprit de corps. Except for paid captains, the troopers responded only in times of crisis and took their leave the instant they deemed the threat concluded.

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

The inherited animosity against professionals remained at the core of the ranger

ethic. Volunteers defending hearth and home thought themselves on higher moral ground than brass-buttoned hirelings. As ranger Nelson Lee explained: “Discipline, in the common acceptance of the term, was not regarded as essential.”

Commanding those who rejected conventional authority required a leader who shared his men's egalitarian values. A ranger captain was merely first among equals, but then that was the source of his power. Texans followed a man not because he had gone to an academy or perused treatises, but because he had proven his worth in the field. Nelson Lee and other rangers admired men selected their officers based on their “valor, wisdom, and experience.”

Even when under the command of tested captains—perhaps especially then—Texans were capable of astounding brutality. Contemporary observers noted their viciousness. Giddings denounced them as “unscrupulous” and “unmerciful.” Like Giddings, modern critics declare their ruthlessness, well, unsporting. Yet, surely, that was the point. For Texas Rangers, war was not a sport. In Texas, it was a savage, dirty pursuit, unrestrained by codes of civilized behavior. Rangers, who who understood their new reality better than anyone, experienced a psychological transformation. They silently vowed to be as hard and unforgiving as the land itself. “Texans,” Nelson Lee asserted, “had no other alternative than to return blow for blow, and to demand blood for blood.” Terror became a weapon.

The traditional hostility toward professional soldiers died hard. When the republic joined the union, Texans assumed that federal troopers would shoulder the burden of frontier defense. US regulars, however, were no more competent than the republic's. Bowing to pressure, the regulars requested assistance. State rangers attached themselves

to federal units—but not to their regulations. Later, during the War Between the States, home guard units and rangers patrolled the frontier and resisted Confederate authority as much as they had any other.

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

Yet, what began as a temporary defense of farm and family ended as a sanctioned institution. By 1876, marauding tribes no longer harried the frontier and leaders of acumen and foresight understood that rangers must convert from Indian fighters to lawmen. Many chafed in their new role: “We hardly knew whether we were Rangers, or court officers,” one old-timer grouched. Of course, court officers *were* what they had become. That was, perhaps, the supreme irony. In a bid to remain relevant, the ranger became the object of his grandfather's greatest scorn—a disinterested professional, an agent of the state, and the “legal bearer of arms.”