



## To the Mexican Inhabitants of the State of Texas Juan N. Cortina (1859)

*Juan Cortina (also known to his contemporaries as Cortinas) came from a wealthy Mexican ranching family who held land just north of the Rio Grande (or Río Bravo), near the Gulf of Mexico. Those land holdings became US territory as a result of the Mexican-American War; Anglo settlers then moved into the vicinity and established the town of Brownsville, Texas. For several months in 1859-60, Cortina led Mexican Texans in armed raids against Anglos in and around Brownsville, alarming Anglo Texans across the state. During the conflict, Cortina issued this proclamation (originally in Spanish), in which he describes the raids as a war against racially motivated abuses that Anglo Americans have committed against Mexicans living among them. Divine revelation, Cortina says, has called him to fight this war. Cortina's fighters were finally overwhelmed by state and federal forces. Cortina retreated to northern Mexico, where he then became involved in the Second Franco-Mexican War.*

COMPATRIOTS: A sentiment of profound indignation, the love and esteem which I profess for you, the desire which you have for that tranquility and those guarantees which are denied you, thus violating the most sacred laws, is that which moves me to address you these words, hoping that they may prove some consolation in the midst of your adversity, which heretofore has borne the appearance of predestination. [...]

The Mexicans who inhabit this wide region—some because they were born therein; others because, since the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, they have been attracted to its soil by the soft influence of wise laws and the advantages of a free government [...]—are honorably and exclusively dedicated to the exercise of industry [...] Their humility, simplicity, and docility, directed with dignity, [...] causes them to excel in an irresistible inclination towards ideas of equality, a proof of their simple manners, so well adapted to that which is styled the classic land of liberty. A man, a family, and a people possessed of qualities so eminent, with their heart in their hand and purity on their lips, encounter every day renewed reasons to know that they are surrounded by malicious and crafty monsters, who rob them in the tranquil interior of home or with open hatred and pursuit [...]

Mexicans! When the state of Texas began to receive the new organization which its sovereignty required as an integrant part of the Union, flocks of vampires, in the guise of men, came and scattered themselves in the settlements, without any capital except the corrupt heart and the most perverse intentions. Some, brimful of laws, pledged to us their protection against the attacks of the rest; others, assembled in shadowy councils, attempted and excited the robbery and burning of the houses of our relatives on the other side of the Río Bravo; while others, to the abusing of our unlimited confidence, when we entrusted them with our titles, which secured the future of our families, refused to return them under false and frivolous pretexts—all, in short, with a smile on their faces, giving the lie to that which their black entrails were meditating. Many of you have been robbed of your property, incarcerated, chased, murdered, and hunted like wild beasts, because your labor was fruitful and because your industry excited the vile avarice which led them. A voice infernal said, from the bottom of their soul, “Kill them; the greater will be our gain!” Ah! this does not finish the sketch of your situation. It would appear that justice had fled from this world, leaving you to the caprice of your oppressors, who become each day more

furious towards you, [so] that, through witnesses and false charges, although the grounds may be insufficient, you may be interred in the penitentiaries, if you are not previously deprived of life by some keeper who covers himself from responsibility by the pretense of your flight. There are to be found criminals covered with frightful crimes, but they appear to have impunity until opportunity furnish them a victim; to these monsters, indulgence is shown because they are not of our race, which is unworthy, as they say, to belong to the human species.

But this race—which the Anglo-American, so ostentatious of its own qualities, tries so much to blacken, depreciate, and load with insults [...]—does not fear [...] those subtle inquisitions which are so frequently made as to its manners, habits, and sentiments, nor that its deeds should be put to the test of examination in the land of reason, of justice, and of honor. This race has never humbled itself before the conqueror [...]; for he is not humbled who uses among his fellowmen those courtesies which humanity prescribes, charity being the root whence springs the rule of his actions. But this race, which you see filled with gentleness and inward sweetness, gives now the cry of alarm, throughout the entire extent of the land which it occupies, against all the artifice interposed by those who have become chargeable with their division and discord. [...]

Mexicans! My part is taken; the voice of revelation whispers to me that to me is entrusted the work of breaking the chains of your slavery and that the Lord will enable me, with powerful arm, to fight against our enemies, in compliance with the requirements of that Sovereign Majesty who, from this day forward, will hold us under His protection. On my part, I am ready to offer myself as a sacrifice for your happiness; and counting upon the means necessary for the discharge of my ministry, you may count upon my cooperation, should no cowardly attempt put an end to my days. This undertaking will be sustained on the following bases:

First— A society is organized in the state of Texas which devotes itself sleeplessly, until the work is crowned with success, to the improvement of the unhappy condition of those Mexicans resident therein, exterminating their tyrants, to which end those which compose it are ready to shed their blood and suffer the death of martyrs.

Second— As this society contains within itself the elements necessary to accomplish the great end of its labors, the veil of impenetrable secrecy covers "The Great Book" in which the articles of its constitution are written; while so delicate are the difficulties which must be overcome, that no honorable man can have cause for alarm if imperious exigencies require them to act without reserve.

Third— The Mexicans of Texas repose their lot under the good sentiments of the governor-elect of the state, General Houston, and trust that, upon his elevation to power, he will begin with care to give us legal protection within the limits of his powers.

Mexicans, peace be with you! Good inhabitants of the state of Texas, look on them as brothers, and keep in mind that which the Holy Spirit saith: "Thou shalt not be the friend of the passionate man, nor join thyself to the madman, lest thou learn his mode of work and scandalize thy soul."<sup>a</sup>

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<sup>a</sup> The quotation is from the Bible, Proverbs 22:24-25.

**Source:** U.S. Congress, House, *Difficulties on Southwestern Frontier*, 36th Cong., 1st sess., 1860, H. Exec. Doc. 52, serial 1050, 79-82, <https://purl.fdlp.gov/GPO/gpo207038>. Public domain.

The English translation of the proclamation that appears in the Congressional report is derived from a broadside published in Brownsville, Texas, November 26, 1859. For another transcription of that broadside, see Jerry D. Thompson, ed., *Juan Cortina and the Texas-Mexico Frontier, 1859-1877* (El Paso: University of Texas at El Paso, 1994), 23-28.

A different English translation of the proclamation appears as “Proclamation of Cortinas to the Mexicans of Texas,” *New York Herald*, December 27, 1859, 2-3, <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn83030313/1859-12-27/ed-1/>.

Excerpts edited and annotated by John-Charles Duffy. Paragraph breaks adjusted for readability. Spelling, capitalization, and punctuation emended in line with modern American conventions. The names of a treaty and a river emended to their now customary forms to facilitate recognition. The word *state*, capitalized in the source, has been converted here to lowercase. The following antique usages are retained from the source publication: the setting of the first word in small caps; the capitalizing of a divine pronoun (retained to prevent ambiguity about the referent); and the use of spelled-out ordinals (*first*, *second*, *third*) to number paragraphs, instead of numerals.

The word *interred* reproduces both the Congressional report and Thompson, though it seems it might be a typographical error, carried over from the original broadside, for *interned*. At a point where Thompson’s transcription has *honorable*, the Congressional record and the *New York Herald*’s re-translation both have *honorably*; *honorably* is used here. Thompson has *purity of their lips*, whereas Congress and the *Herald* both have *purity on*; the latter is used here.

These edited excerpts from Cortina’s proclamation are intended for *teaching* purposes only. For *research* purposes, you should consult, quote, and cite one of the source publications listed above.



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