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“If the Spanish Would But Join” The Forgotten Implications of Spanish Involvement in the American Revolution

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Spain’s Forgotten Role in the American Revolution

The participation of other countries is generally absent from most American recollections of the Revolutionary War. The stories of the War of Independence generally invoke images of the young colonies rebelling against the British monarchy, but how could a small strip of colonies break away from Britain unaided?

Acknowledgement is given to the French, if only briefly, for their presence at the Battle of Yorktown, but Americans tends to forget that France was the first ally of the United States. Even less attention is given to another European county that aided the war effort. Although rarely mentioned in textbooks, Spain played an important role in America’s War of Independence.

As a major colonial power in the Americas, Spain did not enter the war because its King believed that the British colonies had an inherent right to independence. However if the United States gained its independence, British colonial boundaries would be pushed further away from Latin America. The war also provided a renewed opportunity to reclaim lands lost to Great Britain, including Florida, Minorca and most importantly, the Rock of Gibraltar. American independence frequently seemed to hinge on possession of Gibraltar. Perhaps if Britain had not held on to it so tightly, the war could have ended differently.

While initially participating in secret, Spain contributed weapons, supplies and money to fund the war. Then after formally declaring war on Great Britain, the Spanish

military strategy divided and therefore weakened Britain’s forces through simultaneous battles in the Americas and Europe. Spain joined the war because American independence coincided with Spanish interests, yet its economic and military contributions influenced the course of the American Revolution.

Relations between Britain, France and Spain as they existed on the eve of the revolution evolved over hundreds of years. There were numerous wars preceding the revolution, and the eighteenth century found a strengthening alliance between France and Spain. The century began with the War of Spanish Succession. By the close of the war in 1713, branches of the Bourbon Family held the French and Spanish thrones. They shared a common enemy in Great Britain, who became more powerful during the war. The British increased their territory by seizing Minorca and Gibraltar from Spain. They also secured limited trading rights in Latin America, which became a cover for black market and contraband trade in the Spanish colonies.¹

Relations with Britain soured further during the Seven Years War, which ended just thirteen years before the United States declared its independence. France and Spain experienced great losses in the war while Great Britain made strong gains. Spain joined France in the war as part of the Third Family Compact of 1761, an agreement between the Bourbon houses of France and Spain. They agreed to combine forces against Great Britain to defend their possessions, and neither side would negotiate peace without the consent of the other.²

The brief involvement in the Seven Years War went badly for Spain. Eight months after its official declaration of war, the British navy seized Cuba. British vessels also attacked and raided Spanish ships in the Caribbean. An estimated eleven million dollars was lost due to the raids.³ France fared even worse. By the end of the war, it lost most of its colonial possessions in the Americas. Canada fell to the control of

Great Britain, and France gave Louisiana, which included all of its territories west of the Mississippi River, to Spain. Meanwhile Britain expanded its North American territories even further by extending their western boundary to the east coast of the Mississippi River, and the British secured the right to navigate the river.⁴ Britain also took control of Florida after Spain offered it in order to recover Cuba.⁵

The Treaty of Paris, which ended the war, addressed another point of growing conflict between Britain and Spain involving Central America. The British established lumber operations in the area, and there were increasing numbers of skirmishes between the English and Spanish. The British black market was also active in the region. With the treaty, Spain was forced to agree to no longer interfere with the English settlements.⁶

Despite these gains by Britain, the Seven Years War ultimately resulted in the revolt of its American colonies. Sparked by an increase in taxes to pay for Britain's war expenses, the American Revolution provided a weakness that Spain and France could exploit. For Spain, the opportunity to push Britain away from Latin America was too great to ignore. Louisiana provided a buffer between the Spanish and British colonies, but if the Americans gained their independence and Spain reclaimed Florida, the southern boarder of the British territories would be pushed to Canada.

Even before the United States declared its independence, secret negotiations began between the colonies, France and Spain. During these negotiations José Moniño y Redondo, the conde de Floridablanca, outlined what Spain expected for entering the war. Spain wanted to recover Gibraltar, Minorca and Florida, all of which were lost to Great Britain in previous wars. Spain also planned to seize British-held Jamaica and the Bahamas and to eliminate all British settlements on the east coast of Mexico, Honduras and Campeche, which were centers of illegal trade and smuggling operations.⁷

Despite these ambitions for the course of the war, Spanish officials wanted to participate secretly in the early years of the conflict. Spain had to protect its own interests, namely its Latin American colonies. To openly aid the revolution of British colonies could inspire subsequent rebellions in Latin America. Officials were also concerned about risking the loss of Cuba or other territories in another war with Britain.⁸ To safeguard Spanish interests by appearing to be neutral while still furthering the revolution, Spaniards set up a network of agents among the British in the Americas and, most importantly, a method of funneling greatly needed supplies and money into the colonies.

By the end of the war, the amounts of Spanish currency going into the United States through New Orleans were so extensive that Spanish money was commonly seen throughout the colonies.⁹ However Spain's initial contribution was made in collaboration with France. In November of 1775, the Continental Congress established the Committee of Secret Correspondence to solicit foreign aid, particularly from France and Spain.¹⁰ In response, the foreign ministers of the two countries set up the dummy company Roderique Hortalez et Cie in May 1776 with one million livres in weapons and supplies donated from each country. Through this company, which was located in Paris but operated out of the Dutch Antilles, the two countries laundered money and supplies to the American cause.¹¹ It remained in operation until France and Spain officially entered the war.

By the end of 1776, Spain was using New Orleans to directly supply the American government. The Spanish city was initially used for this purpose after General George Gibson led a band of men from Fort Pitt to New Orleans, taking a route down the Ohio and Mississippi Rivers. Gibson operated under the direction of the Committee of Secret Correspondence. They collected nine thousand pounds of

gunpowder at a Spanish establishment up the river from New Orleans. To avoid any suspicion by the British who had settlements along the Mississippi River, Louisiana's governor, Don Luis de Unzaga, placed Gibson under arrest. He was soon released and put on a vessel with more supplies.¹²

Later that year, a Royal Order released on December 24, 1776, declared that all involved Spanish officials, specifically the governors of Havana and Louisiana, were to give gunpowder and weapons to the Americans via free merchant ships.¹³ In response, José de Gálvez, the Minister of the Indies, implemented a plan for monthly shipments of weapons, gunpowder, ammunition and clothing. The shipments, which began in May 1777, routed the supplies from Spain to Cuba and then to New Orleans.¹⁴

When the first shipment arrived, local customs officials did not know about the royal order governing the supplies due to its level of secrecy. Because the bills of lading showed the Spanish government as the owner of the shipment, they took control of it and sent it to the garrison. In order to transfer the supplies to the Americans, Bernardo de Gálvez, the newly appointed governor of Louisiana and nephew of José de Gálvez, announced that the garrison's surplus of supplies would be sold at public auction. The governor then gave money to a local merchant to buy the shipment. To avoid future problems, subsequent shipments were transported to New Orleans on the merchant's ships and then stored in his warehouse.¹⁵

To transfer the shipments to the American government, the Continental Congress used Oliver Pollack, a resident of New Orleans. Pollack shipped the supplies up the Mississippi River to inland ports. In a letter to Gálvez, the Continental Congress asked the governor to extend protection to Pollack and his shipment and to provide Pollack with money to cover the costs of the transports.¹⁶ These shipments continued over the course of the war, although the route changed to the east coast following an

increase in British military activity on the Mississippi River.¹⁷

In addition to the regular shipments, the American government collected additional money and materials from New Orleans when needed. For instance, in the Spring of 1778 approximately thirty American troops traveled down the Ohio and Mississippi Rivers to New Orleans, raiding British settlements and plantations along the way. The expedition was organized by the Continental Congress as a way to retrieve more supplies from New Orleans. To reinforce Spanish claims of neutrality, Gálvez notified his commanders on the river that English settlers fleeing the American troops could use Spanish establishments as places of refuge. He also secretly informed another commander to accept any conquered territories that the Americans may wish to turn over to Spain. When the expedition reached New Orleans, the captured British property and slaves were sold at public auction. The profits from the sale were in turn given to the Americans. Additional supplies were "sold" to Pollack, who transported them upriver in the usual manner.¹⁸ When the British learned that Gálvez allowed the American raiders to remain in New Orleans, three British war ships separately sailed to New Orleans, each demanding the return of the captured property. Gálvez defused the situation by returning some of the remaining property.¹⁹

As the American raiding party made its way to New Orleans, Spanish spies hiding out in British west Florida reported to Gálvez that British troops mobilized in response to the American threat.²⁰ During the period of neutrality, Bernardo de Gálvez sent agents into Florida to monitor British activity and to report on their defenses. In July 1777 one of the agents in Pensacola uncovered that there were two British agents in New Orleans, and that the British government was aware of the supplies given to the Americans. The British agents were captured in New Orleans and banished from Louisiana.²¹

As the covert operations continued in North America, open conflict erupted in South America. Spain quickly used Britain's distraction with the American Revolution to its advantage. In late 1776, Spain overtook a British smuggling operation in Brazil. Then in 1777 Spanish forces attacked illegal Portuguese and British trading posts in Uruguay and Argentina.²² Spanish officials called the incidents in 1777 attacks on the Portuguese, and warned Britain that any interference could lead to a declaration of war. They were risking that British forces would not be spared from the colonies to react. The tactic worked, and the Spaniards shut down the smuggling operations.²³ Spain and Portugal negotiated a peace treaty in October 1777. With the treaty, Great Britain lost its ally.²⁴

While Spain established its position against Great Britain in the Americas, representatives from France and Spain continued to negotiate the terms of an open entrance into the war. Floridablanca was hesitant to officially enter the conflict. As he expressed in December 1777, "Great wisdom is necessary in order not to delude ourselves nor to place ourselves on the precipice of a premature war in which any fatal blow could backfire on Spain, the country which has the most to lose under the present circumstances."²⁵ Floridablanca pursued what was most beneficial for Spain.

Therefore he pressed for specific stipulations. From the beginning, Gibraltar was always a requirement. He maintained that if Spain entered the war, peace could not be declared until it possessed Gibraltar.²⁶

As the negotiations carried on throughout 1777 and into 1778, the future boundaries of the United States became a principal question. Would its boundaries be limited to the borders of the colonies, or would the United States adopt the boundaries of the surrounding British territory, which extended to the Mississippi River?²⁷ If the United States expanded to the Mississippi River, its government would expect navigation rights. Navigation rights

would take away Spain's monopoly on the trade at the mouth of river, plus the Mississippi could become a method for the new country to push into Louisiana, the only division between the Americans and Mexico. Floridablanca maintained that Spain must retain sole access to the mouth of the river and consequently the Gulf of Mexico.

France's representative in the negotiations, Charles Gravier Comte de Vergennes, repeatedly tried to convince Floridablanca to compromise and enter the war with France.²⁸ However as the discussions with Spain dragged on, Vergennes negotiated an independent alliance between France and the colonies. France and the United States entered into two treaties in February 1778, the Treaty of Amity and Commerce and the Treaty of Alliance. With these treaties, France officially recognized the independence of the United States. The French agreed that peace would not be negotiated with Great Britain until the monarchy recognized its independence, and neither ally would declare peace without the consent of the other.²⁹

The French and Americans also signed a secret agreement regarding Spain. It stipulated that if Spain entered the war, its goals would be included in the peace negotiations, and they would not negotiate with Britain without Spain's consent. The Americans also agreed that if the United States took possession of Florida during the war, they would return it to Spain if Americans could have free navigation of the Mississippi River.³⁰

In February of 1779, Congress offered another compromise in which Spain would have sole navigation rights of the Mississippi River below thirty-first parallel.³¹ Once again, Floridablanca refused. He also refused to compromise with France over Gibraltar. He was in a position to make demands, because France and the United States wanted Spain to enter the war. George Washington stated in October of 1778, "If the Spanish would but join their fleets to France and commence

hostilities, my doubts would all subside. Without if I fear the British navy has it too much in its power to counteract the schemes of France.”³² Finally in order to bring Spain into the war, Vergennes agreed to the demands over Gibraltar.³³

On April 12, 1779 France and Spain entered into an alliance that officially brought Spain into the war. The Treaty of Aranjuez was not a treaty with the United States, and it did not make Spain a direct ally of the American colonies. However this alliance with France tied Spain to the pursuit of American independence, because it stipulated that peace could not be negotiated with Britain until the monarchy recognized the independence of the United States. It also stipulated that neither France nor Spain would negotiate peace without the consent of the other. In turn the French would not discuss peace without the consent of the United States due to their alliance. This treaty also established that the war would continue until Spain held Gibraltar, Minorca and Florida.³⁴ Before entering into the alliance, Floridablanca gave a final opportunity to King George III. He offered Spanish neutrality if Britain would return Gibraltar.³⁵ George III refused, and Spain accepted the treaty. The Spanish government announced its declaration of war against Britain on June 21, 1779.³⁶

Before the declaration was made, Bernardo de Gálvez, the governor of Louisiana and Matías de Gálvez, el Presidente de la Audiencia de Guatemala, were instructed to prepare for open military conflict with the British.³⁷ Both men reported to José de Gálvez in Cuba. The primary military plan for the war was to divide and therefore weaken British forces through simultaneous battles in Europe and the Americas.

They began in the Gulf of Mexico. As José de Gálvez related, “Divisions should be detached to clean out the English from the banks of the Mississippi, which should be considered like an outer wall of New Spain’s vast empire.”³⁸ Bernardo de Gálvez

led an overland march to Manchac in September 1779, and the Spanish forces overtook the British fortification. He continued to Baton Rouge, which surrendered on September 22, and then to Fort Panmure in Natchez, which also surrendered. In one month England lost all of its ports on the Mississippi River, and Spain cut off all aid to British establishments on the river.³⁹

In the early months of 1780, Bernardo de Gálvez led a sea assault against Mobile. He then moved on to British-Florida. Since its early settlement, Florida held little value for Spain as it lacked any valuable natural resources and held a relatively small native population. However British Florida was a threat to Spanish activities in the Gulf of Mexico and to Louisiana. Through his agents, Gálvez had detailed information on the military infrastructure of Pensacola, the seat of the civil and military government in East Florida and Britain’s key position in the Gulf of Mexico.⁴⁰ His forces laid siege to the settlement, and the British surrendered Pensacola, thereby giving up their last foothold in the Gulf.

As Bernardo de Gálvez moved offensively against the British in North America, his father, Jose de Gálvez, commanded the Spanish armies in Central America. After Spain’s declaration of war, word circulated of an impending British invasion. British forces moved up the San Juan River in Central America. They were pushed back by Matías de Gálvez’s men, who in turn attacked British-held Roatán, Honduras.⁴¹ For the remainder of the war, he coordinated forces with the governor of the Yucatan to destroy all English settlements in the area.⁴²

While these battles developed in the Americas, combined French and Spanish forces simultaneously led assaults in Europe, specifically on Minorca and Gibraltar. The brunt of these Franco-Spanish forces was set on Gibraltar, which was under constant assault throughout the war.⁴³ Near the close of the war, the allies even

contemplated an invasion of England itself.⁴⁴

As the Spanish military continued its assault in Europe and the Americas, Floridablanca secretly organized negotiations with Great Britain in 1780. He offered to withdraw from the war if Britain would hand over Gibraltar. These secret negotiations violated Spain's treaty with France, but Floridablanca proposed a way to accommodate the Franco-Spanish and Franco-American treaties without Britain officially recognizing the independence of the colonies. His plan was for Britain to offer a truce in which the war would end, and Britain and the colonies would retain whatever areas they held at the time the truce was called. These negotiations continued until early 1781, but King George refused each of his offers.⁴⁵

George III was confident that Britain would triumph in the war. However English perspectives changed after the British General Charles Lord Cornwallis surrendered his 8000-man force at Yorktown, Virginia on October 18 1781, after a nine-day battle with French and American forces.⁴⁶ Spain was indirectly involved in the battle. José de Gálvez released the French fleet that blocked Chesapeake Bay from their position in the West Indies. They were replaced by the Spanish navy, which agreed to protect French possessions in the Caribbean. In addition, the battle was financed by money from the Spanish government.⁴⁷ Perhaps most importantly, however, Spain divided British naval forces through the battles in Europe and Central America. In defense of Gibraltar, Britain did not send naval reinforcements to the American colonies.⁴⁸ Reinforcements may have overcome the French blockade and changed the course of the war.

After the defeat at Yorktown, British public opinion turned against the war and on February 27, 1782, the House of Commons voted to end all offensive military action against the Americas.⁴⁹ However, Floridablanca was not willing to seriously negotiate peace without Gibraltar.

As the European powers debated terms of settlement, the United States held separate negotiations with Great Britain. Britain agreed to recognize the independence of the United States and to relinquish its territories to the Mississippi River in return for navigation rights. Throughout the war, Floridablanca was determined to secure the Mississippi for Spain, but had no control over the issue once it was settled between the United States and Britain.

Meanwhile the fighting continued between the European powers. By this time, Bernardo de Gálvez headed the West Indies operations, and he planned an attack on British-held Jamaica. However the plan was abandoned after much of his forces were sent to control a rebellion that erupted in South American.⁵⁰ Meanwhile Franco-Spanish forces captured Minorca and kept Gibraltar under constant attack. Then on September 11, 1782, a British fleet of thirty-four naval vessels and over one hundred merchant ships defeated the allied forces.⁵¹ Unable to take it by force, the Spanish could no longer debate over Gibraltar.

With little hope of recovering Gibraltar, Spain relented to negotiations with Britain. The parties agreed to an armistice and preliminary accord, which included the agreements between the United States and Britain. Representatives of Britain, France and Spain signed the Treaty of Paris at Versailles on January 20, 1783.⁵² For its efforts in the Revolution, Spain recovered possession of Florida and Minorca through the treaty, but it could not regain the coveted Rock of Gibraltar.

The colonies declared their independence at a time when Spain and France welcomed an opportunity to defeat the British. Spaniards participated in the war out of their own interests in weakening Britain, regaining territories lost in preceding wars and pushing the British away from Latin America. Pursuit of these interests coincided with the needs of the Revolution. However the question remains, what would have happened if Spain's

interests were no longer aligned with those of the United States?

Floridablanca appeared always eager to trade American independence for Gibraltar, but George III would not agree. Perhaps the war would have had a different outcome if King George had not held on to it so tightly. If Floridablanca had his way, Spain may have withdrawn from the war, taking with it the supplies, money and military power it added to the American cause. Great Britain undoubtedly could have concentrated its forces in the colonies if there was not a need to combat the assault on Gibraltar. The turning point of the war was the Battle of

Yorktown, but if the British fleet protecting Gibraltar was in the colonies instead, perhaps it could have overcome the French blockade and won the battle.

Regardless of these possibilities, the Revolution remained aligned with Spain's interests, and Spain contributed to the American cause throughout the Revolution. Spanish financial aid sustained the war, while its military power drew British forces away from the colonies to Europe and Latin America. Therefore although never an ally of the United States, Spain was directly tied to the American pursuit of independence.

¹ Raymond Carr, *Spain: A History*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001) 174.

² James W. Cortada, *Two Nations Over Time: Spain and the United States, 1776-1977*, (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1978) 4.

³ Samuel Flagg Bemis, *The Diplomacy of the American Revolution*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1957), 11.

⁴ "Treaty of Paris 1763," in *Treaties and Other International Acts of the United States of America*, Vol 2, ed. Hunter Miller, (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1931), Article VII.

⁵ "Treaty of Paris 1763," Article XIX and XX.

⁶ "Treaty of Paris 1763," Article XVII.

⁷ Thomas E. Chávez, *Spain and the Independence of the United States: An Intrinsic Gift*, (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2002) 8.

⁸ Cortada, 6.

⁹ Townsend Cummins, *Spanish Observers of the American Revolution, 1775 – 1783*, (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1991), 108.

¹⁰ Chávez, 49.

¹¹ Chávez, 49.

¹² Chávez, 31.

¹³ Chávez, 49.

¹⁴ Cummins, 78.

¹⁵ Cummins, 80.

¹⁶ Cummins, 84.

¹⁷ Chávez, 109.

¹⁸ Cummins, 88.

¹⁹ Cummins, 88.

²⁰ Cummins, 99.

²¹ Cummins, 6.

²² Chávez, 42.

²³ Chávez, 43.

²⁴ Chávez, 64.

²⁵ Carmen de Reparaz, *I Alone: Bernardo de Gálvez and the Taking of Pensacola in 1781: A Spanish Contribution to the Independence of the United States*, Translated by Walter Rubin, (Madrid: Ediciones de Cultura Hispánica, 1993) 32.

²⁶ Bemis, 88.

²⁷ Bemis, 94.

²⁸ Bemis, 94.

²⁹ "Treaty of Alliance" and "Treaty of Amity and Commerce Between the United States and France," in *Treaties and Other International Acts of the United States of America*, Vol 2, ed. Hunter Miller, (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1931).

³⁰ "Act Separate and Secret Between the United States and France," in *Treaties and Other International Acts of the United States of America*, Vol 2, ed. Hunter Miller, (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1931).

³¹ Bemis, 105.

³² Bemis, 110.

³³ Bemis, 111.

³⁴ Chávez, 133.

³⁵ Cortada, 7.

³⁶ Chávez, 133.

³⁷ Chávez, 89.

³⁸ Reparaz, 35.

³⁹ Reparaz, 39.

⁴⁰ Nixon Orwin Rush, *Spain's Final Triumph Over Great Britain in the Gulf of Mexico: The Battle of Pensacola*, March 9 to May 8, 1781, (Tallahassee: Florida State University, 1966), 2.

⁴¹ Chávez, 14.

⁴² Chávez, 134.

⁴³ Carr, 175.

⁴⁴ Chávez, 147.

⁴⁵ Bemis, 105.

⁴⁶ Chávez, 198.

⁴⁷ Chávez, 203.

⁴⁸ Chávez, 201.

⁴⁹ Chávez, 206.

⁵⁰ Chávez, 205.

⁵¹ Bemis, 127.

⁵² "Treaty of Paris 1783," in *Treaties and Other International Acts of the United States of America*, Vol 2, ed. Hunter Miller, (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1931).

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