

The Life and Times of Bernardo de Gálvez, Spain's Great Hero of the American Revolution

Part 1 of 2

By Robert H. Thonhoff*

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During the brief forty-year life span of Bernardo de Gálvez, 1746-1786, a number of great historical events occurred, and a number of great historical personages lived. By that time, his mother country, Spain, had discovered, explored, subdued, and colonized the most extensive empire in the history of the world. Its empire extended around the Earth and included most of the Western Hemisphere. Since 1700, the Bourbon monarchical family had ruled Spain, beginning with King Philip V (1700-1746), continuing with King Ferdinand VI (1746-1759), and succeeded by King Carlos III (1759-1788). The stature of Carlos III, sometimes characterized as being the best of the Bourbons, who brought Spain back to heights of glory and achievement not seen since the sixteenth century, is enhanced further when one considers his European contemporaries, all of whom were busily engaged in rival colonial ventures: King George III of the House of Hanover in England; King Louis XIV of the House of Bourbon in France; Maria Theresa of the House of Hapsburg in Austria and Empress of the Holy Roman Empire; Frederick the Great of the House of Hohenzollern in Prussia; Catherine the Great of the House of Romanov in Russia; and King Gustav III of Sweden. And it is interesting to note that the present King of Spain, Juan Carlos Victor María de Borbón y Borbón, who ascended to the throne as King Juan Carlos I at the end of the thirty-six year rule of Francisco Franco in 1975, is a direct descendant of King Carlos III.

Historical highlights during the life of Bernardo de Gálvez include the ascendancy to the Spanish throne by Ferdinand VI in 1746, the Concordat with the Vatican in 1754 by which the Spanish Church became practically independent of Rome and was placed under the control of the government. From 1756-1763 Spain became involved in the Seven Years War, called the French and Indian War, in North America, which had profound results for both Spain and France. From 1775 until 1779 Spain became an unofficial ally of the American colonies in their revolt against England. After Spain declared war against England on June 21, 1779, Spain openly aided the Americans with great amounts of money, military supplies, and worldwide military campaigns against the British. Bernardo de Gálvez was commissioned by King Carlos III to conduct the military campaigns in North America. Shortly after the Treaty of Paris of 1783, Bernardo became Viceroy of New Spain for less than two years before he suffered an untimely death in Mexico City at the age of 40. Thus, it can be seen that Bernardo de Gálvez was a contemporary not only of some of the world's great rulers but also of some of the world's great leaders such as George Washington, Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Jefferson, Marquis de Lafayette, Admiral de Grasse, General Rochambeau, Lord Cornwallis, Baron von Steuben, Baron de Kalb, Thaddeus Kosciuszko, and Casimir Pulaski, to mention just a few. Bernardo de Gálvez was born on July 23, 1746, in Macharaviaya, a mountain village in the province of Málaga, Spain. He was the first son of Matías and Josepha Madrid y Gallardo de Gálvez, both of ancient nobility. He belonged to a family that during his lifetime was one of the most distinguished in the royal service of Spain. His father, Matías de Gálvez, after serving as Lieutenant Governor General of the Canary Islands and Captain-General of Guatemala, was elevated to Viceroy of New Spain in which position he served from 1784 until his death in 1785. Bernardo's uncle, José de Gálvez, was the visitador general of New Spain from 1765 till 1771, when he returned to Spain to become Minister of the Indies, in which position he exercised power second only to King Carlos III himself. Another uncle, Miguel de Gálvez, was a field marshal in the royal army. A third uncle, Antonio de Gálvez, served as ambassador to the Czarina Russia, Catherine the Great.

Bernardo spent his childhood in the rural village of Macharaviaya. Following family tradition, he chose a military career and became a cadet in Military Academy of Ávila. At the age of sixteen he enlisted as a volunteer in a war against Portugal and became a lieutenant in the infantry.

After that was he was promoted to captain in the Regiment of La Coruña. In 1765 he arrived in Mexico City for the first time as a part of the entourage of his uncle, José de Gálvez, who undertook an inspection tour of the viceroyalty of New Spain. In 1769 Gálvez was commissioned by Viceroy Teodoro de Croix to go to the northern frontier of New Spain, where he soon became commandant of military forces in Nueva Vizcaya and Sonora. He led several major expeditions against Apaches, whose depredations seriously crippled the economy of the region. During campaigns along the Pecos and Gila rivers in 1770-1771, he was wounded twice but gained military experience that proved invaluable a few years later. The name Paso de Gálvez was given to a crossing on the Pecos River where Gálvez led his troops to victory in a fight with the Apaches.

Gálvez returned to Spain in 1771 and spent the next three years in France, where he enrolled in the Regiment of Cantabria to perfect himself in military science and to learn the French language and culture. After his return to Spain, he was assigned to the Regiment of Seville. As captain of infantry under Alejandro O'Reilly, he participated in a failed attack on Algiers and suffered another wound in 1775. In recompense, he was promoted to the rank of lieutenant colonel and attached to the Military School of Ávila. In 1776 he was transferred to the faraway province of Louisiana and promoted to colonel of the Louisiana Regiment. On January 1, 1777, he succeeded Luís de Unzaga as Governor of Louisiana.

While Governor of Louisiana, Gálvez, a single young man barely thirty years of age, met and married María Feliciano de St. Maxent, a young widow. Bernardo adopted the daughter of Feliciano, Adelaida, and within the next few years they had their own children, Matilde (1780) and Miguel (1782). Another child, Guadalupe, was born to them in Mexico City on December 12, 1786, twelve days after Bernardo died.

Before Spain formally entered the American Revolutionary War, Gálvez did much to aid the American patriots. He corresponded directly with Patrick Henry, Thomas Jefferson, and Charles Henry Lee, and personally received their emissaries, Oliver Pollock and Capt. George Gibson. Gálvez responded to their pleas for Spanish aid by securing the port of New Orleans so that only American, Spanish, and French ships could move up and down the Mississippi River. Eventually, the Mississippi-Ohio river system became a veritable lifeline to the American colonists, for over it great amounts of money, arms, ammunition, and military supplies, were delivered covertly to the embattled American forces under George Washington and George Rogers Clark.

Part 2

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