

The Vital Contribution of Spain in the Winning of the American Revolution

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An Essay on a Forgotten Chapter in the History of the American Revolution

SOMEHOW OBSCURED OVER THE PAST TWO HUNDRED YEARS, the vital role of Spain in the winning of American independence is slowly but surely emerging back into the consciousness of our nation. Few Americans are aware of Spain's deep involvement in the American Revolution. When speaking or writing about Spain's contribution to the American Revolution, most Americans generally characterize it somewhere between "nothing" to "minuscule, hardly worth mentioning." Recent research by scholars, however, has brought to light new information about the American Revolution that has been literally "swept under the historical rug" for much too long. Consequently, old

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notions are starting to be dispelled, and Americans are now being re-introduced to the truth.

During the 15th, 16th, 17th, 18th, and 19th centuries, it should be remembered, Spain discovered, explored, subdued, and colonized the most extensive territorial empire in the history of the world. Its empire extended around the globe and included most of the Western Hemisphere. At the time of the American Revolution, Spain owned or claimed all the land of present United States west of the Mississippi River plus the “island” of New Orleans. This vast area was a part of *Nueva España*, or New Spain, which extended from Central America to the “arctic snows.”

From 1776 until war was declared against Great Britain in 1779, Spain covertly, through the merchants Diego de Gardoqui in Bilbao and Oliver Pollock in New Orleans, sent money, muskets, munitions, medicine, and military supplies in great amounts to aid the Americans in their unequal war against England, a longtime foe of Spain—and France. Before and after the declaration of war, Spain had a complex network of “observers” throughout the Americas to monitor the course of the revolt. Two observers posted in Philadelphia, Juan de Miralles and Francisco Rendón, gave not only moral support but also served as conduits for material aid sent by Spain to the American patriots throughout the revolution. In 1781, Rendón even offered the hospitality of his home to General Washington during Washington’s Christmas visit to Philadelphia.

In 1777, Benjamin Franklin, American representative in France, sent Arthur Lee to Spain, where Lee arranged secretly for the shipment by the Spanish firm of José Gardoqui & Sons of 215 bronze cannons, 4,000 field tents, 12,826 grenades, 30,000 muskets, 30,000 bayonets, 30,000 uniforms, 51,314 musket balls, and 300,000 pounds of gunpowder to be sent by ship from a French port by way of Bermuda to Boston. Later, in one of his letters, Franklin thanked the Spanish minister, Count of Aranda, for 12,000 muskets sent to Boston by Spain.

From 1776 to 1779, through merchant Oliver Pollock in New Orleans, Spain provided the American colonies with credits of 7,944,906 *reales* with which all types of supplies—uniforms, shoes, blankets, food, medicine, lead, gunpowder, muskets, flints, cannon, and other material—were shipped by way of the Mississippi and Ohio rivers to the embattled forces of George Washington and George Rogers Clark.

Equally important to the American rebels was Spain’s control of the Mississippi basin through the port of New Orleans, enabling supplies and communications to be sent along the Mississippi and Ohio rivers. With the British blockade of the Atlantic coast, the Mississippi and Ohio river systems served as a veritable lifeline to the forces of George Washington and George Rogers Clark. Only Spanish, American, and French ships were allowed the use of the port of New Orleans, and most of the aid received by Washington and Clark was by way of this backdoor.

After Spain formally declared war against Great Britain on June 21, 1779, Spain's King Carlos III commissioned General Bernardo de Gálvez, Governor of Louisiana, to conduct a military campaign against the British along the Gulf Coast in North America. Accordingly, Gálvez raised an army and navy, took to the field, and defeated the British in battles at Manchac, Baton Rouge, and Natchez in 1779, at Mobile in 1780, and at Pensacola in 1781. In the meantime, his Spanish forces secured the upper Mississippi and Ohio rivers by defeating the British at San Luís (St. Louis, Missouri) and San José (St. Joseph, Michigan) and by assisting George Rogers Clark in his battles at Vincennes (Indiana), Kaskaskia (Illinois), and Cahokia (Illinois). In 1782 Gálvez's forces defeated the British in the Bahamas and gained control of their naval base at New Providence. The Spanish were preparing for the grandest campaign of all against Jamaica when their plans were sidetracked by the negotiations underway that resulted in the Peace Treaty of Paris in 1783, which officially ended the war. By opening up a third front, the Spanish effectively diluted British forces that could have been used elsewhere.

To help feed Spanish forces, some nine thousand head of Texas cattle from the private and mission ranches in the San Antonio River Valley were trailed by Spanish Texas ranchers and escorted by Spanish Texas soldiers to Gálvez's troops in their campaign from Louisiana to Florida. Additionally, several hundred head of horses were sent along for cavalry and artillery purposes.

In the meantime, Gálvez responded to letters from Patrick Henry, Thomas Jefferson, General Charles Henry Lee, Captain George Morgan, and Captain George Gibson for more aid, which Gálvez continued to provide. Notably, a part of the French fleet was under his command during the two-month siege of Pensacola, March to May, 1781. After the successful battle to capture Fort George in Pensacola, Gálvez dismissed the French fleet and provided them with 500,000 *pesos*, which the French used to re-provision their ships at Havana. Then the French fleet sailed along the Atlantic seaboard toward Chesapeake Bay, arriving there just in the nick of time to help General Washington defeat Lord Cornwallis at Yorktown on October 19, 1781.

A voluntary war tax was collected from soldiers and citizens throughout Cuba and New Spain, including the provinces of California, New Mexico, and Texas, to support the war effort. Some of this money, recent scholarship indicates, may well have been included in the half-million *pesos* that Spanish commander Francisco de Saavedra received from Veracruz, which he in turn disbursed to Chevalier de Monteil, who forwarded the money to Comte de Grasse, commander of the French fleet in the Caribbean, who used it to pay his sailors and re-provision his ships at Havana and Guarico en route to Yorktown. Another million *pesos* from Veracruz were forwarded to De Grasse while he was en route to Chesapeake Bay.

Spain fought the British not only on the North American Continent but also in the far off Philippines, Galápagos, Juan Fernández Islands, Honduras, Guatemala, Nicaragua, Bahamas, Jamaica, Minorca, and Gibraltar, while constantly posing a possible Spanish-French invasion of Great Britain. France extended the worldwide dimensions of the war by fighting the British in India, Hudson Bay, and Sierra Leone in addition to the North American Continent and the West Indies.

Gálvez had under his command men from Spain, Majorca, Cuba, Puerto Rico, Hispaniola, and Ireland. From Louisiana he recruited Frenchmen, Acadians, Germans, Canary Islanders, Indians, and Blacks, both slave and free. About thirty Americans, a part of the South Carolina Navy, and a few Texans were in his forces. He also had many troops and ships from México (New Spain). One of his top generals was Major General Gerónimo Girón, a direct descendant of Montezuma. His aide-de-camp in the Pensacola campaign was Francisco Miranda, the precursor of independence in Venezuela.

American privateers were offered and took sanctuary in the Spanish ports of Bilbao, La Coruña, Cádiz, Algeciras, and Santa Cruz de Tenerife. John Paul Jones himself used La Coruña as his base for eighteen months. American privateers and the Caribbean fleet of the French took refuge and provisions at the Spanish ports of Havana and New Orleans. The French port of Guarico on Cabo Francés on the Island of Hispaniola was also an important haven for American, Spanish, and French ships.

On his return trip from Spain to New Spain in October 1784, Gálvez, was accompanied by Diego de Gardoqui, who was on his way to his new post in Philadelphia to become the first Spanish Ambassador to the United States of America. In February 1785, Gálvez went to Savannah and Baltimore to represent Spain in negotiations over boundaries with the United States. Shortly thereafter, to acknowledge the aid given by the South Carolina Navy in the invasion of the Bahamas in 1782, King Carlos III, who knew of George Washington's interest in animal husbandry, especially the breeding of mules, presented Washington with the gift of two special burros for breeding purposes at his Mount Vernon farm. On December 21, 1785, Washington wrote a letter of thank you to King Carlos III for the gift of the two special jack asses.

Gálvez was subsequently commended by the American Congress for his aid during the War for Independence, and Spanish aid was gratefully acknowledged. In the meantime, Gálvez learned that his father, Matías de Gálvez, the Viceroy of New Spain, had died and that he was named his father's successor. By June 17, 1785, he was in Mexico City with his wife and three children to commence his duties as Viceroy of New Spain. In México, as in Louisiana and Cuba, Gálvez attained great popularity. In the first year of his administration, he made a promising beginning, but death suddenly intervened. Early in the fall of 1786, during an epidemic, he was stricken with disease and died on November 30 at the age of 40. Thus the meteoric and heroic career of a truly great man came to an untimely end. His body was interred next to his father's burial

place in a crypt in the Church of San Fernando, and his heart was placed in an urn and laid to rest in the Cathedral of México in Mexico City.

In 1789, Spain's first ambassador to the United States of America, Diego de Gardoqui, stood at the side of George Washington during his inaugural parade in New York City, then our nation's capital. Ambassador Gardoqui positioned the Spanish brigantine, the *Galveztown*, which served as Gálvez's flagship during the Gulf Coast campaign, in New York Harbor, the only foreign warship thus honored. Since then—for whatever reasons—America has seemed to have forgotten not only the great contribution of Spain to American independence but also the great Spanish hero of the American Revolution, General Bernardo de Gálvez.

In more recent times, on June 3, 1976, in honor of the American Bicentennial Commemoration, King Juan Carlos I of Spain, a direct descendent of King Carlos III, presented the people of the United States of America an equestrian statue of Bernardo de Gálvez as a reminder that Spain offered the blood of her soldiers for the cause of American independence. The statue is situated in Washington, D.C., near the intersection of Virginia Avenue and 21st Street NW (which, in this writer's opinion, is in an obscure, out-of-the-way, and hard-to-reach location—hardly like Lafayette Square, where statues of other major foreign heroes are prominently placed).

Far from being “nothing” or “minuscule, hardly worth mentioning,” Spain's contribution should truthfully be characterized as “munificent, even vital” to the winning of the American Revolution.

Scholars in Spain, México, and the United States are currently hard at work researching, writing, and speaking to disseminate historical information that “has been swept under the historical rug” much too long. As a result, it is hoped that Spain will receive the credit it deserves for its aid to the American patriots during their war for independence. And once Americans become fully aware of the life and deeds of General Bernardo de Gálvez of Spain, they will rightfully remember and honor him in the same light as the Marquis de Lafayette, General Rochambeau, and Comte de Grasse of France; Baron von Steuben and Baron de Kalb of Prussia (now Germany); and Thaddeus Kosciuszko and Casimir Pulaski of Poland.

This brief essay barely scratches the surface of a much larger and detailed story that could be told about Spain's vital role in the American Revolution. The best and most comprehensive books thus far written about the subject are Eric Beerman, *España y la Independencia de Estados Unidos* (1992) and Thomas E. Chávez, *Spain and the Independence of the United States: An Intrinsic Gift* (2002), listed in the bibliography that follows. Hopefully, these fine books will be translated soon, respectively, from Spanish into English and from English into Spanish so as to be made available for all English-speaking and Spanish-speaking people the world over. These and other publications,

those already written and those yet to be written, will, perhaps, help earn Spain the chapter it so clearly deserves in the history of the American Revolution.

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About the Flags on the Title Page

The crossed flags on the title page represent the flags of the United States of America and Spain that were in use during the American Revolution. “Old Glory” was reputed to be designed and sewed by Betsy Ross. The “Burgundian Cross Flag,” with many variations, was used by the Bourbon kings of Spain, including King Carlos III (1759-1788).