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THE RISE AND FALL AND RISE OF SPAIN in the Historiography of the American Revolution

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1

Spain in the American Revolution

Americans who lived through the Revolutionary War understood that Spain was a partner in the fight against Britain, even if it was not formally allied with the United States. Before the fighting began in 1775, Spanish muskets and supplies were being shipped from Bilbao to New England by the Basque merchant, Diego de Gardoqui. Along the Mississippi River, the Governor of Spanish Louisiana, Bernardo de Gálvez, was sending more arms and supplies to American forces as far north as Fort Pitt (today's Pittsburgh) to help them in their battles with British troops in the Western Theatre. In Philadelphia, the capital of the nation, the Havana merchant Juan de Miralles served as the Spanish agent to the Continental Congress, and ensured that flour and silver flowed from the Caribbean to the East Coast, to help keep American troops and citizens engaged in the fight.

It was not altruism but common interest that led Spain to help the Americans in their war against Great Britain. France and Spain had come out badly in

the Seven Years' War (1756-1763), with Spain losing Florida and nearly losing Cuba and the Philippines, which represented major threats to the Spanish global empire. France also lost territory (Canada) and faced the build-up of British threats to its own imperial ambitions in India. Together, Spain and France—allies in the Bourbon Family Compact—embarked on a joint campaign to rebuild their navies and prepare to attack Britain at its weakest points, including England itself, in order to restore the balance of power in their favor. Both France and Spain knew that the British colonies in North America wanted far greater sovereignty than the King and Parliament would allow, and saw the coming American Revolution as a way to weaken the British empire as a prelude to their war of revenge. The Continental Congress knew of the Bourbon Alliance's intentions, and specifically wrote the Declaration of Independence in 1776, in order to invite them to fight alongside the newly sovereign United States of America.

France allied with the United States in 1778, after it was clear that the Americans could not win the war against Great Britain by themselves. Spain came into the war alongside France in 1779. The two navies launched a combined naval assault on England, but it failed before the invasion could even take place. Instead, the allied Bourbon Navy operated against Royal Navy convoys in the Atlantic, and prepared further assaults



Brueckner, Henry. *Representing the Arrival of General George Washington at the Battery*. April 30, 1789, New York. / Credit: Library Company of Philadelphia.

against British territories in the Caribbean. Spain launched lightning attacks around the Gulf of Mexico, driving British forces from their strongholds in Nicaragua and in West Florida. Meanwhile, more munitions and supplies flowed from Spanish ports to American troops, arming and clothing them and providing them with much-needed silver coin. Spanish privateers operated from Philadelphia and other American ports to attack British shipping.

In 1781, Bernardo de Gálvez successfully led a combined Spanish-French amphibious invasion of the British capitol at Pensacola, thus neutralizing their presence around the Gulf of Mexico and Caribbean. This sudden reversal allowed the French colonies in the Caribbean to be placed under the protection of the Spanish navy, while the newly-arrived French fleet under Comte de Grasse went north to the Chesapeake Bay to assist in the siege of Yorktown (and carrying Spanish coin to pay American troops). After the defeat of Cornwallis in October 1781, France and Spain seized Minorca, fought to regain Gibraltar, and planned to capture the British naval base in Jamaica. These actions brought Britain to the peace table, and by 1783, the Revolutionary War was concluded with America gaining its independence, Spain recovering Florida, and France regaining the balance of power.

2

Spain's role is recognized in early histories of the American Revolution

The war-forged bonds between Spain and the United States were made plainly visible at the inauguration of George Washington in New York City, in April 1781. The Spanish brig *Galveztown* (modeled on the same ship Gálvez sailed into Pensacola Bay) was the only foreign warship at the ceremony, rendering a 15-gun salute in his honor. One of the first guests Washington received was Diego de Gardoqui, recently become the Spanish ambassador, who was also instrumental in providing Washington with a prize donkey to help improve his livestock (and which became the progenitor of America's most popular donkey breed, the Mammoth Jack).

Contemporary historians in the United States, who had personally witnessed events first-hand and spoken or written to many of the principal actors, gave proper credit to the Spanish contributions to the war. A British-American cleric, William Gordon, copied the personal files of George Washington and others,

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westward to the Pacific Ocean and control the Western Hemisphere, spreading their values of liberty and equality. And some of the biggest obstacles to American progress were the former Spanish territories of Mexico, and Spain's influence in Caribbean.

Bancroft's history was both thoroughly researched and highly partisan. He greatly admired the French assistance to the United States, going so far as to put Lafayette's face (not Washington's) on the frontispiece of Volume 9, devoted to the American Revolution. But he reserved his particular venom for Spain. Instead of praising the actions of heroes like Miralles, Gálvez and Gardoqui, and recognizing the close alliance Spain had with France against Britain, Bancroft painted the Spanish as an enemy almost as hostile as the British. The toxicity spills out across Volume 9: the Spanish are "devoured by ambition," "irritable," full of "intrigues;" they "dissimulate," they "cavil," "lie," "pettifog;" and most damning, he claimed that Spain hated the idea of American Independence. More than any other factor, Bancroft's disparagement of the Spanish involvement in the Revolutionary War is why Americans came to forget how critical it was to victory.

Bancroft's narrative that highlighted French aid and vilified Spain's role had an enormous impact on the historiography of the American Revolution for almost a century. Bancroft was the source material for John Fiske's *War of Independence* (1890), where the chapter on

the French alliance portrayed Spain as carrying out a completely separate war on its own account. The *School History of the United States*, written in 1917 by John Bach McMaster at the outbreak of World War I, claimed that Spain "cared nothing for the United States." That same year, American troops who were marching through France to fight on the Western Front heard Pershing's chief of staff Charles Stanton exclaim, "Lafayette, we are here!", as if the sole reason America went to war with Germany was to repay its debt to France for aid given during the American Revolution.

4

Recovering the memories of Spain's role during the Age of Multiculturalism

America became a global superpower during World War II, and has been ever since. Its self-confidence rose with that power, and it became the centerpiece of alliances like NATO. This change in politics resulted in a more open recognition of past partnerships. In 1958, the noted historian Howard Peckham, in *The War for Independence: A Military History*, brought the Spanish side of the war back into the picture:

"The Americans found a fighter in Bernardo de Gálvez, who moved with energy. [...] He had already sold powder, loaned money, and opened his port to the United States. He seized the British posts of Manchac, Baton Rouge, Natchez and Mobile. [...] In 1781, Gálvez's troops landed and laid siege to the fort [Pensacola]. The British held out for weeks, until the Spanish guns hit their powder magazine."

Within a few years, Spain's role, once again, was being touted in history books. Richard Ernest Dupuy, Gay Hammerman and Grace P. Hayes, in *The American Revolution: A Global War* (1977), were laudatory of Spain and its most prominent Revolutionary figure:

"Bernardo de Gálvez is a Revolutionary name seldom heard, yet this Spaniard's skill at military leadership, his success as a statesman, and his dashing, romantic style should make him a natural popular hero. [...] He formed competent and devoted armies [of] Spanish regulars, French, Anglo-Americans, settlers, free Blacks and Indians [...] and wrested the lower Mississippi Valley and all West Florida from Britain."

The historical outlook of Americans has also changed as a result of immigration. Since the 1980s, Hispanics and Latins represent a larger and larger part of the American population, and our view of history is starting to highlight



Portrait of Bernardo de Gálvez in the United States Senate, unveiled by Teresa Valcarce. / Foto: US Senate

their chapters that had been previously ignored. Thomas E. Chávez, a name well known to the Instituto Franklin de la Universidad de Alcalá, led the charge for restoring Spain's role with his superb 2002 book *Spain and the Independence of the United States: An Intrinsic Gift*, which helped elevate Bernardo de Gálvez as the icon of that role. In 2014, Gálvez's portrait was unveiled in the US Senate, and he was made an honorary US citizen alongside Lafayette and Winston Churchill. And of course, the definitive biography of the man was published by Gonzalo M. Quintero Saravia in 2018, *Bernardo de Gálvez: Spanish Hero of the American Revolution* (the Spanish version is titled *Bernardo de Gálvez: Un héroe español en la Guerra de Independencia de los Estados Unidos de Norteamérica*).

The United States is approaching its 250th anniversary in 2026 in a world that is increasingly coming to resemble that of 1776; a multi-polar world in which regional spheres of influence are marked by the struggle for balance of power between the United States, Europe, Russia, and China, much as the American Revolution was really part of the balance of power struggle between

Britain, France, and Spain. At the same time, the fabric of the nation is today more diverse than ever, especially with the growth of citizens of Hispanic origin; and the influence of immigration, international travel and trade has been greater than at almost any time in our history.

The 19th century German strategist Carl von Clausewitz, in his book *Vom Krieg (On War)*, famously said "War is the continuation of politics by other means." We can also apply this dictum to history. But history is not only the continuation of politics by other means, it is also the means by which we come to understand who we are and who we will become. The study of the American Revolution will continue to offer fresh interpretations of our nation's origins and its relationship with the world, to help guide how we create our future.

"Who tells your story?" asked the Broadway musical *Hamilton*. For Spain's role in the American Revolution, that answer must be, "those who carry on its legacy." In other words, *us*.