

# Spain in the American Revolution

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## *Background*

Spain discovered the New World in 1492 and spent the next hundred years building a huge empire. Then rival European powers France and Britain began planting colonies on mainland North America.

In 1754, rivalry between Britain and France led to the outbreak of the French and Indian War in North America.

In 1759, after a 24 year reign as King of Naples and Sicily, Carlos de Borbón became King Carlos III of Spain. King Carlos III was the son of Felipe V, the first Borbón king of Spain, and the first cousin of King Louis XV of France.

The war with Britain was going badly, and France asked Spain to enter the war in 1761. Carlos III signed the Third Bourbon Family Compact, and agreed to have Spain declare war on Britain. The new king committed Spain to the war without any preparation. As a result, the war went badly for Spain, and Britain seized Manila and Havana from the Spanish. In 1763, France and Spain had to sue for peace.

The Treaty of Paris resulted in France ceding French Canada, Louisiana East of the Mississippi, Dominica, Grenada, Saint Vincent, and Tobago to Britain in exchange for the return of Guadeloupe, Martinique and Saint Lucia that were captured by Britain during the war. France felt that its Caribbean islands and their sugar plantations and rum distilleries were more economically valuable than their vast mainland holdings.

Spain was forced to cede Florida to Britain in exchange for Manila and Havana. France compensated Spain for its losses in the war by ceding Louisiana West of the Mississippi (including New Orleans) to Spain.

In the aftermath of the French and Indian War, Britain controlled the northeast shores of the Caribbean, which threatened Spain's treasure fleets. Britain began to squeeze the colonies to pay for the war that removed the French threat in North America. This ultimately led to the American Revolution. Spain responded to the disaster by building up its military to defend the empire and reforming its

colonial administration to increase revenues. Carlos III began preparing for the next war.

### *Response to the American Revolution*

With the outbreak of the American Revolution in 1775, France and Spain saw an opportunity to capitalize on the misfortunes of their rival Britain. France hoped to replace Britain as our trading partner and Spain hoped to regain lost territory. King Carlos III was an enlightened despot, who did not believe in democratic principles. Even though he supported the Americans against his enemy, he refused to officially recognize the independence of the United States, which would set a bad precedent for Spain's many colonies.

At first France and Spain assisted the rebel colonies covertly. In May 1776, France created a shell corporation, Roderique Hortelez et Cie, managed by Pierre Beaumarchais, to launder money and supplies for the American rebels. France contributed 270,000 *pesos* to start the company in June, which was matched by Spain in August.

In order to maintain the secrecy of the assistance to the Americans, all contact between the United States and Spain was conducted in secret in Paris through the Count of Aranda, the Spanish Minister to France.

Learning from his past mistake, King Carlos III decided he would not enter the war until Spain was completely prepared. Unlike France, Spain had a vast empire in the Americas, and did not want to antagonize the British until they were in the best position to defend the empire. Spain's goals were France's help in Spain's dispute with Portugal, the recovery of Gibraltar, Menorca, Florida, Jamaica and the Bahamas from Britain, and the eviction of the illegal British enclaves on the Caribbean coast of Central America. The Spanish Foreign Minister, the Count of Floridablanca, believed he might be able to attain these goals through diplomacy, rather than war, so he made every effort put pressure on the British by covertly funding and supplying the Americans, and by threatening to enter the war and tip the balance against Britain.

In December 1776, King Carlos III issued a royal order to the governors of Louisiana and Cuba to open Spanish ports in the New World to American merchant vessels.

Bernardo de Gálvez, the governor of Louisiana, covertly sent supplies from New Orleans up the Mississippi River to assist the Americans in attacking British forces along the Mississippi, including George Rogers Clark. He also sent supplies to George Washington's Continental Army.

In 1777, Congress sent Arthur Lee to Madrid. Spain was worried about accepting a diplomat from America, so they ordered Lee to be intercepted before he could reach Madrid. Diego Gardoqui, a Basque merchant, met with Lee at Burgos in Northern Spain. Lee was insistent about going to Madrid, and Gardoqui warned him that if he did, it would force Spain to cease the secret assistance to the Americans. Lee was told that Spain was stockpiling gunpowder and clothing in New Orleans and Havana to be sent to the Americans. Spain also offered to approach Holland about extending credit to the United States. Gardoqui also helped raise funds and supplies for the Americans, and used his company, Gardoqui and Sons, as a cover for funneling Spanish aid to the Americans. Between 1777 and 1782, Gardoqui raised 406,000 *pesos* for the American war effort. Lee agreed to keep everything secret.

In April 1777, Spain agreed to an additional 75,000 *pesos* of assistance.

One of the turning points in the war occurred in October 1777 when the Americans defeated General Burgoyne at Saratoga. The American victory convinced the French that the Americans were able to hold their own in the war, and the French believed that this was the optimal time to enter the war against their ancient foe.

### *France Enters the War*

In February 1778, France and the United States signed the Franco-American Treaty of Amity and Commerce, and the Treaty of Alliance. The treaties recognized American independence, and required neither party could make peace without the consent of the other. Spain continued its official neutrality hoping to see Britain continue to weaken while Spain grew stronger and more prepared. Spain was also concerned about provoking a wider European war by appearing to be an aggressor.

Once the French entered the war, Spain offered the use of Spanish ports along the northern coast of Spain for American privateers. The American ships could

trade the booty from their privateering for military supplies for the war effort, and Gardoqui and Sons would launder the transactions.

### *Spain Enters the War*

In January 1779, General Washington wrote to Congress that “it is not only possible but probable the affairs in Europe may take a turn which will compel [Britain] to abandon America. The interposition of Spain and the union of her maritime force to that of France would probably have this effect.”

The Count of Floridablanca made a final attempt to negotiate a settlement with Britain. He wanted the British to agree to return Gibraltar, Menorca and Florida, evacuate the illegal settlements in Central America, and cease the war against the United States and France, but his efforts were rebuffed.

In April 1779, Spain signed the Treaty of Aranjuez with France. France agreed to help in the capture of Gibraltar, Menorca and Florida, and in return, Spain would aid France in the war with Britain. Spain and France agreed that French forces would fight in the United States and in her waters, while Spanish forces would only attack British possessions outside of the United States. Spain did not want to be seen as directly assisting a British colony in revolting against its mother country. They feared the repercussions with their own colonies.

In June 1779, Spain declared war on Britain under the terms of the treaty with France. France agreed to not sign a peace treaty until Spain recovered Gibraltar, and Britain recognized the independence of United States. The combined Franco-Spanish navies gave the allies numerical superiority over the British Navy.

In July 1779, the Spanish and French began the siege of Gibraltar, which lasted until the end of the war. The Spanish Navy sent forces to defend Havana and the French West Indies, freeing up the French Navy to land troops in the United States.

Bernardo de Gálvez immediately launched an attack on Baton Rouge and Natchez on the east bank of the Mississippi and captured them in September 1779. He then turned his attention to the Gulf Coast, capturing Mobile in March 1780. Bernardo de Gálvez was promoted to field marshal, and was given command of Spanish forces in the American theater.

In January 1780, Admiral George Rodney's relief force bound for Gibraltar was intercepted by a smaller Spanish force under Lt. General Juan de Lángara at Cape Santa Maria, off the coast of Portugal. Rodney defeated the Spanish, but Lángara fought to the bitter end and managed to destroy 1/3 of Rodney's force before being forced to surrender. The damaged fleet was not able to lift the siege of Gibraltar. The British repeatedly sent supplies to Gibraltar, but never had sufficient forces to lift the siege. This wasted naval resources that could have been used against the United States.

In April 1780, Spain sent a fleet from Cádiz to reinforce General Gálvez.

In August 1780, the British sent a large fleet of 63 ships to the West Indies with soldiers and armaments. The fleet was lightly defended, and was surprised by a Franco-Spanish fleet led by Lt. General Luis de Córdoba. The fleet was captured and brought to Cádiz, resulting in a loss to Britain of 1.5 million pounds sterling.

In August 1780, King Carlos III issued a royal order calling on his subjects in the Americas to voluntarily donate 1 *peso* per Indian and 2 *pesos* per Spaniard to the war effort. Spanish subjects in the future states of California, Arizona, New Mexico and Texas, as well as the rest of the Spanish empire in the Americas made the donation. Father Junípero Serra in Alta California collected the *donativo* from the missions, and used church funds to pay it for those who were unable to pay.

The King also asked the church in Spain to donate or loan money for the war effort. The cathedrals of Toledo and Malaga, and perhaps others, gave money to the King for the war.

In March 1781, General Gálvez besieged Pensacola in West Florida, and two months later the British surrendered the town. By sweeping the British from the Mississippi and the northern gulf coast, Gálvez prevented the British from encircling the Americans and attacking from the west.

From August to November 1781, the Spanish Fleet guarded the French West Indies, permitting French Admiral de Grasse to take his entire fleet to Yorktown. When the fleet arrived at Havana, the 1 million *pesos* promised by the government of New Spain for the supplies and Continental Army payroll had not yet arrived. Francisco Miranda raised 500,000 *pesos* in six hours from the merchants of Havana so the fleet could continue on to Yorktown. Admiral de Grasse defeated the relief fleet of Sir Thomas Graves, which prevented the escape

of Lord Cornwallis by sea. In October 1781, Lord Cornwallis was forced to surrender his army.

While Spain was occupied with the war effort, a revolt broke out in Venezuela, Colombia and Peru. As a result, Spain had to divert troops that were going to be used to attack St. Augustine, and retake East Florida.

When Britain offered Menorca to Russia in an effort to draw Russia and other European nations into the war, France and Spain sent a combined fleet to Menorca and surprised the British defenders. The island's Spanish population refused to help the British, and the island was captured in 1782.

Spain's fleet attacked the British West Indies and the British in Central America, forcing the British to divert forces to defend their possessions.

Bernardo de Gálvez' father, Matías de Gálvez, was the Captain General of Guatemala, which at that time included most of Central America. The British had illegal settlements on the Caribbean coast of Central America for extracting timber and smuggling operations. Once war was declared, Matías de Gálvez attacked the British settlements, forcing the British to divert resources to defend their settlements.

In May 1782, Manuel de Cagigal led an attack on the Bahamas, and succeeded in recapturing the islands for Spain without a fight. This was in violation of the orders of Bernardo de Gálvez, and forced Gálvez to abandon the Franco-Spanish invasion of Jamaica due to insufficient forces.

In January 1783, there was an armistice leading to the Treaty of Paris of 1783, in which Great Britain recognized the independence of the United States. Britain signed separate peace treaties with Spain, France and Holland. Spain recovered West Florida, East Florida, and Menorca, while surrendering the Bahamas and allowing British enclaves on the Belize River in Central America – later to become British Honduras.

### *Conclusions*

Spain contributed to the American Revolution from the onset by secretly providing money, gunpowder and supplies to the Americans. This assistance was

desperately needed to maintain the struggle for independence against the vast resources of the British Empire.

Once Spain was assured that it was in the strongest position with respect to Great Britain, after its dispute with Portugal was resolved, and after all attempts to reach a diplomatic solution failed, Spain entered the war as an ally of France. Spain used its military in conjunction with the French to attack the British on the Mississippi, in the Gulf of Mexico, in the Caribbean, in Central America, and in the Western Mediterranean. By attacking the British in many theaters, the Spanish prevented the British from bringing sufficient force to bear against the Americans.

Perhaps one reason why this assistance has been largely forgotten is Spain's refusal to openly support the United States and recognize the independence prior to 1783. Clearly Spain, one of the world's largest colonial powers, had a lot to lose by openly supporting colonial revolution in Britain's colonies. Also, once the United States replaced Britain on the Spanish Empire's northeastern border, future conflict was inevitable.

On an interesting note, Marcos Marreno, the Spanish Ambassador to London, reported to José de Gálvez, the Minister of the Indies (the uncle of Bernardo de Gálvez), in 1778 that the American "rebels were not the type of people one normally associates with revolutions, but were the natural leaders of the colonies."

## SAR TRIP TO SPAIN, 2010

May 12 – Guided tour of Madrid – Prado Museum, Royal Palace, Armory, Old Quarter

May 13 – Meeting with Vice Mayor of El Escorial, Tour of El Escorial, Wreath Laying at Tomb of Carlos III

May 14 – Royal Audience with Prince Felipe, Meeting with Ambassador Solomont

May 15 – Fiesta of San Isidro, Dinner with Marques de Legarda at Gran Pena Club

May 16 – Guided tour of Toledo – Jewish Quarter, Santa Maria la Blanca Synagoge, Santo Tome Church, Monastery of San Juan de Los Reyes, Cathedral of Toledo

May 17 – Tour of Naval Museum, Founding of Spain Society at Iglesia de San Jorge

May 18 – Post Trip to Macharaviaya (Hometown of Galvez) for town fiesta, visit Nereo shipyards to see construction of brig *Galveztown*, visit Hall of Mirrors at Malaga town hall to meet with Cultural Minister, visit Malaga Cathedral (One Armed Lady)

May 19 – Trip to Gibraltar

May 20 – Tour of Malaga

# SPANISH LEADERS DURING THE WAR FOR AMERICAN INDEPENDENCE



**JOSÉ MOÑINO Y REDONDO,**  
CONDE DE FLORIDABLANCA  
CHIEF MINISTER OF SPAIN  
(1728-1808)



**CARLOS III, KING OF SPAIN**  
(1716-1788)



**PEDRO PABLO ABARCA DE BOLEA,**  
CONDE DE ARANDA  
SPANISH AMBASSADOR TO FRANCE  
(1719-1798)



**DIEGO MARÍA DE**  
GARDOQUI Y ARRIQUIBAR,  
MERCHANT IN BILBAO  
(1735-1798)



**FRANCISCO SAAVEDRA DE**  
SANGRONIS,  
SPECIAL AGENT OF CARLOS III  
(1746-1819)



**MATIAS DE GALVEZ Y**  
GALLARDO,  
CAPTAIN GENERAL OF  
GUATEMALA  
(1725-1784)

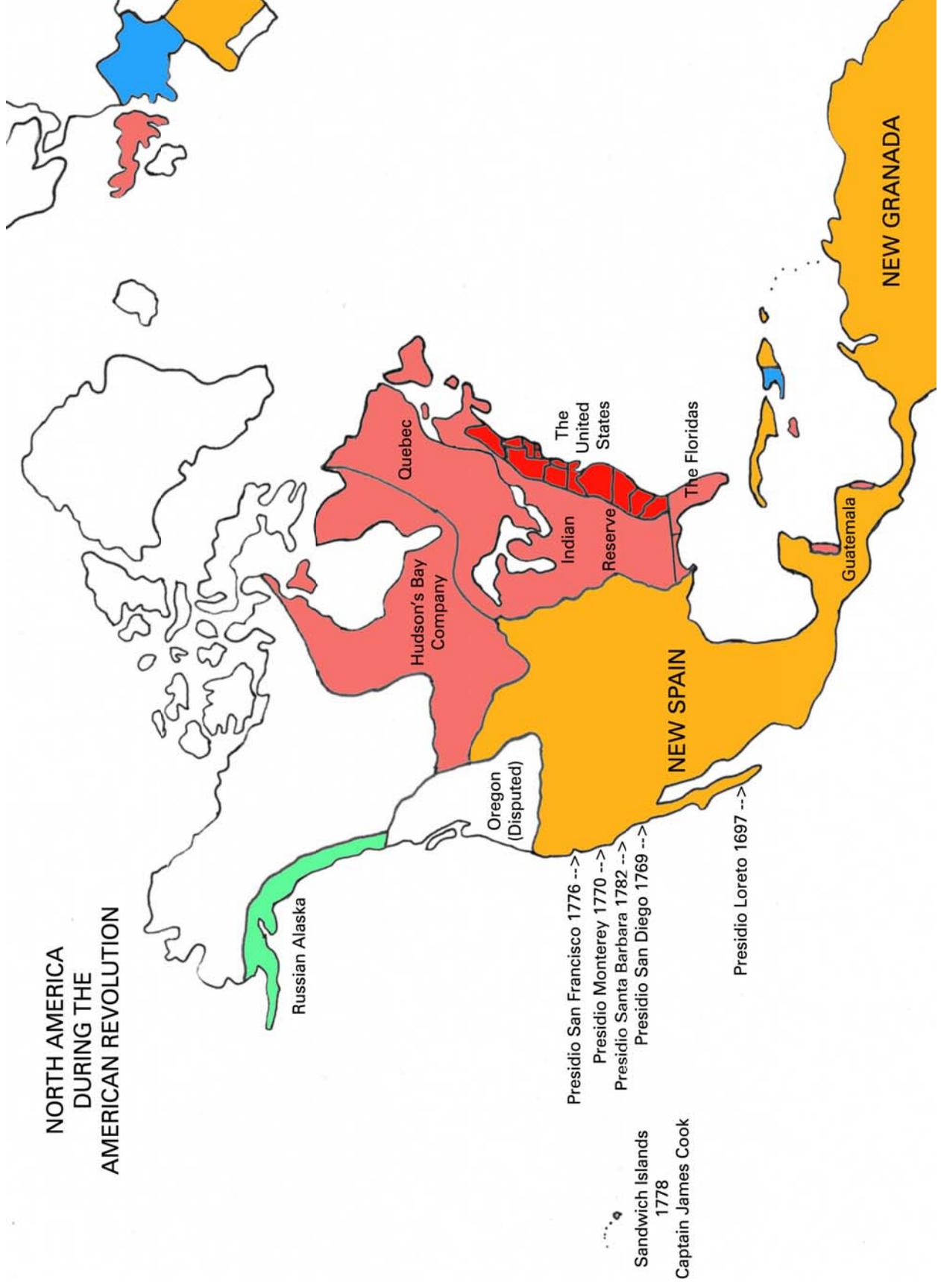


**BERNARDO DE GÁLVEZ Y MADRID,**  
GOVERNOR OF LOUISIANA  
(1746-1786)



**JOSE DE GALVEZ Y**  
GALLARDO,  
MINISTER OF THE INDIES  
(1720-1787)

**NORTH AMERICA  
DURING THE  
AMERICAN REVOLUTION**



Presidio San Francisco 1776 -->  
 Presidio Monterey 1770 -->  
 Presidio Santa Barbara 1782 -->  
 Presidio San Diego 1769 -->  
 Presidio Loreto 1697 -->

Sandwich Islands  
 1778  
 Captain James Cook

# SONS OF THE AMERICAN REVOLUTION TRIP TO SPAIN



SAR and Granaderos de Galvez Meet with Crown Prince Felipe of Spain



Wreath at Tomb of King Carlos III at El Escorial



PG Butler inducts new Spain Society President



President General Butler Meets with US Ambassador Solomont in Madrid

