

Alex Blaa

*A Costly Mindset:
British Overconfidence in the Struggle for Florida
during the American Revolution*

ABSTRACT: *This article examines the factors that led to Florida's transfer from British to Spanish control during the American Revolution. It touches on the overconfidence of British Secretary of State for the North American Colonies, Lord George Germain, the leadership of Spanish Governor Bernardo de Gálvez of Louisiana and British Major General John Campbell, as well as supply and logistics issues that Florida was facing. The Battle of Pensacola (1781) was the climax of an important campaign that pushed Britain out of the Gulf of Mexico, setting the stage for later naval endeavors during the Revolutionary War.*

KEYWORDS: *American colonial history; American Revolution; Florida; Spain; Great Britain; Siege of Pensacola (1781); George Germain; John Campbell; Bernardo de Gálvez; Colonial Office 5 series*

Introduction

Following their critical victory at the Battle of Yorktown (September 28-October 19, 1781), the rebellious North American colonists, along with their French allies, forced the British government to recognize their independence. The thirteen colonies formed a new nation, the United States of America. However, France was not the only European power to have aided the colonies in their rebellion. Spain was also an important and often underappreciated player in the war. In fact, one of the most crucial conflicts of the American Revolution did not even involve the Continental Army or George Washington. Instead, Britain and Spain waged the battle for control of the seemingly insignificant and far-off colony of Florida. Britain's defeat at the Siege of Pensacola (March 9-May 8/10, 1781) and subsequent loss of Florida had significant repercussions. Historians have largely ignored these repercussions, and thus they remain underexamined. In the end, the loss of Pensacola and all of the ills that stemmed from it for the British were avoidable. This article argues that the arrogance and ignorance of the Secretary of State for the American Colonies, Lord George Germain (1716-1785), was the most significant factor contributing to the British defeat. Another factor was the boldness and leadership of Spanish Governor Bernardo de Gálvez (1746-1786) of Louisiana. Taken together, these two factors brought about the fall of Pensacola with all its consequences for the British Empire.

Put into a larger context, this article addresses an extensively debated question, namely: How did the British lose the war for America? It is influenced primarily by Andrew Jackson O'Shaughnessy's 2013 monograph, *The Men Who Lost America: British Leadership, the American Revolution, and the Fate of the Empire*.¹ O'Shaughnessy, a historian at the University of Virginia, argues that it was not the

¹ Andrew Jackson O'Shaughnessy, *The Men Who Lost America: British Leadership, the American Revolution, and the Fate of the Empire* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013).

incompetence of their officers in America, such as Generals Howe, Clinton, Burgoyne, and Cornwallis, that led to the British defeat, but rather the “insufficient resources, the unanticipated lack of loyalist support, and the popularity of the revolution.”² He uses arrogance as an analytical lens, but it is not at the heart of his central claim, which is where his work differs from this article. O’Shaughnessy does not explicitly name arrogance as a reason for Florida’s fall; instead, he characterizes Germain’s displays of arrogance as military blunders.³

O’Shaughnessy’s fairly recent study (2013) has not been the only one to offer explanations for Britain’s loss of the thirteen colonies. O’Shaughnessy mentions the frustration that General William Howe (1729-1814) displayed toward Germain and the British government, framing the government as incompetent and out of touch with the situation in the colonies.⁴ In his 1965 article, “Lord Howe and Lord George Germain, British Politics and the Winning of American Independence,” American military historian Ira D. Gruber proposes a more nefarious rationale, accusing King George III (r. 1760-1820) and Prime Minister Lord Frederick North (in office 1770-1782) of attempting to use the crisis in America to gain despotic control over Parliament.⁵ Thus, published almost fifty years apart from each other, Gruber’s and O’Shaughnessy’s works suggest rather different interpretations of the same events.

Published one year before Gruber’s article, Oxford scholar Piers Mackesy’s 1964 book, *The War for America: 1775-1783*, criticizes the assessment of the American Revolution by British military historian Sir John Fortescue (1859-1933) and those following in Fortescue’s footsteps who, according to Mackesy, had ascribed the conflict’s outcome to Germain’s folly and ignorance.⁶ Mackesy, it must be noted, does not address Florida or the Battle of Pensacola in his work, even though the latter actually feature Germain’s most blatant displays of arrogance. Omitting this incident, whether intentional or unintentional, alters one’s perception of the role Germain played with regard to the British losses. O’Shaughnessy’s study has not escaped criticism either: in her 2015 University of Georgia PhD dissertation, Ashley D. Allred points to the fact that O’Shaughnessy’s work does not sufficiently take into account the British Army’s extreme and brutal violence against the rebellious colonists in South Carolina, which she considers a significant reason why the local loyalists did not support the British more than

² O’Shaughnessy, *Men Who Lost America*, 353.

³ O’Shaughnessy, *Men Who Lost America*, 346.

⁴ O’Shaughnessy, *Men Who Lost America*, 119.

⁵ Ira D. Gruber, “Lord Howe and Lord George Germain, British Politics and the Winning of American Independence,” *The William and Mary Quarterly* 22, no. 2 (1965): 225-243, here 233; Matthew H. Spring, *With Zeal and with Bayonets Only: the British Army on Campaign in North America, 1775-1783* (2008; Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2012), 4.

⁶ Piers Mackesy, *The War for America: 1775-1783* (1964; Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1993), xxiii.

they did.⁷ The British mistreatment of and disrespect toward the Indigenous played a similar role in the fall of Florida and the victory of Spain. This article agrees that the British officers were not responsible for the loss, but contends that O'Shaughnessy's work does not sufficiently consider Germain's willful ignorance as a factor that contributed to the loss of the American colonies.

This article applies both a military history and an economic history lens. To address the theme of arrogance, it analyzes correspondence between Major General John Campbell (1727-1806), the British commander during the Siege of Pensacola, and Germain, as well as secondary sources that demonstrate that the latter's arrogance there was not an isolated incident. For the prelude to the Siege of Pensacola, it utilizes accounts by both Germain and Campbell to describe key moments as well as the role the Indigenous played in the outcome. Most of the documents analyzed below have been accessed via the Adam Matthew Colonial America database⁸ which contains digitized materials from the Colonial Office 5 series of the National Archives, Kew, England,⁹ among them essential first-hand accounts by both Campbell and Germain. Finally, with regard to the consequences of the British defeat at Pensacola, which strengthened Spain's position in the region, quantitative data reveal the economic importance of the West Indies (i.e., the Caribbean) to the British. To tie this event into the overall narrative of the American Revolution, this article examines how the outcome of the Battle of Pensacola affected the birth and early foreign policy of the United States.

I. Florida in Context

To the British Empire, Florida was more important in a strategic sense than it was economically viable. Florida had remained under Spain's control until the end of the Seven Years War (1756-1763) when possession of the colony transferred to Great Britain as part of the Treaty of Paris (1763), which ended the war with Spain and France.¹⁰ However, after taking control of the colony, Britain realized that Florida cost more to maintain than it generated in revenue. Unlike other colonies, such as the Carolinas and New England, which offered exports that were crucial to Britain's economy, including timber and clothing dyes, Florida did not feature any important articles of export. What Florida did provide was an important buffer to resist Spanish expansion in the region. Thus, despite the economic drain,

⁷ Ashley Dee Allred, "A Strategy Gone South: The British, the Backcountry, and Violence in Revolutionary South Carolina" (PhD diss., University of Georgia, 2015), 58.

⁸ Access to this database is by subscription only, which is why all subsequent citations from this database contain the respective shelfmark used in the National Archives, Kew, England.

⁹ The National Archives, Kew, England, CO (Colonial Office) 5 (Board of Trade and Secretaries of State: America and West Indies, Original Correspondence), 1606-1822, accessed May 18, 2020; hereafter cited as "CO 5."

¹⁰ "The definitive Treaty of Peace and Friendship between his Britannick Majesty, the Most Christian King, and the King of Spain. Concluded at Paris the 10th day of February, 1763," accessed May 18, 2020.

the protection from a potential Spanish attack in the Gulf of Mexico was worth the cost, and the British Crown continued to subsidize the colony.¹¹ This role of Florida as a buffer for the North American holdings explains why Britain was committed to its defense despite its lack of value on the surface. Central to Florida's defenses was the fort at Pensacola, located on Florida's western Gulf coast, and if any European rivals wished to control Florida they had to conquer Pensacola first.

In 1966, librarian Nixon Orwin Rush published the first comprehensive work entirely devoted to the Battle of Pensacola.¹² Rush blames the failure at Pensacola on British Major General John Campbell. Campbell was a veteran of the French and Indian War (1754-1763), as well as the commander of the 57th Regiment stationed in North America. When the British government recognized that Florida was at risk of a Spanish attack, Lord Germain ordered Campbell to take command of the troops stationed at Florida. Rush accuses Campbell of being cowardly and simply unwilling to fight back because he was displeased about the conditions in Florida.¹³ Yet other scholars have depicted Campbell differently. Larrie D. Ferreiro, a historian of engineering, quotes a letter in which Campbell states that he would "defend this post to the last."¹⁴ O'Shaughnessy, though briefly, also mentions the battle of Pensacola and blames Germain for mistakenly putting excessive expectations on Campbell. Historian Kathleen DuVal disagrees with Rush, claims that neither side saw the Siege of Pensacola as an important battle at the time, and thus blames its fall on a lack of interest on the part of the Europeans, stating that neither Britain nor Spain recognized Florida's importance.¹⁵

On the other hand, Rush praises Spanish Governor Bernardo de Gálvez of Louisiana. After serving in the Spanish military against Portugal, Gálvez had been sent to Mexico in 1762 and had fought against the Indigenous in the area. Though he sustained many wounds throughout his military career, he was able to work his way up until he was appointed Governor of Louisiana in 1776. Rush lauds Gálvez for his leadership skills, his ability to coordinate an amphibious assault on Florida, and his compassion toward his men and captured prisoners alike.¹⁶ While Germain's overconfidence and Campbell's unpreparedness created an exploitable weakness, scholars should not overlook Gálvez's leadership and boldness. The conquest of Pensacola granted Gálvez much prestige, as well as the honor of

¹¹ Paul E. Hoffman, *Florida's Frontiers* (2001; Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2002), 227-228.

¹² 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).

¹³ Rush, *Spain's Final Triumph*, 21.

¹⁴ Quoted in Larrie D. Ferreiro, *Brothers at Arms: American Independence and the Men of France and Spain Who Saved It* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2016), 251.

¹⁵ Kathleen DuVal, *Independence Lost: Lives on the Edge of the American Revolution* (New York: Random House, 2015), 189.

¹⁶ Rush, *Spain's Final Triumph*, 18.

acquiring the honorific motto *Yo Solo* (“I alone”) for his coat of arms, which served as a reminder to future generations of the bravery of their ancestor.¹⁷

King Carlos III of Spain (r. 1759-1788) was not sympathetic to the American Revolution. He saw a free and independent United States as a significant threat to Spain’s colonial ambitions, and thus did not intend to get involved.¹⁸ However, Carlos III did see the American Revolution as an opportunity to “eliminate the British presence in the Gulf of Mexico and the Caribbean.”¹⁹ Gálvez was eagerly awaiting his opportunity to strike against Britain. Unlike his king, though, Gálvez was sympathetic to the American cause and provided much needed weapons and financial support, sometimes without Carlos III’s knowledge.²⁰ Despite Carlos III’s fear of what an independent United States could mean to Spain’s imperial ambitions, his disdain for the British proved to outweigh the risks. Their victory in the Seven Years War and subsequent massive territorial gains had made the British massively unpopular among their European rivals. When the American Revolution broke out, Spain saw the perfect opportunity to take revenge.

II. The Siege of Pensacola

When the threat of Spanish intervention increased, following the French support for the American Revolution, Lord Germain dispatched Major General Campbell to Florida to reinforce and take command of the British garrison that was stationed there. Unlike his eventual adversary Bernardo de Gálvez, Campbell’s approach was more cautious and meticulous. After arriving in Florida, Campbell immediately wrote to Germain, informing his superior that he was “extremely concerned [...] [about the] improbability of executing [Germain’s orders].”²¹ He also mentioned the “ruinous state” of the quarters for a commanding officer, describing them with the sardonic description of “a great omen.”²² Campbell’s reaction demonstrates that he was fully aware of the frustrating situation that he was facing. If a letter from Patrick Tonyn, the British Governor of Florida, which suggested the exact opposite of Campbell’s assessment had not arrived on Germain’s desk first, Campbell’s warnings might have been able to convince

¹⁷ Steven Otfinoski *The New Republic* (Singapore: Marshall Cavendish, 2008), 16.

¹⁸ Willis Fletcher Johnson, *The History of Cuba, Volume Two* (New York: B. F. Buck & Company, Inc., 1920), 138, 142, 145-146.

¹⁹ Jose I. Yaniz, “The Role of Spain in the American Revolution: An Unavoidable Strategic Mistake” (M. Military Studies thesis, United States Marine Corps University, Quantico, 2009), 3.

²⁰ Paul Chrisler Phillips, “The West in the Diplomacy of the American Revolution” (PhD diss., University of Illinois, 1911; published 1913, University of Illinois Studies in the Social Sciences, vol. 2, nos. 2 and 3), 53.

²¹ “John Campbell describes the poor conditions and lack of money and provisions in Pensacola, with enclosures of petitions and correspondence to Campbell,” January 3-March 22, 1779, CO 5/597 pt 1, 9-10.

²² “John Campbell reporting on the work he is doing in West Florida, including arranging fortifications and requesting supplies and labour, and increased naval defence,” April 15-May 10, 1779, CO 5/597 pt 1, 70.

Germain of the “improbability” of the situation. Tonym’s letter stated that “[Spain’s] season for active service must be so far advanced before they could [attack Pensacola].”²³ This phrase, a “season for active service,” denoted the time of year when armies were recruiting most of their soldiers. Thus, Tonym was suggesting that Spain’s army was too small to pose a threat to Florida at the time. Receiving such a letter from Florida probably reassured Germain into thinking that Campbell was simply exaggerating and in no significant danger. According to O’Shaughnessy, Germain “has been accused of misplaced optimism that verged on the realm of fantasy,” and therefore a letter like Tonym’s would have convinced him that Florida would face little difficulty defending itself against Spain despite Campbell’s concerns.²⁴

Seemingly determined to ensure that Germain would comprehend his assessment of the situation, Campbell sent several additional letters. He insisted that he needed more supplies to aid his defense of Florida. In one such letter, Campbell mentioned that the provisions that were supposed to arrive in Florida were “totally destroyed.”²⁵ One notable aspect of this particular letter that indicates Campbell’s assessment of his dire situation is that he wrote it, in his own words, “without ceremony.”²⁶ In those days, when generals corresponded with high-ranking government officials, their letters usually featured an introductory paragraph of praise for their lord and an indication that they had received a previous letter. Meanwhile, Campbell’s letter in question is devoid of this traditional hallmark of pleasantries and opens with a desperate call for assistance. For someone like Campbell, whose previous correspondence had always begun with a paragraph or more of flattery, to begin a letter to Germain like this is a testimony to just how concerned he was about the situation. In his next letter, Campbell acknowledged the frequency with which he was writing to Germain: “I presume to trouble your lordship with [the frequency of] these letters,” and went on to say that he was forced to “guarantee [the arrival of provisions] the morning after [they were supposed to arrive], stating the number of days [in] which each article of provisions [...] will reach [Pensacola].”²⁷ In other words, Campbell found himself forced to deceive his men and claim that more provisions would arrive so that his men would not lose morale or faith. Yet, despite the overburdened Major General’s concerns, Germain decided to add even more pressure.

²³ “Patrick Tonym’s letter to Lord Germain (no. 110), acknowledging his receipt of copies of Germain’s speech at the meeting of the new Parliament,” March 7, 1781, CO 5/560, 80.

²⁴ O’Shaughnessy, *Men Who Lost America*, 187.

²⁵ “John Campbell relates the lack of supplies reaching Pensacola and the dearth of flour in particular and his attempted mediation of affairs in the Indian Department following the death of the superintendent there,” March 12-April 7, 1779, CO 5/597 pt 1, 161.

²⁶ “John Campbell on provisions being provided to West Florida,” October 31, 1779-July 28, 1780, CO 5/597 pt 1, 361.

²⁷ “John Campbell on provisions being provided to West Florida,” October 31, 1779-July 28, 1780, CO 5/597 pt 1, 369, 381.

On November 1, 1780, Germain sent secret instructions for Campbell to launch a surprise attack against New Orleans,²⁸ an idea that had been in the works for some time. Back in 1776, a British soldier by the name of Robert White had addressed a comprehensive plan to Germain as to how to reduce the Spanish presence in the region, stating “First, annihilate, universally, the Spanish Dominion in America.”²⁹ This quote demonstrates a possible motive for Germain’s mindset when he finally decided to order Campbell to strike against New Orleans, disregarding Campbell’s protestations that this would be a mistake. Fortune was on Gálvez’s side, though, as he managed to intercept Germain’s letter to Campbell. The latter then reported that “information has reached [Gálvez] by way of Indians from Orleans and great preparations are being made for the attack on Pensacola, that every person capable of bearing arms [should be] rushing to join the expedition.”³⁰ If Germain had assessed the situation more carefully and realistically, Campbell might have been able to prepare his reinforcements gradually over time. White’s 1776 plan, however, had spurred Germain on and had convinced him that the only way to push Spain out of the region was to, in White’s words, “annihilate, universally, the Spanish Dominion in America.”³¹ Upon intercepting Germain’s letter, Gálvez was convinced that his position in Louisiana was at risk, and he reacted immediately. Once the “secret” British operation had been thwarted, the situation forced Campbell to reinforce Florida even more extensively and more quickly than before. Ever since the Battle of Baton Rouge on September 21, 1779, Gálvez had already been conducting a brilliant campaign, rapidly gaining control of the Mississippi Territory and pushing Britain back into Florida.³² At that time, Campbell had to report “the conquest of the western port of the province by the armies of Spain in consequence of their early intelligence of the commencement [of the attack on New Orleans].”³³

Despite this frustrating situation, Germain assured Campbell that Fort Mobile and Fort Charlotte (both near today’s Mobile, Alabama) would hold until reinforcements would arrive: “Indeed, I am not without hope that Don Gálvez will

²⁸ “George Germain informs John Campbell of a plan to attack New Orleans using reinforcements from Jamaica,” November 1, 1780, CO 5/597 pt 2, 465, 467.

²⁹ “Robert White to George Germain with a plan to reduce Spanish America, should Britain go to war with Spain,” December 9, 1776, CO 5/155, Part 1, 2.

³⁰ “John Campbell relates intelligence from New Orleans of the Spanish preparing men to take arms against the British, the lack of response regarding reinforcements from Peter Parker and John Dalling, and the safe arrival of food supplies; includes a report on Fort Charlotte’s capitulation,” September 22, 1780, CO 5/597 pt 2, 279.

³¹ “Robert White to George Germain with a plan to reduce Spanish America, should Britain go to war with Spain,” December 9, 1776, CO 5/155, Part 1, 2.

³² “George Germain reacts to the news of the Spanish victory in the south, and discusses the defence of Pensacola and other areas with John Campbell,” April 4, 1780, CO 5/597 pt 1, 15.

³³ “John Campbell describes territory lost to the Spanish, and an altercation at sea in which men were lost and taken prisoner,” September 21-December 15, 1779, CO 5/597 pt 1, 115.

find it difficult to continue his garrison at [Fort] Mobile.”³⁴ Luck was with the British for once, as the Spanish held off their initial attack on Florida because they received incorrect information that the British forces were to receive reinforcements.³⁵ When the Spanish finally arrived in Florida, Campbell reported that “[the Spanish] had already thrown up trenches of near a mile in length sufficiently deep to cover and protect them from our cannon,” and went on to state that “The fire from which [i.e., the cannon] however together with that of our howitzers greatly disturbed and [held] them in the north during the day.”³⁶ This report demonstrates that Campbell was certainly not planning to surrender without a fight. On the contrary, despite all of the misfortunes and lack of preparations Campbell had had to endure, he put considerable effort into the defense of Pensacola. However, the British soldiers that were fighting under Campbell were experiencing a steady drop in morale, so much so, that Campbell ordered, in an official proclamation, to “engage and give all due obedience to the orders of the general officer,” threatening “corporal punishment agreeable to the [...] law.”³⁷ The battle’s decisive moment was yet another stroke of luck for the Spanish, namely, when a misfired cannonball hit a large gunpowder keg, the latter exploded and blew a large hole into the wall of the fort, allowing Gálvez to send soldiers in and quickly force surrender.³⁸ The Siege of Pensacola ended on May 8, 1781, and two days later, on May 10, 1781, the British troops left the fort. Britain had been eclipsed by Spain in Florida after a year and eight months. And Gálvez had reclaimed Spain’s glory after the humiliating defeat it had suffered at the hands of Britain eighteen years earlier.

Spain and Britain were the main combatants, but their soldiers were not the only forces in the struggle for Florida: the colony’s Indigenous population also played a part. During the colonial period of North America, forming alliances with the Indigenous was a central aspect of policy. From the original landing at Plymouth Rock, the Indigenous had a critical role in the establishment of the colonies, as well as their European proxy conflicts. Both the British and Spanish armies relied on the Indigenous to supplement their numbers, and thus the latter’s loyalty was crucial. The Europeans in the New World used gift-giving to initiate alliances with the Indigenous and ensure their continued support. In a letter dated

³⁴ “George Germain writes that he believes the defences at Pensacola and their alliance with the Creek Indians will continue to deter the Spanish,” November 1, 1780, CO 5/597 pt 2, 236.

³⁵ “Letter from John Campbell confirming that an invasion by Spain has not happened yet and the need for further supplies,” February 15, 1781, CO 5/239, 88, 89.

³⁶ “Letters from John Campbell regarding Pensacola’s bombardment by both Spain and France and the surrender of Fort George to Spain,” May 7-12, 1781, CO 5/239, 213.

³⁷ “A proclamation by Major General John Campbell, commanding His Majesty’s forces in West Florida,” September 12, 1779, CO 5/598, 49.

³⁸ William S. Coker and Robert R. Rea, “Introduction,” in *Anglo-Spanish Confrontation on the Gulf Coast during the American Revolution*, ed. William S. Coker and Robert R. Rea (Pensacola: Gulf Coast History and Humanities Conference, 1982), viii.

July 22, 1780, Campbell mentioned “a great deal of uncertainty and anxiety” regarding his alliance with the local Creek Indigenous.³⁹ It was a disastrous turning point for the Anglo-Creek relationship when, one year earlier, in 1779, the *Earl Bathurst*, a ship carrying supplies for the local Indigenous, arrived and its goods turned out to be of such poor quality that the Indigenous actually turned against the British when the Spanish attack on Pensacola finally began.⁴⁰ In *Independence Lost: Lives on the Edge of the American Revolution* (2015), Kathleen DuVal discusses this crucial change in allegiance, arguing that Campbell could have done more to unify the Indigenous and strengthen their alliance with the British.⁴¹

III. Missed Opportunities

Even though Major General John Campbell was unprepared and ill supplied, there were two opportunities available to him that he missed. Unbeknownst to Campbell, Bernardo de Gálvez and his admiral, José Calvo de Irazábal, repeatedly disagreed over the most effective way to attack Pensacola. The impatient Gálvez took matters into his own hands and personally led four small ships past a British heavy anti-ship cannon that was positioned on the Red Cliffs battery. Though successful, the incident created a rift between Gálvez and his admiral. This rift only widened when Gálvez insinuated that Calvo de Irazábal was cowardly for not pressing on when Gálvez had ordered it before continuing his attack.⁴²

The second missed opportunity is that Campbell could not utilize the Indigenous to their full potential due to the *Earl Bathurst* supply ship fiasco. The Creek Indigenous realized that they could gain superior supplies by allying with Spain instead of Britain.⁴³ The Indigenous’ switch of allegiance was a major factor in Britain’s final defeat. In a letter to Campbell dated November 1, 1780, Lord Germain had mentioned a previous incident when the “Creek Indians had come to your assistance [and] deterred Don Gálvez and the Spanish [...] from making their intended attack.”⁴⁴ Thus, if Germain had supplied Campbell and his

³⁹ “John Campbell discusses the nature of the Indian Department and trade with groups such as the Creeks, and the defence of Pensacola and the reinforcements to be sent to them,” July 22, 1780, CO 5/597 pt 2, 223.

⁴⁰ “Letters from Brigadier General Campbell regarding the destruction of a ship of provisions and non-arrival of two others, delay of his travel to the Mississippi due to illness and land for the situation of a fort,” April 7-May 10, 1779, CO 5/237, 230.

⁴¹ DuVal, *Independence Lost*, 164-165, 194-196.

⁴² Eric Beerman, “José Solano and the Spanish Navy at the Siege of Pensacola,” in *Anglo-Spanish Confrontation on the Gulf Coast during the American Revolution*, ed. William S. Coker and Robert R. Rea (Pensacola: Gulf Coast History and Humanities Conference, 1982), 125-143, here 130-133.

⁴³ “John Campbell on the situation in the south, including relations with Indian tribes like the Choctaws in the aftermath of the Spanish having wrested territory from the British,” February 10-March 23, 1780, CO 5/597 pt 1, 125, 127.

⁴⁴ “George Germain writes that he believes the defences at Pensacola and their alliance with the Creek Indians will continue to deter the Spanish,” November 1, 1780, CO 5/597 pt 2, 232.

Indigenous allies with better provisions, Spain might not have been able to sway the Creek Indigenous. With these additional allies who were familiar with Florida's terrain, Campbell might have been able to turn the tide. Instead, the Creek Indigenous turned their backs on Britain in favor of a better deal from Spain.

Tying the events in Florida to the larger war occurring in the North American colonies, having a Spanish-occupied mainland location near the Atlantic Ocean allowed Spain to send ships to attack Britain elsewhere. This is important, considering that one of the main reasons why Washington was successful at Yorktown was due to the absence of the British navy. Washington himself recognized this, stating that Spain could well afford "to transfer the naval war [that Spain was fighting with the British in the Atlantic] to America."⁴⁵ Britain relied heavily on its navy to supplement its army. Without it, the Americans and their allied armies were able to prevail. In order to keep soldiers from deserting at such a crucial stage in the war, Spain also provided funds for the American army to use to pay for supplies and their soldiers' wages.⁴⁶ Spain's attack on Florida and subsequent naval attacks against the British were vital distractions for the massive navy that Britain had at its disposal. The Spanish had entered the war in 1779, two years before Yorktown, and the war was becoming costlier and more humiliating every year. Ultimately, Spain (and France) joined the negotiators' table when Britain and newly recognized United States signed the Treaty of Paris in 1783.

While Spain's actions were helpful to the rebellious colonists during the final stages of the American Revolution, it was the reclaiming of Florida that gave Spain the means to hurt Britain much more severely elsewhere. With the acquisition of Florida, Spain was in perfect striking range of the West Indies. The West Indian islands of Antigua, Jamaica, Dominica, Grenada, St. Christopher, Nevis, Montserrat, St. Vincent, Tortola, and Barbados were producing 80,285 tons of sugar for Great Britain on an annual basis.⁴⁷ From its base in Florida, Spain now had the opportunity to steal these vast quantities of sugar.⁴⁸ Since its discovery as a flavor enhancer and its role in making rum, sugar had become an invaluable resource for Europeans. If Spain managed to take even a few of the West Indian islands for itself, its revenue based on sugar would increase tremendously. According to Alan Taylor, the "British valued their West Indian colonies more than anything on the North American continent."⁴⁹ In other words, the British

⁴⁵ Quoted in Howard Lee Landers, *The Virginia Campaign and the Blockade and Siege of Yorktown, 1781: Including a Brief Narrative of the French Participation in the Revolution prior to the Southern Campaign* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1931), 131.

⁴⁶ John D. Grainger, *The Battle of Yorktown, 1781: A Reassessment* (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2005), 49.

⁴⁷ Richard B. Sheridan, *Sugar and Slavery: An Economic History of the British West Indies, 1623-1775* (1973; Kingston: Canoe Press, 1974), 100.

⁴⁸ Alan Taylor, *American Revolutions: A Continental History* (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 2016), 265-267.

⁴⁹ Taylor, *American Revolutions*, 284.

would have rather lost the thirteen colonies than the West Indies. The loss of Florida put Spain in a position to take the treasured tropical islands and precious sugarcane for itself. Though such an invasion of the West Indies is speculative, there is proof that Spain considered the endeavor. According to a 1781 intelligence report from Saint Croix, Spanish ships had left Pensacola and had been spotted trying to attack an island off the coast of Florida.⁵⁰ Going by the report, it is not a great leap to assume that, had Spain seen the right opportunity, it would have taken it. With the British reeling from setbacks inflicted by the rebellious American colonists and their European allies, Spain would have had the chance to add some of the tropical islands to its list of territories. Fortunately for the British, Gálvez faced a staggering distraction in the form of massive slave revolts throughout the Spanish Empire, which took priority over striking further at the British.⁵¹

Conclusion

Historians of the American Revolution have frequently cited logistical issues as the primary reason why the British lost in America. In addition, scholars have considered the arrogance on display by British leaders during this time; however, when discussing overconfidence, they have usually referred to King George III or Prime Minister Lord North, as well as some of the British generals, including Howe, Clinton, and others. O'Shaughnessy has led the charge in breaking down this accusation against the British generals, claiming that it was not their fault and that they were doing their best, given the difficult situation. This article continues with this trend of removing the blame from military leaders and placing it instead on government officials, such as Lord Germain, and their hubris.

The American Revolution was a complicated event, and it seems to become even more so as historians continue to expand our knowledge of the period. North American colonists waged the primary conflict against their British rulers, but France and Spain provided crucial assistance to the rebellious colonists. Spanish intervention was critical to the American success, but Bernardo de Gálvez is still not nearly as much of a household name as some of the war's other leaders. Because Spain did not use Florida as a launching pad for further conquests, historians have not sufficiently acknowledged the threat to British supremacy that the transfer of Florida to Spain generated. In 2014, Gálvez became the most recent of just eight individuals to be awarded honorary United States citizenship,

⁵⁰ "Copy of an Intelligence report from Santa Cruix, reporting on the positioning of various French and American ships at St Thomas's and the likelihood that they would be sailing imminently for America, on the arrival at St Thomas's of Spanish ships from Pensacola, on the movements of American, French and British forces at Rhode Island and West Point, including those of Washington., General Green and Lord Rawdon, and that the British fleet was currently cruising off Boston," July 31, 1781, GEO/ADD/15/0632, Georgian Papers Programme (online), accessed May 18, 2020: "He further adds that a few days before the fleet for St. Thomas's left the Cape, Seven Spanish Men of War had arrived there from Pensacola, which place had been taken by Storm with great loss, that the Spaniards afterwards attempted Augustine, but could not get over the Bar."

⁵¹ Taylor, *American Revolutions*, 267.

indicating that the United States government now views Gálvez as being as important to this country's history as Winston Churchill, Raoul Wallenberg, William Penn and his second wife Hannah Callowhill, Mother Teresa, the Marquis de Lafayette, and General Casimir Pulaski. As historians continue to examine the many aspects of the American Revolutionary War, the role of Spain in helping the United States emerge, albeit perhaps unwillingly, will become clearer.

Today, the United States is arguably the most powerful nation on Earth and has succeeded Great Britain as the power which claims the right to police the world. Ironically, this is what King Carlos III had foreseen in the eighteenth century, and it was precisely why the idea of a free United States concerned him. Carlos III did not fight for the United States for ideological reasons or out of sympathy, but simply because it gave him the opportunity to reclaim something that, in his opinion, belonged to him, namely, Florida. However, Spain's reluctance to recognize the United States does not mean that one should discount or overlook Spain's role in the American Revolution. Indeed, recent scholarship on the American Revolution and the Revolutionary era suggests that Spain's hidden role will not remain hidden for much longer.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Alex Blaa of Orange, California, earned his B.A. in History (2018) and his M.A. in History (expected summer 2020) at California State University, Fullerton (CSUF), where he is a member and the 2019/2020 president of the Theta-Pi Chapter of Phi Alpha Theta (History Honor Society). His article printed above originated in a senior research seminar offered by CSUF's History Department.