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“Facing East” from Iberian America: Postrevolutionary Spanish Policies in the Southwestern Backcountry, 1783-1792

Following the American Revolution, the new United States government and its citizenry greedily cast their eyes westward across the expansive trans-Appalachian frontier. The contest between the region’s native peoples, Anglo-American westerners, and Spanish colonists for the trans-Appalachian West began long before the first shots of the Revolution were fired at Lexington & Concord. From the near perpetual regional Indian warfare to the diplomatic maneuverings of Euroamerican backcountry leaders, the struggle to control the land the Indians called the “western waters” defined borderland relations for most of the 18th century. Historians have devoted a great deal of scholarly energy to chronicling the actions, motivations, and consequences of the century-long struggle for the trans-Appalachian West from an Anglo-American perspective. More recently, “new Indian historians” have also integrated Amerindian voices into the larger frontier narrative. One of the most effective studies offering the “Indian perspective” on the contest for the frontier is Daniel Richter’s Pulitzer-Prize nominated *Facing East From Indian Country: A Narrative History of Early America*. In his monograph, Richter argues that by shifting our perspective from a westward facing, Anglo-centric view to one that “faces east from Indian country, the history [of the west] takes on a very different appearance.”¹ It is in the spirit of Richter’s call to shift our historical viewpoint from an Anglo-centric, western vantage that I offer Spain’s perspective on the postrevolutionary struggle to control the southern backcountry.

¹ Daniel K. Richter, *Facing East From Indian Country: A Narrative History of Early America* (Boston: Harvard University Press, 2001), 8-9.

During the first decade following the Revolutionary War, the region stretching from the western slopes of the Appalachian Mountains to the Mississippi River and from south of the Ohio River to the Gulf of Mexico (often referred to as the “Old Southwest” or the “First West”) developed into an extraordinarily dynamic borderland in which regional Indian groups (primarily the Overhill/Chickamauga Cherokee and Upper Creeks), American westerners, and Spanish colonial officials vied for dominion. This presentation examines the diplomatic, economic, and social development of this region from a Spanish colonial perspective. By standing on the winding banks of the Mississippi River and casting our gaze eastward, this historical perspective reveals the motivations behind many of Spain’s critical postrevolutionary North American economic, diplomatic, and cultural policies and the role fear, both real and imagined, played in the development of these colonial strategies.

In a September 27, 1785 letter delivered by Spain’s newly-appointed chief American diplomat Diego Gardoqui to the United States Congress, the Spanish monarch Carlos III expressed his nation’s desire to maintain “good correspondence and harmony...with the United States.” Despite the friendly tone of the address, the Spanish king warned that establishing “fixed” borders between the rapidly expanding United States and Spain’s Mississippi Valley and Florida communities were necessary to maintain “good understanding, friendship, and union” between the two nations. Six months later, on March 5, 1786, Spain’s Louisiana Governor Estevan Miro informed his Lt. Governor Francisco Cruzat that a “collar” (probably a string of wampum beads) was being circulated among the Creek, Cherokee, and Chickasaw Indians “with the idea of getting them all to make war” on America’s western settlements (specifically the Cumberland River settlement of Nashville and the Virginia’s Kentucky District communities at Louisville and Lexington). Miro told Cruzat that he believed the region’s native peoples “continue to be firm in their friendship” with Spain, but he warned him “not to lose sight for one moment of the

necessity of drawing the Indian nations more and more to our friendship.”² Two years later, on November 15, 1788, Cumberland merchant Thomas Amis stood before a Davidson County, NC justice of the peace and swore a deposition recounting the confiscation of his property by Spanish officials at the port city of Natchez. Amis recalled that after landing at the Mississippi River port town with a flatboat full of goods (including 142 Dutch ovens, 100 cooking vessels, and 50 barrels of flour), “the Spanish commandant at Fort Rosalie... refused to allow [him] to navigate the Mississippi River below Natchez and seized his goods for the use of the crown of Spain.” These three historical vignettes capture the three primary strategic objectives of Spain’s postrevolutionary North American policies: defending their territorial borders and key communities, preserving their economic and diplomatic connections with the region’s native peoples, and (*perhaps most importantly*) protecting their North American and trans-Atlantic commerce. What is not as evident in these three historical snapshots is the impact fear had in shaping these western policies.

As the “dust settled” on the violence and chaos of the American Revolution, Spanish officials from New Orleans to Havana began the arduous task of developing and implementing a series of policies designed to secure their nation’s economic and strategic interests in the rapidly transforming trans-Appalachian West. If you spend a little time with the Spanish diplomatic records and correspondence from this period, it becomes clear that Spanish officials are crafting these policies under considerable duress. This “wave of fear” that engulfed Spanish colonial decision makers was fueled by a number of real and tangible threats to Spain’s territorial sovereignty, including: rapidly expanding western American settlements and their land-dependent economies (especially in Georgia and the future states of Tennessee and Kentucky), efforts by the United States and British agents to lure away Spain’s Indian allies and trading partners, and a vulnerable Spanish colonial economy that was increasingly important

² *The Diplomatic Correspondence of the United States of America, Vol. III* (Washington: Blair & Ives), 137-8, 249-50; Lawrence Kinnaird, ed., *Annual Report of the American Historical Association, Volume III: Spain in the Mississippi Valley, 1765-1794* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1946), 170-1.

to Spain's global mercantile economy yet teetering on the brink of ruin. These were the "actual" threats to Spanish western hegemony, but Spain's colonial leadership also confronted a wide range of fictive (or at least overstated) dangers sparked by gossip, lies, and misinformation that advanced rapidly across the region. One of the earliest rumors terrorizing Spain's colonial zeitgeist came to light almost immediately after the signing of the 1763 Treaty of Paris. Spanish officials began receiving reports from their Mississippi River communities that American western agents were clandestinely raising a large backcountry militia and planning to march on Natchez (one of the largest and most important trading communities) and New Orleans (the seat of political power in Spain's Louisiana colony). The first actionable threat, we'll call it the "Thomas Green Affair," appeared in the summer of 1785. Louisiana Governor Miro and West Florida Governor Arturo O'Neill began receiving disturbing dispatches from the residents of Natchez and Creek Indian leaders that a "sinister" Georgian named Thomas Green was raising an army of western militiamen from the communities of Cumberland (future site of Nashville), Kentucky, and Franklin (in East Tennessee) in an effort to dislodge Spain from the Mississippi River Valley and secure access to the lower portion of the Mississippi River (*Spain closed the river to American shipping in 1764- more on that in a moment*). The Upper Creek chief Alexander McGillivray warned O'Neill in a July 8, 1785 letter that "Fort Natchez" was going to be "attacked by 2,500 men." McGillivray's scouts informed him that Green had already raised 1500 men, who were camped "30 Leagues" from the fort, and another sizeable body of soldiers armed with artillery were on the march towards Natchez.³ Additional reports circulated among Spanish officials claiming that American Indian agents were secretly meeting with Chickasaw and Cherokee warriors in an effort to convince them to join in the planned assault on Natchez.⁴ While it is true that Thomas Green and a number of other backcountry leading men wanted to attack Natchez (*Green openly advocated attacking Spanish*

³ O'Neill to Galvez, 8 July 1785 "Papers from the Spanish Archives Relating to Tennessee and the Old Southwest, 1783-1800," *East Tennessee Historical Society's Publications* 9 (1937): 121-2.

⁴ Bouligny to Miro, 4 August 1785 "Papers from the Spanish Archives Relating to Tennessee and the Old Southwest, 1783-1800," *East Tennessee Historical Society's Publications* 9 (1937): 128-9.

Louisiana), there is no evidence that his plans to “throw off the encroaching tyrants” ever received widespread public or political support or even got to the planning stages (*Kris Ray may be able to provide more insight on this affair*).⁵ Despite the unlikelihood of a large Indian-assisted attack on Spain’s Mississippi River settlements and the repeated condemnation of these sorts of rumors by the United States Congress, the flood of reports warning of these sorts of American sorties (including dozens of unconfirmed warnings throughout the decade of imminent attacks on New Orleans, Pensacola, Mobile, and just about every sizeable Spanish western community) had a tremendous influence on Spanish colonial decision-making.⁶

It is of little wonder that, under this dark cloud of fear, Spain’s Carlos III placed such paramountcy in defending Spain’s colonial borders, bolstering the Spanish armed forces, and strengthening Iberian-Amerindian military alliances. These defense objectives shaped a number of Spain’s most important policy decisions and resulted in the expansion of Spanish-Indian diplomacy and the implementation of a radical new colonial emigration strategy. As Kathryn Braund, Claudio Saunt, and Robbie Ethridge have demonstrated in their studies of the Muscogee, the Creek pelt trade significantly bolstered Spain’s expanding trans-Atlantic economy and formed the foundation of Iberian-Amerindian backcountry relations.⁷ However, the Lower Mississippi Valley’s native and Spanish resident’s shared concerns over community defense also played a critical role in creating these cross-cultural alliances. Initiated amidst the violence and chaos of the American Revolution, the postwar efforts of Spanish colonial officials to cement trade and diplomatic alliances with the region’s Indian communities took on greater urgency as

⁵ *The Diplomatic Correspondence of the United States of America, Vol. III*, 147-8, Kinnaird, ed., *Annual Report of the American Historical Association, Volume III: Spain in the Mississippi Valley, 1765-1794*, 147-8.

⁶ Spanish colonial records, diplomatic exchanges, and private correspondence included numerous examples of these types of faulty reports.

⁷ Braund, Kathryn E. Holland, *Deerskins and Duffels: The Creek Indian Trade with Anglo-America, 1685-1815*. Lincoln, NE: The University of Nebraska Press, 1996; Claudio Saunt, *A New Order of Things: Property, Power, and the Transformation of the Creek Indians, 1733-1816* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1999); Ethridge, Robbie. *Creek Country: The Creek Indians and Their World*. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2006.

America's western population swelled and pressure for land intensified. Collective fear of American encroachment proved to be a powerful psychological force as both groups secretly entered into a mutual defense pact. Over the course of the next decade, Spanish agents clandestinely rendezvoused with Creek and Cherokee leaders to exchange intelligence on the activities of American westerners and to ensure that Native leaders continued to "keep themselves under [Spain's] protection." Spain also secretly funneled weapons and ammunition to Creek and Cherokee warriors through the Florida trading firm of Panton, Leslie, and Company in order to avoid detection by the United States. Governor O'Neill described Spain's Amerindian strategy in a 1785 letter penned to Governor of Cuba Bernardo de Galvez, writing "If circumstances require that we become hostile to our [American] neighbors, I assure you... that a sufficient number of Indians, whom I have made grateful by some presents, shall be able to spread terror on the Frontiers of Georgia and Carolina."⁸ In exchange for Spanish financial, martial, and diplomatic support, Creek and Cherokee leaders agreed to harass American western settlements, dispatch warriors to backcountry "hotspots," and to serve as an Amerindian "buffer zone" separating Spain's Louisiana and Florida communities from America's westerners. Despite their best efforts, Spain's support of the region's Amerindians proved to be a poorly guarded secret (*it was widely known by western Americans who repeatedly made demands of Spanish officials to halt their support of the Indians*), but the success of Creek and Cherokee raids and the fear of a Indian-Iberian coalition served to retard America's western expansion (at least until the end of the 18th century).⁹

⁸ Caughey, *McGillivray of the Creeks*, 22-26, 28-33; *Cherokee and Creek Indians* (New York: Garland Publishing Inc., 1974), 121-124; Alexander McGillivray to Arturo O'Neill, 10 October 1886, Antonio Valdes to Estevan Miro, 10 April 1790, Mississippi Provincial Archives (Spanish Dominion 1779-1798), Mississippi Department of Archives and History, Jackson; Saunt, *A New Order of Things*, 67-88.

⁹ John Walton Caughey, *McGillivray of the Creeks* (Columbia: The University of South Carolina Press, 2007), 22-26, 28-33; *Cherokee and Creek Indians* (New York: Garland Publishing Inc., 1974), 121-124; Alexander McGillivray to Arturo O'Neill, 10 October 1886, Antonio Valdes to Estevan Miro, 10 April 1790, Mississippi Provincial Archives (Spanish Dominion 1779-1798), Mississippi Department of Archives and History, Jackson; Saunt, *A New Order of Things*, 67-88; Amos J. Wright, Jr. *The McGillivray and McIntosh Traders on the Southwest Frontier, 1716-1815* (Montgomery, AL: NewSouth Books, 2007), 217-223; Linda Langley, "The Tribal Identity of Alexander McGillivray: A Review of the Tribal and Ethnographic Data," *Louisiana History* 46:2 (2005): 231-239; Claudio Saunt, *A New Order of Things: Property, Power, and the Transformation of the Creek Indians, 1733-1816* (Cambridge: Cambridge

Efforts to defend their North American colonial settlements also resulted in the initiation of a series of high-level negotiations between Spanish colonial officials and western political and economic leaders (*the so-called Spanish Conspiracies*). Out of these negotiations emerged an unlikely Spanish emigration proposal designed to bolster Spain's colonial backcountry defenses and remove the threat posed by western American encroachment (*Spain derisively called these people "western adventurers"*). In the spring of 1789, Governor of Louisiana, Esteban Miro, issued a "Memorandum of Concessions" to American "Westerners" residing in the upper Tennessee Valley, Cumberland District (at the time, both part of western North Carolina), and Virginia's Kentucky District. The remarkable proclamation expressed the willingness of Spain's King Carlos IV, who had recently ascended to the throne after the death of his father Carlos III, to allow "every good [American] inhabitant to come down and settle in the Province of Louisiana." In an effort to attract American emigrants, Spain offered a wide range of economic incentives and cultural concessions, including: exclusive access to the Mississippi River (*closed by Spain in the winter of 1784 to non-Spanish traffic*), land grants, tax breaks, lucrative business contracts, and even a number of cultural concessions (*religious tolerance*). However, these backcountry advantages came with a significant price to be exacted from the would-be American emigrants. Spanish colonial officials expected newly settled Anglo-American westerners to contribute to the defense of Louisiana and to protect the economic interests of the empire. Spanish officials envisioned American westerners serving as a sort of backcountry Comitatus to fend off threats from Great Britain, the United States, and other Anglo-American westerners. The westerners' military experience, forged in the fires of the American Revolution and nearly two decades of constant Indian warfare, made them ideal Spanish soldiers, and if an agreement could be concluded, Spain's monarch expected the "adventurers... to defend the King's territory against any attack by another Power" and bolster the "Royal Navy." Mirroring their plans for the region's native communities, Spanish officials on both sides of the Atlantic theorized

University Press, 1999), 67-72. There are dozens of correspondences between Creek leaders like Alexander McGillivray chronicling the diplomatic alliance and military support between the Muscogee and Spanish nations.

that the American westerners could also serve as a “secure barrier against the unjust attempts of the United States [to forcibly acquire Spanish territory].” In the fall of 1787, Governor Miro informed Spanish colonial officials that new American emigrants “should be obliged to take up arms against any attempted invasion by [western] settlements.” The exchanges between Spanish colonial officials and American western leaders leaves little doubt that Spain’s primary motivation for extending their settlement offer was to bolster their colonial defenses with American citizen-soldiers and remove the threat posed by many of these same men.¹⁰

While the defense of their North American communities may have stood as the most pressing concern for Spanish colonial officials, protecting and expanding Spain’s trans-Atlantic economy ran a very close second. Following the American Revolution, Spanish officials in Louisiana struggled to develop a strategy for dealing with a series of colonial economic problems, including: the devaluation of Spanish currency, a trade imbalance, specie shortages, and rolling food shortages (especially flour). Additionally, Spain’s commercial farmers and merchants faced mounting competition from America’s western tobacco planters, merchants, and Indian deerskin traders. In response, Spain deployed a number of tactics to preserve their place in the rapidly transforming trans-Atlantic marketplace. Unquestionably, the most controversial of these policies in North America was Spain’s 1784 decision to restrict access to the lower portion of the Mississippi River (*south of Natchez*) and all Spanish ports and markets from American shipping.¹¹ The agreement, negotiated by U.S. Secretary of Foreign Affairs John

¹⁰ Ezpeleta to Valdes, 29 December 1788, “Papers From the Spanish Archive Relating to Tennessee and the Old Southwest, 1783-1800,” *East Tennessee Historical Society’s Publications* 18 (1946): 139-143; Antonio Valdes to Estevan Miro, 10 April 1790, Mississippi Provincial Archives (Spanish Dominion 1779-1798), Mississippi Department of Archives and History, Jackson; White to Miro, 18 April 1789, “Papers From the Spanish Archive Relating to Tennessee and the Old Southwest, 1783-1800,” *East Tennessee Historical Society’s Publications* 20 (1948): 103-105.

¹¹ Thomas P. Slaughter, *The Whiskey Rebellion: Frontier Epilogue to the American Revolution* (New York: Oxford Press, 1986), 30, 37, 40-42, 52-60; “Summary of a conversation between James White and Gardoqui, 26 August 1786, “Papers From the Spanish Archive Relating to Tennessee and the Old Southwest, 1783-1800,” *The East Tennessee Historical Society’s Publications* 9 (1944): 83-84; Secretary of Foreign Affairs, John Jay (Gardoqui to Conde de Floridablanca (Spain’s Secretary of State), 28 October 1786, “Papers From the Spanish Archive Relating to Tennessee and the Old Southwest, 1783-1800,” *East Tennessee Historical Society’s Publications* 9 (1944): 85-86);

Jay and Spanish Diplomat Diego Gardoqui, to deny American boats navigation of the region's most important trade and transportation artery for twenty-five years sent shockwaves through America's western communities. Angry western American merchants, planters, and political leaders decried the Mississippi River decision and accused Jay of selling out western planters and merchants in order to protect eastern manufacturers, merchants, and commercial fishermen. From the Spanish perspective, closing down the Mississippi River was a logical decision designed to protect Spanish farmers, merchants, and factors from American competition, disrupt the development of American-Indian trade relations, correct Louisiana's trade imbalance, and most importantly, halt America's western expansion by eliminating its primary motivation, profit. Despite the birth of lucrative smuggling operations and the backlash from American westerners (*especially those like Thomas Amis who had their goods and boats seized by Spanish authorities*), Spain stood firm on their Mississippi River and trade policies until the spring of 1788, when a fire destroyed much of New Orleans and food and commercial goods shortages forced the relaxing of these restrictions.¹²

Spain's emigration policy primarily aimed at bolstering the kingdom's colonial defenses was also directly linked to Spain's postrevolutionary economic strategy. In a process historian Abraham Nasatir labels "counter colonization," Spanish colonial officials believed that, by convincing American westerners to either migrate to Spanish territory or swear their allegiance to Spain, they could remove the single greatest threat to Spain's postrevolutionary economic recovery. Spanish agents targeted key American merchants, planters, and political leaders in hope of siphoning off the architects of America's western political economy, men like Kentucky tobacco merchant James Wilkinson and prominent western political and business leaders like Cumberland's James Robertson and Franklin's John Sevier. While willing to offer American emigrants and allies a wide range of economic incentives (*most*

Jay Feldman, *When the Mississippi Ran Backwards: Empire, Intrigue, Murder, and the New Madrid Earthquakes* (New York: Free Press, 2005), 27-35.

¹² John G. Clark, *New Orleans, 1718-1812: An Economic History* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1970), 204-6, 209, 265-270;

importantly access to the Mississippi River and Spanish markets), Spain also stood to gain from the proposed arrangements, including: increasing the flow of high-demand goods into Spanish markets (i.e. tobacco, flour, and manufactured goods), boosting colonial revenues generated by taxes and import/export duties, providing a means to supplement precarious food supplies during shortages, and most importantly, removing American competition from the regional marketplace.¹³

Placed within the geopolitical context of the postrevolutionary contest for the trans-Appalachian West and the growing competition within the rapidly expanding Atlantic marketplace, Spain's western policies clearly reflect their three primary strategic colonial objectives: defense, economic hegemony, and Amerindian diplomacy. In an August 1786 report delivered to the U.S. Congress on the ongoing negotiations between himself and Diego Gardoqui, John Jay offers this deft analysis of the origins of Spain's colonial policies. Jay reported that during a recent parlay with the Spanish diplomat, He had warned Gardoqui that "the country was filling fast with people, and that the time will come, when they would not submit to seeing a fine river flow before their doors, without using it as a highway to the sea for the transportation of their products." In what Jay characterized as a "fruitless argument," Gardoqui "insisted" that the Mississippi River and Louisiana markets remain "shut" to the United States. In his final analysis, Jay clearly understood what was at stake for Spain if their colonial policies failed and he warned the congressmen that if the United States directly challenged these western policies, the end

¹³ Clark, *New Orleans, 1718-1812: An Economic History*, 207-210; Miro's Memorandum of Concessions to Westerners, 20 April 1789, "Papers From the Spanish Archive Relating to Tennessee and the Old Southwest, 1783-1800," *East Tennessee Historical Society's Publications* 20 (1948): 104- 105; Kevin T. Barksdale, *The Lost State of Franklin: America's First Secession* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2008), 145-161; A.P. Whitaker, "Spanish Intrigue in the Old Southwest: An Episode, 1788-89," *The Mississippi Valley Historical Review* 12 (September 1925): 159; Arthur Preston Whitaker, *The Spanish-American Frontier, 1783-1795: The Westward Movement and the Spanish Retreat in the Mississippi Valley* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1927), 1-32; John R. Finger, *Tennessee Frontiers: Three Regions in Transition* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001), 99-124; Thomas P. Slaughter, *The Whiskey Rebellion: Frontier Epilogue to the American Revolution* (New York: Oxford Press, 1986), 28-45; Reginald Horsman, *The Diplomacy of the New Republic, 1776-1815* (Arlington Heights, IL: Harland Davidson, 1985), 28-37; Kevin T. Barksdale, "A Spanish Conspiracy on the Trans-Appalachian Borderlands," *Journal of Appalachian Studies* (Spring 2008): 95-123; Michael Allen, *Western Rivermen, 1763-1861: Ohio and Mississippi Boatmen and the Myth of the Alligator Horse* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1990), 59-61.

result could lead to “an unpopular and dangerous war” that would destroy “harmony and good will” between Spain and the United States and decimate the southern backcountry.¹⁴

¹⁴ *The Diplomatic Correspondence of the United States of America*, 209-213.