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Spanish Naval Strategy and the United States, 1763–1819

Ivan Valdez-Bubnov

This article examines the naval strategies conceived by the Spanish government to deal with Anglo-American expansion in North America. The political, social and diplomatic aspects of this process have been thoroughly approached by historiography. However, its impact on Spanish naval policy has received little attention. After the Louisiana purchase, the Spanish navy made a plan for a full-scale war against the United States, involving battlefleet action, blockade, amphibious operations and *guerre de course*. The War of the Third Coalition prevented it from taking place, and the Napoleonic invasion of 1808 practically obliterated the Spanish Navy. After the restoration of the Spanish Monarchy there were renewed tensions with the United States, and in 1816 the project was redrawn, albeit on a more modest scale. This article examines the contents of the war plans in detail, in order to understand the objectives of Spanish grand strategy and the manner in which naval forces were to be employed. Also, it aims at understanding the intellectual origins of the ideas expressed by the authors of these plans. Finally, it aims to underline the consequences that the failure to implement an effective diplomatic, military and naval strategy had for Spain's position in North America.

Key words: naval strategy, Spain, United States, War of the Third Coalition, Napoleonic wars, Louisiana, Spanish navy, Seven Years War, Enrique Reynaldo Macdonnell y de Gondé

During the second half of the eighteenth century, Spain was one of the three leading naval powers of Europe, after Great Britain and France, and its foreign policy was, to a large extent, determined by the capacity of its naval forces to act as a credible instrument of power politics. Naval policy was an important component of Spanish diplomacy, and a key instrument against the perceived danger of Anglo-American expansion over Spain's territories in North America. After 1763 the Spanish crown attempted to limit the economic development of British Florida, a policy that, eventually, contributed to its decision to support of the American Revolution. But when the North American war ended and Florida was returned to Spain in 1783, the Spanish crown faced diplomatic conflict with the independent United States over a number of frontier issues. The political, social and diplomatic aspects of this process have been thoroughly approached by historiography.¹ However, the importance of naval policy as one of the elements that shaped Spanish diplomacy in North America has received little attention.²

1 Griffin, *The United States and the Disruption of the Spanish Empire*; Graham, *Empire of the North Atlantic*; De Conde, *Entangling Alliance*; Ruigómez de Hernández, *El Gobierno español*; Cussik, *The Other War of 1812*; Hernández Franco, *La gestión política*.

2 Martínez Valverde, *La marina*; Batista, *La estrategia española en América*; Castillo Manrubia, *La marina de guerra*; José Cervera Pery *La marina española en la emancipación de Hispanoamérica*; Pérez Turrado *La marina española*; Pérez Turrado, *Las marinas patriota*; Alzina Torrente, *Una guerra romántica*; Rodríguez González, 'Les objectifs de la marine espagnole'.

The Peace of Paris, which ended the Seven Years War in 1763, was disastrous for the Bourbon powers. The French empire in North America was practically destroyed, and its commercial position in the Indian subcontinent was seriously diminished. Spain, on the other hand, was forced to cede Florida to Great Britain, in order to recover the lost maritime enclaves of Havana and Manila. To compensate its ally for these losses, the French government transferred the large territory of Louisiana to the Spanish crown. Thus after 1763 Spain held the left bank of the Mississippi river, whereas Britain held the right bank, as part of the territory of West Florida. This settlement allowed British subjects to freely navigate the Mississippi river, opening an important trade route to the Gulf of Mexico and the Caribbean.³

During the following years the Mississippi remained open to Anglo-American navigation, adding to the grievances that prompted the Spanish prime minister, Gerónimo Grimaldi, to accept a foreign policy devised by the French court. Their objective was to launch a full-scale naval war against Great Britain, as soon as the combined Bourbon fleets reached a sufficient strength. This, however, proved difficult to achieve. Warship production in both countries turned out to be slower than expected, and when a major international crisis broke in 1770, the French government judged its fleet was not ready to support the Spanish ally in an open confrontation with Great Britain. As a result, the Spanish crown had to accept new territorial losses, and the French suffered a serious loss of prestige. For a few years, the projected war against Britain ceased to be the principal aim of French foreign policy.

The beginning of the American Revolution in 1776 changed this scenario. The new French king gave political and material aid to the rebels, and the French navy started new shipbuilding programmes. This shift in policy was encouraged by the Spanish ambassador in Paris, the Count of Aranda, who believed the North American conflict was an exceptional opportunity to eliminate British maritime and naval superiority.⁴ In a manuscript written to the French minister Vergennes, Aranda stated that Franco-Spanish intervention was necessary for a number of economic and political reasons. He mentioned the low import taxes enjoyed by British merchants in Spanish ports, British contraband from Jamaica into Spanish America and British possession of Gibraltar and Menorca. He considered that if the Americans obtained their independence without Spanish help, it would be difficult to expect their gratitude in the resolution of the frontier problems dragging from the Seven Years War. He stated that Anglo-American expansion would sooner or later generate frictions with the Spanish territories in North America. He was nevertheless optimistic, stating that Spanish intervention could set a precedent of goodwill in the relations between the two countries.

To deal with British sea power, Aranda created the first strategic plan for a full-scale naval war in the North Atlantic and the western coast of North America. In essence, he proposed to synchronize the use of the Bourbon battle fleets with commerce raiding on a grand scale. To achieve this, he believed, it was necessary to support private armaments in all Spanish European and American ports. He calculated that the Bourbon intervention would increase the number of American privateers already raiding British commerce, and requested the opening of all Spanish and French ports

3 De Conde, *Entangling Alliance*, 25.

4 Archivo Histórico Nacional, Madrid (hereafter AHN), Sección Estado, MS 4224.

to them. Thus, he expected the seas to be covered with privateers of all three nations, forcing British merchant shipping to resort to the ancient system of convoys. These would then be attacked by Spanish and French flying squadrons of battleships and cruisers, while the main Bourbon battle fleets concentrated to strike at the British navy as soon as it attempted to protect the convoys. Aranda believed that the British government, confronted with such a strategy and committed to protect the supply lines of its armies fighting in North America, would be forced to fit out at least 160 warships of all types. He expected that the large number of sailors drafted into the Royal Navy would reduce the numbers of British privateers, and make it more difficult to man the merchant fleets.

Aranda calculated that, to attain this objective, the Bourbon fleets would require to fit out 80 line-of-battle ships and 60 frigates. Thirty-five battleships and 24 frigates were to be stationed in Ferrol and Brest; and 14 battleships and 14 frigates between Cadiz, Cartagena and Toulon. Also, he wanted at least 20 line-of-battle ships and 12 frigates stationed in American waters. These were to be used as flying squadrons, but always keeping a number of battleships concentrated ready to strike at British lines of communication. He also expected several frigates to be stationed in the Indian Ocean, and to use the Spanish naval forces deployed in the Southern Pacific to reinforce the divisions stationed at Ferrol or Cadiz. The land forces of both countries, on the other hand, were to be used in support of the naval war, protecting dockyards and ports, with 20,000 men in northern Spain, 8,000 around Gibraltar, and around 60,000 on the French coasts. The troops deployed in France were to be used as a credible threat of invasion, forcing the British Admiralty to concentrate large forces in the English Channel.

Aranda attempted to convince Vergennes to follow this plan in case of a joint Bourbon intervention, but his own influence in the Spanish court was dwindling. When Grimaldi was removed as Secretary of State in 1776, Aranda was not considered as a successor. In his place the king appointed the Count of Floridablanca, a lawyer, to lead the Spanish government. Floridablanca was opposed to what he perceived as Spanish submission to French foreign policy, and attempted to keep a safe distance from Aranda's bellicose lobbying. But he had other reasons to question the convenience of supporting the Franco-American alliance. He firmly believed Republicanism threatened the divine right of kings, and feared that North American independence could set an example to Spain's American colonies.

These considerations led to the first foreign policy plan devised specifically to deal with the United States. Floridablanca instructed Aranda to offer the Americans limited material and financial help, coupled with the demand that their Congress must not enter any diplomatic agreement without the participation of the Bourbon powers. He was also instructed to follow a secret line of negotiation with the British government, in case the war turned against the Americans.⁵

However, the British defeat at Saratoga in 1777 increased French support for the American cause. In 1778 Vergennes signed a commercial treaty, followed by a formal military alliance with the Congress. This strengthened Aranda's case for a Spanish intervention. In his view, the possibility of a Franco-American triumph could leave Spain politically isolated both in Europe and North America. These

5 Hernández Franco, *La gestión política*, 335.

considerations finally prompted Floridablanca to act. In April 1779, he signed the Treaty of Aranjuez, making Spain enter the war in support of the American war effort.

Floridablanca refused to follow Aranda's proposal for an all naval, blue-water strategy, directed against British commerce and naval forces. Instead, he attempted to use the Bourbon fleets to protect an amphibious landing in the British isles.⁶ When this failed, Spanish naval strategy was limited to support the siege of Gibraltar, to protect trade routes in the Caribbean, and to project military forces in to the North American mainland. Thus, during the American war, Spanish naval power was used almost exclusively for the protection of trade and the projection of military force.⁷

In political terms Floridablanca was very cautious towards his American ally. In fact, he did not want to recognize American independence until a new treaty on commerce and navigation was agreed by both governments. From 1780 onwards the American Congress sought to obtain this pact, but Floridablanca systematically avoided the question. In his view, one of the main reasons for the Spanish intervention was to prevent further British expansion into the Mississippi valley, and to block fluvial navigation as an outlet for American produce into the Gulf of Mexico. Floridablanca noticed that, as allies, the Americans were using the Mississippi with the same intensity as the British had done since the end of the Seven Years War. This situation would not be easily reverted with an American triumph, thus potentially reproducing the outcome of the peace of 1763 in North America.

This explains why most Spanish military operations during the American War concentrated around the Mississippi valley and West Florida. As a result of these victories, both banks of the Mississippi delta became a possession of the Spanish crown, thus making it possible to close the river to Anglo-American trade. It is significant that the Spanish galley forces were restored following the Peace of 1783, and measures were taken to establish a squadron of rowed craft to patrol the river up to the outpost of Nueva Madrid.

In this new context Floridablanca devised a more complex policy to deal with the United States. Its basic goal was to contain American expansion into the Gulf of Mexico and the Caribbean, thus protecting Spain's commercial monopoly with its colonies. A different policy was adopted in Florida and Louisiana, where free trade was allowed in order to attract settlers and develop the economy. Nevertheless, the Mississippi river was declared exclusive property of the Spanish crown, forbidding its use to Anglo-American traders. Spanish diplomats also tried to divert Americans from the Caribbean, granting them free trade with the Canary islands, and offering diplomatic help in their conflict with the Barbary states. They also hoped to contain American fishing in the North Atlantic.⁸

When the American Congress repudiated these policies, Floridablanca decided to stimulate secession, offering Anglo-American settlers the right to use of the Mississippi river as subjects of the Spanish crown. He also tried to create an Indian state under Spanish protection, in order to prevent further Anglo-American expansion to the west. Naturally, diplomatic conversations were stalled. They only

6 AHN, Sección Estado, MS 2841, 13 Jan. 1779.

7 Martínez Shaw, 'Participación de la Armada española', 75–80.

8 Hernández Franco, *La gestión política*, 349.

resumed in 1791, when the Congress again requested Spanish recognition of its right to navigate the Mississippi.

The fall of Floridablanca in 1792 signalled a change in policy towards the United States. The new minister of state, Manuel Godoy, reversed Floridablanca's directives. In 1795 he formally accepted the frontiers set by the peace of 1763, and recognized free navigation of the Mississippi. Despite this he still had to deal with different plots to overthrow Spanish rule in Florida.⁹ In 1794 and 1795 a conspiracy by French revolutionary agents was discovered and neutralized. The following year Godoy allied the Spanish monarchy with revolutionary France, thus eliminating the French threat. But this did not stop instability in the region. In 1797 an invasion of East Florida was planned by Elijah Clarke, a former militia officer from the state of Georgia. In 1801 the adventurer William Augustus Bowles launched a series of raids into Spanish territory from a self-proclaimed independent state in North Florida. While all these attempts were discovered and eventually defeated, they might have convinced Godoy to end the North American problem by ceding Louisiana to France, in exchange for dynastic privileges for the Spanish royal family. Thus, the problem of dealing with Anglo-American expansion was transferred to a more powerful ally.

Nevertheless, the Louisiana cession did not end the disputes with the United States government. Between 1797 and 1800 France and the United States waged an undeclared naval war, in which large numbers of American ships were captured.¹⁰ During that period, many French privateers operated from Spanish American ports, and Spanish privateers made a significant number of prizes. In this context, the Spanish government began to explore the possibility of using the French alliance to take a tougher stance against the Anglo-Americans.

In 1801 there was a serious proposal for a Franco-Spanish naval blockade against their coasts, designed to thwart their growing presence in Spanish-American trade.¹¹ It was sent to Godoy by Ramón de López y Angulo, a Spanish agent deployed in New Orleans. He proposed a commercial embargo in all Spanish European and American ports, followed by a landing of troops between Mobile and Panzacola. Then the Franco-Spanish naval squadrons were to blockade the ports of the United States, in order to extinguish their commerce and force a convenient diplomatic agreement upon them. However, it soon became clear that the French project of recreating their North American empire was doomed to failure, as the slave revolts in Saint Domingue made it impossible to create an outlet for Louisiana's produce. In 1803 Napoleon sold Louisiana to the United States, thus returning a new and magnified frontier problem to Spain.

The tougher stance sought by Godoy also backfired when the Jefferson administration demanded compensation for the ships captured by Spanish privateers during the naval war with France in 1797 to 1800. Merchants in New England and the southern states demanded up to 5 million dollars in reparations.¹² American diplomats soon began to suggest that Spain should cede Florida as part of a settlement

9 Cussik, *The Other War of 1812*, 42.

10 On this subject, see: Bonnel, *La France, Les États-Unis et la guerre de course*; De Conde, *The Quasi-War*; Palmer, *Stoddert's War*; Crowhurst, , *The French War on Trade*.

11 Museo Naval de Madrid (hereafter MNM), MS 315, doc. 16.

12 Cussik, *The Other War of 1812*, 18.

on this matter. They also claimed that the frontier outpost of Baton Rouge had to be considered as part of the Louisiana purchase by the United States.

In Spain there were calls to resolve this situation by force. In 1804 Enrique Reynaldo Macdonnell y de Gondé, a brigadier in the Spanish navy, proposed a detailed strategy for a full-scale naval war against the United States.¹³ The plan was based on observations he made during a one-year visit to that country from 1799 to 1800. Also, some of his opinions on the nature of naval operations derived from his service in the Swedish navy during the war with Russia of 1788 to 1790.

The plan started with a detailed geographical and hydrographical description of the United States. It included a map which unfortunately is now lost. This introduction was followed by a description of the political system of the country. It stressed the political instability of the Federation, pointing out the differences in law, character and interests of the northern and southern states. According to Macdonnell the maritime economy of New England contrasted sharply with agricultural Georgia and the Carolinas, resulting in different attitudes towards the abolition of slavery. This division threatened the unity of the Republic. The northern states, blessed with a larger population, exercised a greater influence in Congress, and in all public business. He also stressed the permanent confrontation between the Federalist and Republican parties, who hated each other most passionately. He predicted that, in time, the Federation was to split, possibly in three parts. The first one would comprise the northern states down to Virginia; the second one from Virginia to the Savannah river; and the third one the western territories.

Macdonnell believed the American economy was weak, with imports surpassing exports, a large national debt and a high annual deficit. This, in his view, was the cause of American contraband into the Spanish colonies. He also described the army, stating that the officers were 'men of honour and spirit', but the soldiery was badly dressed and poorly paid, being composed mostly by immigrants who wished to escape servitude. Also, there were no real fortified strongholds. It might be worth pointing out that Macdonnell had been in contact with General Wilkinson, an American officer who had tried to enter Spanish service by promoting secession in Kentucky and the western states.

The American navy, according to Macdonnell, was composed of 15 frigates, of 30 to 40 guns.¹⁴ During the last war, they had fitted out 35 minor vessels, apart from the frigates, in order to get respect for their flag. This armament had been promoted by the Federalist party, confirming its policy to stand among the warring nations of Europe. The Republicans prevailed, however, and the navy was later reduced to the frigates, minus the *Philadelphia*, recently captured by the Barbary corsairs.

According to Macdonnell, the American frigates appeared roughly built in the upperworks, but their waterlines and hulls were so well thought that they were as good as those of their smaller ships. These in his view were 'the best in the world, built with grace, and good at sail'. Moreover, the frigates were very heavily armed, mounting 24-pound artillery, and very large crews. He concluded that the Spanish frigates stood little chance of defeating one of them. Moreover, their dockyards stored enough timber to build four 74-gun line-of-battle ships.

Macdonnell marvelled that American officers were not trained at a naval school,

¹³ MNM, MS. 435, doc. 1.

¹⁴ Shiftlet, *America's Line of Battle*.

such as the Guardias Marinas of Spain and France, but rather learned their profession at sea. In his words they were 'excellent sailors, intrepid and brave, and most of them also very good pilots'. They had already proved themselves in a few combats, which would have honoured any of the older navies of Europe. He also stated that there was a large marine population, of up to 60,000 souls, and discussed their pay in some detail.

He believed that the navy was misunderstood by the government, particularly by the Republican party. He also expressed surprise at the fact that their regulations (*Ordenanzas*, as he called them in Spanish fashion) were thin, and composed by a lawyer who had never stepped on a ship. But this navy was governed by maritime laws, based on the ancient customs and practices of the sea. Since its sailors already knew the laws, it was free from the excess of paperwork that plagued other navies, especially the Spanish. He concluded that the navy was the most solid component of the American state. He nevertheless pointed out that it was not their armed forces that the kingdom of Mexico had to fear, but rather, the growing population massing at its frontiers, and its relentless impulse to migrate.

Macdonnell thought that despite all their weaknesses the United States were going to grow powerful, prosperous and rich. When they reached New Orleans and the Mississippi down to the Gulf of Mexico, and added the western states of Kentucky, Tennessee and Indiana, they would develop industry and commerce, and inherit all the knowledge and expertise of the older states of Europe. He predicted the Anglo-American population would expand to the west and, in two decades, the United States would threaten Mexico.

His conclusion was clear: it was necessary to declare war immediately, while the Americans were still underdeveloped and Spain had a clear military and naval superiority. He pointed out that they had signed no defensive treaties with other nations, whereas the Franco-Spanish alliance was still in place. So there were no political obstacles to initiate such a war. He proposed to seize the initiative, invading Louisiana and Georgia, and capturing New Orleans. The main political objectives of the conflict would be to close the Mississippi river to Anglo-American navigation, and to prevent their further expansion into Spain's North American territories.

These statements were followed by a detailed strategic plan for combined land and sea operations against the United States. The plan was written in a complex style, as Macdonnell attempted to use a scientific, geometrical jargon. This was inspired, as he acknowledged later on, by the published works of Welsh soldier of fortune Henry Lloyd. In a historical study of the Seven Years War, Lloyd had tried to establish a method to plan military operations according to geography, the enemy's strategic points and the lines along which armies could move. He called these 'lines of operation'. Macdonnell used Lloyd's terminology to present the planning of the naval campaign as a 'new method' to devise naval strategy in a scientific manner.

Macdonnell stated that his 'new method' had the virtue of establishing 'fixed and permanent principles' for the conduct of naval operations. He claimed he had derived these philosophic ideas while reflecting on strategy, or the 'sublime part of naval warfare', after careful study of the Spanish intervention in the American Revolution. Then, he claimed, he read Lloyd, most probably the *History of the Late War in Germany* (1766), and was impressed by his idea of 'lines of operation' in land warfare. Thus he borrowed Lloyd's nomenclature and was stimulated to create

a ‘scientific method’ for the planning of naval warfare, based on the search for permanent and invariable principles that could be systematically applied to strategic planning. In his words:

I foresee, in the horizon of what is possible, the emergence of a New Science, which has always existed, but has never been properly understood. This is the Science of Naval Strategy, or the sublime part of War at Sea.

In other words, Macdonnell, in adapting Lloyd’s method to the study of naval warfare, had attempted to create a scientific approach to strategy, as later naval historians tried to do. In fact, the works of Lloyd inspired one of the most influential military thinkers, Baron Antoine-Henri de Jomini, into deriving fixed, unchanging strategic principles from the study of military history. It might be worth pointing out that Jomini’s work, in turn, influenced the great American naval philosopher, Alfred Thayer Mahan, in his definition of the permanent principles of maritime strategy that constitute the framework of his *Influence of Sea Power Upon History* series.¹⁵ Thus, Macdonnell’s ideas represent an early and rare example of the merging of science, history and strategy that was to define navalist thinking in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

The plan comprised combined land and sea operations, in a campaign season lasting from February to June. The first part of the manuscript described the land campaign in detail. To begin with, Macdonnell proposed to create an arsenal in St Augustine, East Florida, in order to supply an army of invasion, composed of between 8,000 and 12,000 men. Since that bay was shallow, the invasion was to start with an amphibious landing in San Marcos, Apalaches Bay. Then the Spanish armies were to move and be supplied along the rivers San Juan and Nassau, in order to occupy the state of Georgia, and then attack New Orleans. At the same time Nueva Madrid would be used to launch a guerilla campaign into Indiana, Kentucky and Tennessee. Macdonnell expected to mobilize the Indian tribes who, in his view, were ‘the best light troops in the world’. He recommended imposing heavy contributions on the American population and destroying what could not be seized by the advancing Spanish armies, in order to ‘ruin the country for many years’. In his words:

War must be serious and bloody, in order to inspire a healthy fear, followed by submission and the political respect due to a Great Nation, such as the Spanish. War without fear is nothing, and loses its most excellent and effective attributes.

Once Georgia was conquered, the land forces were to proceed to the conquest of South Carolina and then, if Congress persisted in its obstinacy, North Carolina too.

The second part of the manuscript described the naval campaign, which was to be co-ordinated with the land campaign. Macdonnell started by establishing a first line of operations, which he called the ‘stationary line’ or ‘line of first position’. It connected the Spanish dockyards and ports where ships could be fitted out, and had to be as close as possible to the theatres of war. Macdonnell traced this line from Puerto Rico to Havana, where it divided in two, one going to Veracruz, and the other to St Augustine, Florida, where the arsenal for the invasion army was to be established.

¹⁵ Sumida, *Inventing Grand Strategy*, 23, 43.

He then traced a second line, composed of what he called alternatively 'lines of movement' or 'spheres of activity'. These encompassed three areas in which American merchant shipping was to be intercepted by Spanish cruising squadrons, each composed of one ship of the line and two frigates. These 'spheres' were:

- 1 New England, especially around Cape Cod, close to Boston.
- 2 Pennsylvania, between the river Delaware and Chesapeake Bay.
- 3 The Carolinas, around Charleston, and its adjacent coasts.

In addition other cruisers were to be stationed in the American trade routes of the North Atlantic (sailing from Ferrol and Cadiz), and the Mediterranean (sailing from Cartagena and Algeciras). Finally, cruisers were to patrol the routes from Manila to Canton, and from Coromandel to Malavar. Macdonnell believed that the capture of a few ships travelling to India would not cover the cost of the cruisers, but it would greatly damage the American economy.

When this *guerre de course* ceased to be productive, all Spanish naval forces were to concentrate in a designated point and, in three divisions, form a 'third line of movement', or 'line of blockade'. The first division was to blockade the coasts of New England, especially around Cape Cod. The second division, from New York to Cape Henry, and the third one, from Cape Fear to Savannah. The blockades were to be more complete at the central points of these three areas.

From here Macdonnell explained how to deal with the American naval forces. A division composed of two battleships and four frigates was to capture the American frigates deployed against Tripoli and other Barbary nations. It is worth pointing out that he was against any attempt to blockade the American navy around the Potomac. He stated that the blockade of naval forces was a bad British practice, because it required to maintain a very large blockading force against a smaller one, with the blockading ships suffering more from the elements than the blockaded. Also, if bad weather imposed an interruption of the blockade, the enemy could make a sortie and strike where less expected.

To illustrate the dangers of blockade, Macdonnell described an episode he witnessed while serving in the Swedish navy during its last war against Russia. A large Swedish squadron was stationed between two Russian ports, being superior to the squadrons in each one of them. But when it lost station due to bad weather, the two smaller Russian squadrons sailed out, concentrated and formed a larger one. Then, they defeated the Swedish in detail. Thus, in Macdonnell's view, it was not sensible to attempt to blockade the American navy. Rather, he proposed to allow it to go out, and destroy or capture its ships piecemeal. To achieve this, two more lines of cruisers were needed, one from Havana to the Florida Keys, and another from Santo Domingo to the port of Baracoa.

Finally, when all that had been achieved, the Spanish navy was to pass to the 'fourth line', or 'line of attack'. The three naval divisions would unite, and attack the American coast, shelling its ports, landing infantry parties, and burning dockyards and ships. The Americans would be completely weakened: surrounded, being attacked from the north, south and west, having lost Georgia, and maybe one or two Carolinas, harassed from New Madrid in their western states and with their ports destroyed and their coasts looted. They would sue for peace.

The project ended with the conditions of the peace treaty to be imposed on the Americans. They were the following:

- 1 To close the Mississippi to American navigation, from the Ohio to the Gulf of Mexico.
- 2 To establish a new frontier line, from the Atlantic to the Mississippi.
- 3 To close the Pacific to American navigation, from California to Cape Horn.
- 4 To end American whaling in the River Plate, and to close all Patagonia to American shipping.

There is evidence showing that Spanish prime minister, Manuel Godoy, requested to see Macdonnell's project on at least three different occasions.¹⁶ However, it is not difficult to understand why he was not interested in taking it any further. Godoy was the main influence behind the Louisiana cession to France, and Macdonnell's project could be seen as a criticism of his North American policy. But there were other factors that prevented it from being taken to reality. Almost as soon as Macdonnell delivered the manuscript, Spanish frigates carrying bullion were attacked by the British, forcing Spain to enter the War of the Third Coalition on Napoleon's side. The following year, an important part of the Spanish navy was destroyed at the battle of Trafalgar. Three years later, in 1808, the French army occupied Spain, starting the Spanish Independence War. These misfortunes proved fatal for the seemingly powerful Spanish naval system. The officer corps became divided between *afrancesados* and patriots, the naval budget was reduced to nothing, shipbuilding ceased completely, and routine maintenance of existing warships was paralysed.

On the other hand, the pressure imposed by the Jefferson administration on the Spanish government was reduced as a result of the worsening relations between the United States and Great Britain. A series of naval incidents prompted Jefferson to impose an embargo on British imports, followed by a total embargo on American exports. The diplomatic tensions created by these policies convinced Jefferson of the wisdom of ceasing to antagonize the Spanish Regency, now a British ally in the war against Napoleon. For a few years, the demands for the cession of further Spanish territory in North America were stopped.

But Spain's American empire began to disintegrate rapidly. In 1810 revolution erupted in both Mexico and South America, and Spain's provisional governments failed to quell popular uprisings or to rally the elites around their own changing agenda. The revolutionaries on their part sought formal recognition from the United States government, with no success. But the merchants of the North Atlantic ports provided an important unofficial aid in the form of weapons sales and logistic support for insurgent privateering.¹⁷ Soon most revolutionary governments developed

16 MNM, MS 1409–bis, doc. 12, 21 Jun. 1816.

17 On insurgent privateering and its relation with the United States, see: Winkler Bealer, *Los corsarios de Buenos Aires*; Faye, 'Commodore Aury'; Currier, *Los cruceros del 'General San Martín'*; Géigel Sabat, *Corsarios y piratas de Puerto Rico*; Long, *Nothing Too Daring*; Díaz, *Luis Brión*; Worcester, *El poder naval*; Samayoa Guevara, *La presencia de Luis Aury*; Ferro, *Vida de Luis Aury*; Beraza, *Los corsarios de Artigas*; Hartog, *Almirante Luis Brión*; Alzola de Cvitanovic, *Los corsarios*; Bidwell, *The First Mexican Navy*; Grummond, *Renato Beluche*; Arguinguey and Rodríguez, *El corso rioplatense*; Grafenstein Gareis, 'Patriotas y piratas'; Grafenstein Gareis,

important privateer fleets, largely dependent on the maritime infrastructure of North American merchant communities. In many cases, their ships were even manned by North American officers and crews.¹⁸

The Madison administration, on the other hand, resumed the aggressive policies that had been abandoned by Jefferson, and initially supported a *coup d'état* in Spanish Florida, which soon degenerated into a bitter civil war between Spanish and Anglo-American settlers. By 1813, however, the fate of the Napoleonic empire was sealed, and the withdrawal of French forces allowed the restoration of the Spanish monarchy. This led to successful campaigns to restore order in the colonies and by 1815 the royalist armies had re-established imperial rule in most of the continent. Nevertheless the United States' unofficial support for the rebels still posed a serious political problem. The insurgent fleets remained active, a bloody civil war between Spanish and Anglo-American settlers still raged in Florida, and an invasion army, comprising many volunteers from the United States, was being prepared in New Spain's northern provinces. In this new context Joseph Vázquez de Figueroa, Secretary of Navy of the restored Spanish king, began considering the possibility of declaring war on the United States.

Vázquez de Figueroa studied Macdonnell's project and in June 1816 commissioned three naval officers to produce a report on the possibilities of taking it to reality.¹⁹ Their verdict, however, left no doubt. Macdonnell had underestimated the power of the American state, and the Spanish navy did not have the strength it had when the project was written.²⁰ This, however, did not deter Vázquez de Figueroa, and he ordered Macdonnell to produce an updated version of the plan, according to the new political situation and proportionate to Spain's naval resources. Macdonnell procrastinated and was reprimanded for it.²¹ He delivered the second version of the plan in September 1816.²²

In this new version, Macdonnell stated that the menace posed by the United States was far greater than in 1804, and that open conflict was inevitable. He believed that the American army comprised 10,000 regulars, not counting the militias raised by the states. As a result of the war of 1812 to 1814 with Great Britain, these forces were divided, half of them deployed against the British, near Canada, and the other half in the vicinity of New Orleans. He also stated that the American naval forces counted two ships of the line, 12 to 13 frigates and an undetermined number of smaller vessels. Their maritime population could mobilize 80,000 sailors, and they had excellent officers. In case of war this navy could capture the ports of Panzacola and San Marcos de Apalache, and launch a damaging *guerre de course* against Spanish shipping.

The Spanish navy, according to Macdonnell, numbered 23 ships of the line, 17 frigates, 8 corvettes and 61 minor vessels. The new version of the plan, he stated, was proportionate to these forces, and it was radically different from the 1804 version.

'Insurgencia y contrainsurgencia'; Laffitte, *Histoire des côtes colombiennes*; Davis, *The Pirates Laffite*; Gámez Duarte, *Del uno al otro confín*.

18 Gámez Duarte, *Del uno al otro confín*, 199–200.

19 MNM, MS 1409-bis, doc. 12, 28 Jun. 1816, 5 July 1816; MNM, MS 435, doc. 1, 4 Aug. 1816.

20 MNM, MS 1409-bis, doc. 12, 26 Jul. 1816.

21 *Ibid.*, 2 Aug. 1816 and 14 Sep. 1816.

22 MNM, MS 1409-bis, doc. 12.

The first step of the land war was to fortify all the frontier outposts of New Spain's Internal Provinces; the ports and bays of Florida, especially Panzacola, and to place gun and mortar batteries to prevent their use by American privateers. The second step was to reinforce the garrisons of Puerto Rico and Cuba. The third step was to capture Mobile, in order to use its bay as a first base for the landing of military supplies. A second base was to be established at Pontchartrain Lake. A third base was to be placed in Natchitoches. Once all this had been achieved, a land force was to attack New Orleans, stemming from all three points. Macdonnell was aware of the British defeat in 1814 not far from that city but he claimed they had made many mistakes. He warned that, if New Orleans was not captured, and Panzacola was lost to an American attack, then the Spanish frontier would recede back to Cuba, and the Gulf of Mexico would 'no longer be ours'.

As in the 1804 project, Macdonnell described the naval war in a separate section. The main purpose of the Spanish navy was to protect Spanish shipping from American privateers. He believed that four frigates would be sufficient to escort the Cadiz convoys but, he warned, it was necessary to improve their armament if they were to face the American heavy frigates. He also expected to compel the Cadiz merchants into arming privateers: six of 30 to 40 guns, and six of 12 to 20. The former would escort convoys sailing to the Antilles, and the latter, those sailing to the Mediterranean. This, in fact, had been done in previous conflicts, and Macdonnell was confident that it could be repeated.

Macdonnell wanted to use the rest of the Spanish navy to launch an intense *guerre de course* against American merchant shipping. This, he believed, would deliver a mortal blow to the Republic. To maintain control of the Gulf of Mexico, two battleships and two frigates were to be stationed in Havana; two more frigates in Panzacola, and two more in Nassau. From these points, cruisers were to sail according to the lines of operation he proposed in the 1804 plan. If two more line-of-battle ships could be fitted out, they were to be stationed in the New England coast, to harass American commerce and attract the attention of their naval forces. He believed that this new version of the plan for land and naval warfare could be carried out with five regiments of foot, one of horse, two to four line-of-battle ships, and 10 frigates.

Vázquez de Figueroa again requested a formal report on the feasibility of the project.²³ The manuscript was sent to the same officers who had studied the 1804 version. Their detailed reply came in October 1816.²⁴ The new report did not question Macdonnell's strategic ideas, but rather emphasized the lack of resources to carry them out. In their opinion the rebellion in Mexico made it difficult to concentrate resources to fortify the frontier. Also they pointed out that the king's naval forces were nowhere near the numbers stated by Macdonnell. If those 23 ships of the line and 17 frigates were available and capable of taking to sea, then there was no question that war had to be declared. They even went as far as to state that it would be possible to contain the Americans with half of those forces. But since the ships were not ready, or simply did not exist, the whole project was a chimera. They conceded the Americans were dangerous, especially their privateers, and that they were instrumental in keeping the Mexican rebellion alight. But until the Spanish navy

23 MNM, MS 1409-bis, doc. 12, 27 Jun. 1816.

24 Ibid., 17 Oct. 1816.

could be rebuilt, the best course of action was to appease the American government, while trying to contain their migrants and stop the spread of their pernicious ideas.²⁵

This was not the end of it. Vázquez de Figueroa thanked Macdonnell for his efforts,²⁶ but when the latter requested to get his manuscripts back, he was refused.²⁷ Vázquez de Figueroa wrote that they might still be of use.²⁸ There were reasons for this. During the final months of 1816 an intense campaign against Spanish shipping was launched by the privateer navy of the Mexican Congress, from its base in Galveston Island, in the province of Texas. This fleet largely operated by selling its prizes in New Orleans, thus prompting a series of protests from the Spanish minister in the United States, Don Luis de Onís. In 1817 the invasion army of general Xavier Mina (largely supplied from the United States) sailed from Galveston and landed in the coast of Tamaulipas. The royalist reaction, however, was swift, and Mina was soon defeated. After this success Vázquez de Figueroa attempted other counterinsurgency measures, such as promoting division amongst Mexico's French privateers. For this purpose, he hired the services of the Laffitte brothers, who seized Galveston Island and prevented the forces of the Mexican Congress reclaiming it as a naval base. More importantly, he also made a serious attempt to rebuild the Spanish navy, by purchasing ships in France. This, however, proved to be a difficult enterprise, due to the volatile political and financial situation of the restored monarchy. Moreover, the North American strategy envisaged by Vázquez de Figueroa had to compete with other plans, promoted by the powerful financial interests that had supported the military solutions attempted both by the regency and Ferdinand VII's government.

From an early stage of the Spanish American Independence Wars, in 1811 the Spanish government had financed its attempts to reconquer America through a council composed mainly by representatives of the powerful Cadiz merchant community, the Comisión de Reemplazos.²⁹ This council obtained and administered loans from the merchant community in order to supply troops and fit out warships destined for Spanish America. It also acted as a representative of Cadiz's merchants, who were interested in sending their own ships under the protection of the warships carrying troops for the reconquest enterprise. Thus there was a close connection between the interests of Spanish transatlantic trade and the planning of the military expeditions destined for Spanish America. It is not surprising that practically all military expeditions were aimed at the key ports of Spanish inter-American and transatlantic trade. Their seizure had more than military significance, for it also allowed the restoration of the trade routes desperately needed by the merchants of peninsular Spain.³⁰ This is another element that explains why the North American strategy envisaged by Vázquez de Figueroa failed to turn into reality, despite the efforts he made to rebuild the Spanish navy.

25 MNM, MS 1409-bis, doc. 12.

26 MNM, MS 1409-bis, doc. 12, 1 Nov. 1816.

27 Ibid., 15 Nov. 1816.

28 Ibid., 22 Nov. 1816.

29 On this subject, see Fontana, *La quiebra de la monarquía absoluta*; García Baquero, *Comercio colonial y guerras revolucionarias*; Teijeiro de La Rosa, *La Real Hacienda Militar*; Costeloe, *La respuesta a la independencia*; Malamud, *Sin marina, sin tesoro y casi sin soldados*.

30 Malamud, *Sin marina, sin tesoro y casi sin soldados*, 44-7.

From June 1816 Ferdinand VII's government began considering mounting a definitive military effort to subdue its Spanish American rebels, the *Grande Expedición*, or 'Great Expedition'. From the beginning, there was a clear interest in sending it either to Tierra Firme or the River Plate, in accordance with the interests of Cadiz's trade, and in direct contradiction with Vázquez de Figueroa's North American strategy. Precisely at the same time when Vázquez de Figueroa requested the report on Macdonnell's first plan, the king was already deciding to support a reconquest strategy aimed at South America.

This was not the last time Vázquez de Figueroa's ideas diverged from the dominant political forces within his own government. His policies to purchase and build ships in France were successful, but they produced only small units, mainly fit for the protection of trade. Ferdinand VII, on the other hand, relied on his Secretary of War to obtain a whole squadron of line-of-battle ships and frigates from the Russian government,³¹ a transaction so secret that Figueroa was not informed of it until the ships had been delivered to one of his subordinates, Baltasar Hidalgo de Cisneros, captain general of Cadiz.³² It is significant that this operation was launched at the same time Vázquez de Figueroa was considering the implementation of Macdonnell's project, and about the same time the first calls to fit out the Great Expedition were made.³³ Clearly his exclusion from the purchase of the Russian squadron blocked any attempt of using it in any enterprise other than the re-conquest of Spanish American markets.

Vázquez de Figueroa reacted to this humiliation by questioning the report made by Hidalgo de Cisneros about the state of the ships. He personally said to the king that they were rotten and unfit for service, and that the whole operation had been a monstrous corruption scandal. He consigned this version in his manuscript memoirs, and it became the standard narrative on the failure to rebuild the Spanish navy. Recent studies, however, have unearthed not only Baltasar Hidalgo de Cisneros's technical reports, but also Vázquez de Figueroa's own correspondence on the matter. These documents, which apparently had been hidden, demonstrate that Vázquez de Figueroa opposed the fitting out of the Russian squadron for political motives, and slandered the operation as a way of protecting his own reputation as naval minister. Not surprisingly he was dismissed and banished from the court. Some officers, however, closed ranks around him, and the first two commanders appointed to the main line-of-battle ships, the *Alejandro I* and *Fernando VII*, declined their commissions on the grounds of poor health. They were dismissed from the navy too. The ships, on the other hand, did not receive any maintenance, and had short operational lives. Later on Vázquez de Figueroa's version of this affair became popularised, since there was a general reluctance to settle the debt contracted for the purchase of the Russian ships.³⁴

The diplomatic relations with the United States also changed during this period. By 1818, insurgent privateering was turning into piracy, forcing American shipping

31 On this subject, see Alemparte Guerrero, 'La escuadra rusa vendida'; Anca Alamillo, 'Historia de la armada española'.

32 Hernández Díaz, *Baltasar Hidalgo*.

33 Anca Alamillo, 'Historia de la armada española', 39–40.

34 *Ibid.*, 46–61.

to pay high insurance rates.³⁵ Thus, the unofficial support the privateers had enjoyed in American ports disappeared, and soon the United States navy developed a more active presence in the Gulf of Mexico and the Caribbean. Moreover, the United States army led an invasion of East Florida under the pretext of ousting insurgent pirates; in fact, the former fleet of the Mexican Congress. By then, the total lack of an operational navy and a viable strategy confirmed that the Ferdinand VII's government was still incapable of any effective intervention in North America. This made diplomacy the only option left. In 1819 the Spanish government signed the Adams-Onís Treaty, delivering the Two Floridas to the United States and delaying the Spanish-American naval war for several decades.

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35 Morgan, 'Sea Power in the Gulf of Mexico', 106–22.

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