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## Spain Deserves More Credit for American Independence

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## Spain Deserves More Credit for American Independence

By David Head  
UCF Forum columnist  
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“Yo solo” should be just as memorable as “Give me liberty or give me death!”



Painting of Bernardo de Gálvez at the siege of Pensacola by Augusto Ferrer-Dalmau.

The American Revolution is famous for the stirring words traditionally attributed to its patriots. There’s Patrick Henry’s “Give me liberty or give me death!” And Israel Putnam’s “Don’t fire ’til you see the whites of their eyes!” And Nathan Hale’s “I only regret that I have but one life to lose for my country.”

This month we mark the 240<sup>th</sup> anniversary of a revolutionary battle cry that I think should be better known: “Yo solo”— “I alone,” the words attributed to Bernardo de

Gálvez, the governor of Spanish Louisiana, who attacked British-held Pensacola and forced the town's surrender on May 8, 1781, two years before the end of the Revolutionary War.

Gálvez's words remind us that the American Revolution — the eight-year war between the United States and Great Britain — was also fought here in Florida, led by the Spanish. Their victory certainly should be celebrated as a source of pride for all Floridians.

Though Spain never signed an official agreement to fight alongside the United States, the two had a common enemy — Britain, long a Spanish rival — and a common friend — France, with whom both would form their own alliance.

Spain declared war on Britain in 1779, but not out of altruism to the American cause. Spain's goals were self-interested and strategic. King Carlos III wanted to recover key positions in the Mediterranean lost to Britain earlier in the century: Gibraltar, on the Spanish coast, and the island of Minorca. Preserving Spanish access to the Gulf of Mexico and Central America was also vital. Plus, taking Britain down a peg would feel good, too.

The loss of Pensacola helped convince British officials that the war was becoming unwinnable.

When news of war reached New Orleans, the capital of Spain's Louisiana colony, Gálvez was ready to attack his neighbor, the British colony of West Florida, which stretched east from the Mississippi River to the Apalachicola River near Tallahassee, where the colony of British East Florida began. Cobbling together a force of army regulars, local militia, free Black soldiers, and adventurers from the United States, Gálvez marched his men through the bayous to hit the British fort at Baton Rouge in September 1779. Persuading the Spanish navy to send support from Cuba, he struck British Mobile the next year.

Then came the prize, Pensacola. Gálvez again assembled a diverse force of Spanish regulars including Majorcans and Irishmen, French troops, free Black soldiers from Havana, and free Black militiamen from New Orleans. They sailed from Havana in March. But there was a problem. To enter Pensacola Bay, ships had to pass through a narrow channel between barrier islands, and the British had set up a battery of cannons to defend it.

The first Spanish ship ran aground and with British cannon balls flying, some of the naval officers wanted to give up. Gálvez scorned their caution. Urging "those with honor and courage to follow him," Gálvez pushed his ship, the *Gálveztown*, through the channel, proving it could be done. "I, my sons, went alone to sacrifice myself," he later boasted to his men, "so as not to expose a single soldier."

It took some later polishing to change "I, my sons, went alone" into the pithier "I alone," but that's the version that Gálvez emblazoned on his coat of arms, and it stuck.

Whatever Gálvez actually said, the Spanish flotilla got inside the bay, landed the army, and lay siege to the city. It was only a matter of time. A few weeks later, the British surrendered.

The loss of Pensacola helped convince British officials that the war was becoming unwinnable. As the historian Kathleen DuVal put it, “Britain had, for the first time in the war, lost a colony that had not rebelled.” When, later in 1781, another British army surrendered to a combined American-French force at the Battle of Yorktown, the one-two punch was unmistakable. A negotiated peace acknowledging American independence was the war’s most likely outcome.

Yet, I think few Americans today have ever heard of Gálvez, and Spain’s contribution to the war is equally forgotten. And many Floridians are unaware that the devolution was fought here. How many residents know the state was once a British colony, just like the famous first 13 that became the United States?

The Spanish victory at Pensacola should be a source of pride. At a time when American history is buffeted by ideological interpretations of the nation’s past, such as the dueling 1619 Project and the 1776 Report, the story of Gálvez, his men, and the Siege of Pensacola offers an expanded vision of the American story while upholding the ideals of the revolution.

Remember it: “Yo solo” — the evolution’s battle cry en español.

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