



**EXPLORATION OR ESPIONAGE?:
THE SPANISH REACTION TO
HUMBOLDT'S MEETINGS WITH
JEFFERSON IN 1804¹**

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Five years after Alexander von Humboldt's audience with the Spanish monarch Carlos IV in March of 1799, at the end of this voyage, in June of 1804, the Prussian traveller found himself as a guest of Thomas Jefferson in the White House. While Carlos VI provided him with a very generous permission that allowed him to carry out his scientific expedition in the Spanish colonies, the American president was much interested in the outcome of this exploration voyage, and in particular, the knowledge on the Spanish territories in Humboldt's possession.² Between these two crucial moments the explorer devoted his time to the study of all facets of natural history in the Spanish overseas dominions, which at the time of his travels were divided into the viceroalties of New Spain, New Granada, Peru, and the island of Cuba. This ambitious and in many ways unprecedented venture, and its far-reaching outcome in form of a large number of publications, laid the foundations of Humboldt's incomparable fame that would increase continuously over the next half-century. It was an enterprise aimed at the progress of science, however, it was undertaken in a historical context marked by clearly defined imperial interests, which would have an impact on the use of the knowledge produced by the Prussian explorer.

Humboldt's American voyage also chanced to create a connection between Spain and the United States at a very particular moment in history: in October 1803, only a few months before his arrival to Philadelphia, the United States Senate ratified the purchase of the Louisiana territory, a vast region that since 1762 was in Spanish possession, before it returned into French hands in the year 1800. This extended land stretched from west of

¹ This article has been elaborated in the frame of a Marie Curie Grant awarded by the European Commission Research Executive Agency (AHumScienceNet, project number 327127, FP7-PEOPLE-2012-IOF) and forms part of the book project *Humboldt's Empire of Knowledge: From the Royal Spanish Court to the American President's House* (University of California Press, 2019).

² See documents related to the authorization process published in Puig-Samper and Rebok, *Sentir y medir*, 201-207. For more information, see also Puig-Samper, "Humboldt, un prusiano en la Corte".

the Mississippi to the Rocky Mountains, which meant that the young nation would double its size. While for Spain this transaction was an important factor that accelerated the disintegration of the Spanish empire, already in decline; on the other, it established a firm foundation for the westward expansion of the United States, and its rise as a new empire during the nineteenth century. This was precisely the moment when Humboldt moved from New Spain to the United States and, through this chain of events, became involved in the concerns and pursuits of both nations. It was also the beginning of the territorial expansion of the United States towards the Pacific and the consequent start of government-promoted reconnaissance of the Western territories. These circumstances made that May of 1804 was the timing perfect for a personal encounter with the American president, who in those years also acted as president of the *American Philosophical Society*, the nation's most prestigious learned society (Rebok 2019). Nevertheless, at the moment of his presentation at the Spanish court in 1799, Humboldt could not possibly have anticipated this drastic change in the political map, nor was a visit to the United States on the agenda for his expedition. And even if he had possibly thought about such a visit, in the context of his rising curiosity for this country since his student years in Hamburg, he could not have foreseen this development, as a result of which his scientific expedition would be drawn into the opposing strategic interests between these two rival powers.

This evolution of events provided an excellent setting for the United States to receive a visit from the Prussian explorer and, on the other side, also for Humboldt himself, this encounter would open up challenging new opportunities for the future.³ But what about Spain? What was the official Spanish reaction to his visit in the United States, right after this important land transaction, and therefore in a politically very delicate moment? Was the Court at all worried, we might wonder, that Humboldt could pass on to other nations the geographical information that he had compiled in the archives in Madrid and in the Spanish possessions? During his visit to the royal court in Aranjuez, it seems, there was no real awareness of the consequences of Humboldt's economic and institutional independence with regard to the information that would come into his possession. At least no discussion of this matter is reflected in the records. In any case, the authorities should have been aware of the impossibility of controlling the diffusion of knowledge the same way they had done with those expeditions that were financed by

³ Details on Humboldt's travels through the United States can be found in two older though excellent works: Schoenwaldt, "Humboldt und die Vereinigten Staaten" and Friis, "Humboldts Besuch in den Vereinigten Staaten von Amerika". Regarding his impact in this country please see Dassow Walls, *The Passage to Cosmos*.

Spain. In these cases the authorities would maintain power over the outcome and were in the situation to use them as they pleased, publishing them entirely or partially, or just storing them in the archives, without any further elaboration. This was clearly not possible in Humboldt's case. He strongly believed in the importance of free circulation of knowledge, which he would pursue all his life, even in those moments when it was not aligned with the interests of the political world. The officials at the court may not have dared to openly discuss this issue, given the generous support by the monarch, and his advisors, that the Prussian had received. Or they might indeed not have been conscious of this risk, or at least not of the extent to which he would actually take control of the knowledge produced.

Hence, the intriguing questions at this point are: What was the reaction of the diplomatic representatives of the Spanish empire in the United States, when they learned in May 1804 that, after Humboldt's extended stay in New Spain, he had changed his itinerary and added a trip to Philadelphia and Washington to his American expedition? Would they establish contact with the famous explorer? Or would they express any kind of concern about his close connection to American political and scientific circles at this moment?

Spanish diplomatic representation in the US

At this point we need to have a closer look at the Spanish diplomats commissioned to the United States during the time of Humboldt's visit in 1804, including their respective political interests and orientation, since this would condition their view of his scientific endeavor. How each of them positioned himself ideologically and the difference in their character, explains to a certain extent their respective reaction with regard to the Prussian's arrival in Philadelphia.

Let us begin with the Spanish Envoy Extraordinary and Minister Plenipotentiary in Philadelphia during Humboldt's visit, Carlos Martínez de Irujo y Tacón (1763-1824). Irujo, often spelled Yrujo, was a Knight of the Order of Carlos III and from 1803 also known as the Marqués de Casa Irujo. He arrived in June 1796 as the first Spanish Ambassador; before, his mission diplomatic relations had been carried out by *Chargé d'Affaires* (Sealove 1963). After his marriage with Sarah McKean in April 1798, the daughter of Governor Thomas McKean (McKean 2016), his close connection to her father brought him into contact with many intellectual and influential people of his time. Over the years, Irujo would play a prominent role in Philadelphia society, establishing intense correspondence networks with leading politicians and in 1802 he was honored as a member of the *American Philosophical Society* (Beerman 1981). However, he and his wife have been described as "intriguers of the highest order", and Irujo himself was portrayed as "an obstinate, impetuous and rather vain little person with

reddish hair; enormously wealthy, endlessly touchy, extremely intelligent and vastly attractive", who lost his temper from time to time. He was known for his "dignity and shrewdness", as well as "the brilliant qualities of his elegant and felicitous personality. While serving his King "with energetic loyalty", he was also "on intimate terms at the President's House" (Wandell and Minnigerode 1925, 154, 230). Another source characterized him as "proud as a typical Spaniard should be" and "a flighty and dangerous friend, but a most troublesome enemy." (Adams, 425). Irujo seemed to feel very comfortable in the United States, he "loved the rough-and-tumble of democratic habits, and as the same source describes, he "remembered his diplomatic dignity only when he could use it as a weapon against a secretary of state".

Reading these comments about Irujo, or delving deeper into his correspondence of the time, it becomes clear that he was quite a character who took no pains to avoid trouble, not even with the American government. In fact, there were several moments during his career when the United States attempted to make Spain withdraw its ambassador. In addition, he had the particularly difficult diplomatic task, to inform the Spanish Crown about the conditions of the Louisiana Purchase and, vice versa, to communicate to Jefferson's cabinet that his government was vehemently opposed to the transaction. The Crown considered it to be an open infringement of the third treaty of San Ildefonso, signed in 1800, given that Napoleon had promised Spain "never to alienate" this land. Irujo even copied the wording of the Spanish-French agreement in order to prove that by selling this land without the approval of Spain, France had indeed committed a "manifest violation of the obligations contracted by her with his Catholic Majesty".⁴ The Spanish minister became quite passionate about this issue, and by attacking the validity of the transaction on a variety of grounds, apparently not always with the most polished manners, he not only caused a rift between the State Department and the Spanish legation, but also a personal conflict between himself and Madison that was to plague bilateral relations with Spain for years. This personal antagonism was another factor that added to the delicate state of official Spanish-American communications at this crucial moment.

Although Irujo was described as being "thoroughly at home" in Jefferson's domestic household as well as his political circle, with a double title to confidence and affection, thanks to his connections with Governor McKean and his position as Spanish ambassador, over time his relationship with the president would become rather complicated (Adams, 425). An interesting anecdote illustrates the way Irujo chose to be on good terms with

⁴ Carlos Martínez de Yrujo to James Madison, 4 September 1803, in *The Papers of James Madison*, vol. 5, 16 May - 31 October 1803, pp. 378-379.

Jefferson, just after the start of the latter's first term in March 1801. This anecdote provides a good portrait of his character, while it also reflects well Jefferson's cautious diplomatic course of action, and more importantly, it depicts their relationship shortly before Humboldt's arrival to the United States. All started with a charming offer by his wife Sarah McKean, who presented her respectful compliments to Jefferson and sent him, along with "two dozen bottles of sweet Paxarete wine".⁵ This came at a moment when, and this is an important detail, at the request of the Adams administration, the Spanish government had recalled Irujo from his position in Philadelphia in 1800. However, given his strong ties to Philadelphia through his wife, Irujo was not inclined to leave the city. Under a new president he saw a chance that this recall could be reversed, and he was willing to do anything necessary to extend his stay. He was lucky. His pleas were heard, and one of Jefferson's first diplomatic acts was to ask the Spanish government to renew Irujo's assignment in Washington.

Irujo was delighted and immediately sent a letter of gratitude, thanking the president for intervening in this matter.⁶ Knowing of Jefferson's passion for good wine, and his continuous efforts to obtain it from Europe, Irujo quickly found a way to express his thankfulness in a more material way, and at the same time, to ensure good future connections to the head of the American Administration. The following year he sends him "two hampers of Champaing which he wishes may prove as good as in reputation".⁷ However, according to the President's memorandum book, which included a list of wine used during his presidency, what Irujo called a "hamper" in reality were a hundred bottles of champagne (Bear and Stanton 1997, 1115).

No doubt Jefferson the wine connoisseur would have been delighted by this gift; however, Jefferson the president did not feel comfortable accepting such generosity, and even less, with its appearances. Hence, in his reply a few days after receiving the bottles, he showed his appreciation for this "excellent supply" and the expression of friendly relations, but also inquired about the price of the consignment. "This is such a transaction of *meum & tuum*"⁸ as

⁵ Sarah McKean Irujo to Thomas Jefferson, 24 March 1802, in *The Papers of Thomas Jefferson*, vol. 37, *4 March–30 June 1802*, pp. 118–119.

⁶ Carlos Martínez de Irujo to Thomas Jefferson, 6 October 1801, in *The Papers of Thomas Jefferson*, vol. 35, *1 August–30 November 1801*, pp. 392–393.

⁷ Carlos Martínez de Irujo to Thomas Jefferson, 20 November 1802," in *The Papers of Thomas Jefferson*, vol. 39, *13 November 1802–3 March 1803*, p. 50.

⁸ *Meum & tuum*. what is mine and what is yours.

must follow the same rules between us as between others (...), and if not done on the usual & equal terms would forbid my availing myself of a similar accomodation in future", Jefferson wrote.⁹ Nevertheless, the next letter from the Spanish diplomat, written at the end of December 1802, did not contain the desired information, but the announcement of the shipping of "a *new* supply of my excellent champaigne", together with his "congratulations of the *new* year". It was another hundred bottles, which he could "spare without inconvenience", as Irujo stated. In exchange, he requested "the favor of another dozen of your excellent Madeira".¹⁰ In some way, however, the price for these bottles must have been determined, since Jefferson noted in his *Memorandum Book* that he paid Irujo \$150 for the champagne (Bear and Stanton, 1115). How much the president was concerned about following correct procedure is shown by the fact that he also paid the corresponding customs duties of \$22.50 on the wine, since he was aware that for the ambassador this type of importation was exempt from duty. "It would be improper for me to take the benefit of that", he wrote to the clergyman and politician Muhlenberg, and asked him to "take the proper measures for paying the duty" with the check he sent attached. Preferably without mentioning his name, he added, in order to "avoid ill-intended observations", for instance by indicating that it was the due duty for a "parcel of wines not entitled to privilege".¹¹

This anecdote is not only entertaining to read, but it also clearly depicts the rather different *modus operandi* of the two politicians. For the Spaniard it must have been a perfectly valid way to ensure good future relations; to Jefferson it rather represented a moral conflict – his passion for good wine versus his concern to preserve his moral integrity, or at least the appearance of moral integrity. While for Irujo it was a normal strategy for building friendship, with no other ethical implications, President Jefferson was indeed worried to enter into a situation that could yield his foes the slightest chance to put his honor into question. Nevertheless, shrewd as Jefferson was, in the end he was able to preserve both the wine and his well-earned symbolic capital. For Irujo on the other hand, in the long term his efforts would not pay off. As early as the following year he would find himself in severe

⁹ Thomas Jefferson to Carlos Martínez de Irujo, 9 December 1802, in *The Papers of Thomas Jefferson*, vol. 39, 13 November 1802–3 March 1803, 127–128.

¹⁰ Carlos Martínez de Irujo to Thomas Jefferson, 30 December 1802, in *ibidem*, 238–239.

¹¹ John Peter Gabriel Muhlenberg to Thomas Jefferson, 6 February 1803, *The Papers of Thomas Jefferson*, vol. 39, 13 November 1802–3 March 1803, p. 464.

disagreement with the US government over the Louisiana Purchase. In addition, his troublesome character did nothing to smooth the situation, and even affected his carefully-nurtured relationship with the American president. In February 1804, in his anger, he even declined an invitation from the president and broke off communication with him for several months.¹² It was under these circumstances – when also Jefferson’s administration had become so frustrated with Irujo that they later would request the Crown to remove him as minister – that Humboldt arrived on the stage.¹³

The Spanish Consul General in Philadelphia, however, Valentín de Foronda y González de Echávarri (1751-1821), who was in the city from 1801 onwards, had a rather different character and a different political stance. He came from an honorable and wealthy Basque family and was already known in Spain as a liberal thinker, as an intellectual, and as the author of articles on political philosophy and political economy. He had taught at the Basque Institutional School known as the *Seminario de Vergara*, had travelled widely and was made a Knight of the Military Order of Santiago in 1793 and a Knight of the Order of Carlos III in 1801. His nomination for the diplomatic position in Philadelphia was due to the Secretary of State, Mariano Luis de Urquijo. During his brief term from February 1799 until December 1800 he was not only very instrumental for Humboldt’s project and several other scientific undertakings that had been launched during his time. Urquijo, of Basque origin as well, also appointed the enlightened economist and writer Foronda as General Consul and later as Minister Plenipotentiary of Spain to

¹² Carlos Martínez de Irujo to Thomas Jefferson, 10 February 1804,” *The Papers of Thomas Jefferson*, vol. 42, 16 November 1803–10 March 1804, p. 444. Madison complained to Jefferson about the behaviour of the Spanish minister: James Madison to Thomas Jefferson, 24 April 1804, in: *The Papers of James Madison*, vol. 7, 2 April–31 August 1804, pp. 103–104. The next letter from Irujo to Jefferson was not until September 1804, when he contacted the president to discuss with him the behaviour of Pickney in Madrid: To Thomas Jefferson from Carlos Martínez de Irujo, 7 September 1804, *Founders Online*, National Archives, <http://founders.archives.gov/documents/Jefferson/99-01-02-0329> (Early Access document from *The Papers of Thomas Jefferson*).

¹³ In 1806 relation had turned that bad that Jefferson wrote an official complaint titles “Propositions for consideration & consultation respecting Yrujo”, which contained very direct words: Memo re Carlos Martínez de Irujo, 9 July 1806, *Founders Online* <http://founders.archives.gov/documents/Jefferson/99-01-02-3992> (Early Access document from *The Papers of Thomas Jefferson*).

the United States. He might have thought that this country would be a good place for this liberal spirit. As a scholar and member of various learned and scientific societies in Valladolid, Zaragoza and Bordeaux, Foronda quickly established in the United States contacts with the *American Philosophical Society*, where he presented a series of papers to the Society and was distinguished with membership in 1804 (Spell 1936; Foronda 1807). As a scholar, He much enjoyed the company of the men who shared his intellectual interests in Philadelphia, and took full advantage of the opportunities he found in this nation, particularly with regard to the freedom of the press. Here he would be able to get into print what he dared not publish in Spain. Some of his writings had indeed to be handled with care, since they reflected his liberal attitude and in Spain the time was not yet ripe for his convictions. Prior to coming to the United States, Foronda had experienced the himself, by getting into difficulties with the Spanish authorities due to his "unorthodox" ideas.

His text entitled *Carta sobre lo que debe hacer un príncipe que tenga colonias a gran distancia* (1803), in which he advocated independence for the Spanish colonies, was wisely published anonymously in Philadelphia. His argument was that if Spain gave up its colonies voluntarily and became a purely peninsular kingdom, this would increase the wealth and happiness of the population in Spain. Relieved of the great burden of governing and defending their colonies, the government could devote resources to internal improvements and the betterment of agriculture and industry. Foronda even wrote an appendix to this text, signed as "editor", in which he held up the United States as an example Spain should follow. This nation had no gold or silver mines, nor colonies or fleets to defend her trade, he argued, but in 1801 the nation exported \$93 million worth of merchandise (Smith 1961, 275-276). Clearly, with this conviction, the United States was a better place for him to be. Interestingly, he based his argument on the same modern economic model that pursuit not just on the extraction of resources, but preferred the creation of a functioning and profitable economy, which also Humboldt would use for his purposes.

Another delicate text that Foronda wrote shortly before Humboldt's arrival in Philadelphia in March of 1804 was his analysis of the United States called *Apuntes ligeros sobre los Estados Unidos de la América septentrional*. These notes were probably written for his superior, ambassador Irujo, and for Cervallos, the Secretary of State in Madrid, and were based on his experience of three years of residence in this country. It gives a good impression of the situation of the nation at this moment, seen through the eyes of a Spanish citizen with a very positive attitude towards his host country (Foronda 1948). In contrast to Irujo, who sought to keep the old world order, maintaining the privileges of the ruling class, Foronda knew he was living in an age of transition that was to see the rearrangement of several regions of the world.

He was aware that this also implied the disappearance of the Spanish empire and therefore saw the potential of the United States as a convincing model to follow (De Onís 1948, 357). In a letter to Cevallos he also described how this country was prospering and the threat it could mean to Spain, given its proximity to the Kingdom of Mexico.¹⁴

In the same line of argument, just before returning to Spain in 1809, Foronda published yet another controversial text in Philadelphia, entitled *Apuntes ligeros sobre la Nueva Constitución proyectada por la Majestad de la Junta Suprema de España y reformas que intenta hacer en las leyes*, where he defends a constitutional government with separation of powers, the sovereignty of the people, and individual freedom against despotism. Given that over the time of his duty in the United States, Foronda had also developed close contacts, or even friendship, he was eager to obtain the American's assessment on this paper. Thus he sent it to him and incorporated into the text the suggestions that Jefferson offered.¹⁵ It was not only collegial generosity, what inspired the president to comment on the paper - with an eye on his own interests, he must have appreciated a diplomat of the rivalling power who encouraged his own nation to give up its empire. Most certainly he felt another step closer to his goals. However, unsurprisingly, in his home country Foronda did not receive the same reaction. Here his attempt to introduce republican ideas was not at all appreciated, but rather considered to be treason. Hence, after his return he would have to face even more severe problems as before his departure, only this time he was sentenced to ten years in prison for dissent (De Onís 1968, 353).

Reactions to Humboldt's Visit

From this description of both characters, we can easily imagine which of these two representatives of the Spanish empire would be the more interesting interlocutor for the Prussian during his stay in the United States. It is unclear, whether the diplomats had received any official note regarding this visit from the Spanish authorities in Cuba. So far no official instructions to them have been found. In the local journals in Philadelphia, however, it was announced that the "distinguished Prussian Philosopher (scientist), with

¹⁴ Valentin de Foronda to Pedro Cevallos, Philadelphia, 22 December 1807, AHN, Madrid, Legajo Estado 5633, n. 76.

¹⁵ Valentín de Foronda to Thomas Jefferson, 26 August 1809, *The Papers of Thomas Jefferson*, Retirement Series, vol. 1, *4 March 1809 to 15 November 1809*, 2004, pp. 470-471; "Thomas Jefferson to Valentín de Foronda, 4 October 1809," in: *Ibidem*, vol. 1, p. 577-578.

his companion, Mr. Bonpland" had arrived on their way to Europe.¹⁶ In addition, this important event was broadly commented upon in the intellectual circles, particularly among all people related to the *American Philosophical Society*, to which both diplomats were closely connected. Hence the question here is if they seemed to be concerned about the political implications of this visit? Would they fear that that sensitive information could be passed to the American government, at a moment when Jefferson's cabinet was eagerly trying to obtain reliable information on the newly acquired territory, and Spanish possessions in North America in general?

As a short note in the *Gaceta de Madrid*, the official Spanish government journal, on May 25 shows, Valentín de Foronda announced that for the following Sunday he had sent a lunch invitation to Humboldt and his traveling companions at his residence in Philadelphia.¹⁷ This was just a few days after Humboldt's arrival, and thus reveals that the Spanish representative was well aware of his visit and was indeed interested in meeting the famous explorer in person. Moreover, it shows that he not only sought to establish contact with the traveler and his companions, but that it was also important to make the information public in Spain. Besides his professional motives given his position as Consul General, he most likely also had a strong personal interest in getting acquainted with Humboldt. He must have been intrigued to hear his first-hand impression on the political situation in the Spanish colonies. And since Foronda seemed to be aware of the pending shift of power inside the Spanish empire, and in consequence between Spain and the United States, to the point that he had introduced specific propositions in this context, both persons had indeed many common topics of interest to discuss. Unfortunately, there are no records of their encounter, nor are there references in letters to third parties that could shed light on the topics they discussed. Not even in the diplomatic correspondence between to Spain exchanged at this moment was this meeting reflected. Hence, we can only imagine that they most likely had a lively conversation that included a discussion of the first signs of those problems that would later lead to the independence movement in Spanish America.

At the first sight, it seems rather surprising that no reference to Humboldt's stay in the United States has been found in Foronda's diplomatic correspondence. The reports he sent to his superior in Madrid dedicated considerable space to the recent Louisiana Purchase and the dispute about

¹⁶ *Relf's Philadelphia Gazette and Daily's Advisor*, year 21, n. 4825. It was also announced in the *United States Gazette*, see: Friis, "Alexander von Humboldts Besuch", 150.

¹⁷ *Gaceta de Madrid*, no. 61, July 31 (1804) 677. Founded in 1661, this journal provided official information on the kingdom, today it is named *Boletín Oficial del Estado*.

its boundaries. The possible impact of the information in the Prussian's possession in the United States, however, seems not to have been a subject to be dealt with in official communications.¹⁸ Not even the surviving correspondence of Foronda during the months of May and June 1804 reveals any reference to Humboldt as a person, his activities in the United States, or his visit to the consul's residence. Strangely, at this point, Humboldt's connection to the center of political power in Washington or the centers of learning in Philadelphia did not seem to have raised any concerns in Spanish diplomatic circles. Apparently, the potential circulation of information in his hands was not perceived as a risk to the interests of the Spanish crown. However, given Foronda's ideological background, and the problems he had therefore faced in Spain, it might also simply have not been in his interest to make the content of his conversation with the liberal Prussian scholar public. More so if it included conflictive aspects, such as his attitude towards the situation in Spanish America and its potential future. Being silent on this matter, could thus also have been a mere act of caution by the Spanish diplomat.

However, while Foronda did indeed manifest an interest in meeting Humboldt as an enlightened and liberal scientist, and invited him right after his arrival in town, a personal encounter between the Prussian and Irujo seems not to have taken place. The Spanish ambassador was apparently not aware of the wider significance of this visit in its historic context, or else he saw no potential danger to Spanish interest. He seemed to be too busy with other matters at that moment to be interested in the celebrated Prussian. We do not know at what moment exactly he heard for the first time about the explorer's visit to Philadelphia, but it is quite likely that he was informed from the beginning. Though Irujo would usually not attend the meetings of *American Philosophical Society*, given his residence in Washington, from the minutes we know that he was indeed present at an assemblage of the Society on June 15, where the Prussian's visit was discussed.¹⁹

In Irujo's case he did inform Madrid about the visit, though it was only a brief comment in a letter to the Secretary of State in Madrid, written on 22 June, shortly before Humboldt's departure. It did not contain any discussion

¹⁸ Archivo Histórico Nacional, Guía Sección de Estado, Secretaria de Estado. 1.4.6. Negociado de los EEUU; Sección de Estado, Inventario Topográfico, tomo VI, legajos 5001 a 5999. See also: Gomez del Campillo, *Relaciones diplomáticas entre España y los EEUU, 1944 - 1945*.

¹⁹ American Philosophical Society Archives, Minutes of the APS, p. 200 (APS_Minutes-1799-1804_200, in <https://diglib.amphilsoc.org/islandora/object/text%3A163793/pages?page=16>).

of this visit or its potential impact though on the conflictive situation with the United States. At the end of a diplomatic report he added, as a post script, the information that three weeks before, the *Baron de Humboldt* from Prussia had arrived from Havana, accompanied by a young Frenchman named Monsieur Bonpland, and that both naturalists had been traveling for five years in the Spanish possessions in America, with the approval of the King. They were accompanied by "Don Carlos Montúfar", a native of Quito,²⁰ he continued to inform, who had joined them for a large part of their journey, and would embark within a few days for Bordeaux, from where Humboldt and Montúfar would most likely proceed immediately to Madrid.²¹

The latter piece of information, however, seems to have been a misunderstanding: Humboldt certainly had no intention of returning to Madrid, not at this point nor later in life, when a new invitation of Humboldt was discussed within the Spanish diplomatic circles (Rebok 2009, 261-266). Having the example of other explorers in mind, he certainly did not want incur this risk. Particularly the unfortunate fate of Alessandro Malaspina, a Spanish naval officer of Italian origin, who after returning to Spain from his expedition to America, Asia and Australia (1789-94) was accused of spying and imprisoned, served as a warning to Humboldt. In consequence, he seems to have been worried that the Crown would try to get hold of the material he had gathered in their colonies and obtain control over the fruit of years of work. The opportunity to sail from Philadelphia to France therefore seemed to be a safer option than returning from Cuba to Europe, which would most likely have been on a Spanish ship.

Once in Paris, where they attended the coronation of Napoleon as emperor of France, the three traveling companions went their separate ways: while Montúfar left for Spain and Humboldt returned to Berlin, at this moment only Bonpland stayed in Paris. If Irujo was in the belief that Humboldt would proceed to Madrid, it must have been a mere speculation,

²⁰ Carlos Montúfar y Larrea (1780-1816). After their arrival in Paris he left for Madrid, provided with letters of recommendation from Humboldt, in order to initiate his military education at the *Real Academia de Nobles*. He entered the service of the Spanish army and fought against Napoleon's troops in the Peninsular War. Later, however, he decided to return to Quito to take an active part in the Independence movement, at the side of Simon Bolívar, and was executed in 1816 in Buga, Colombia. See: Hampe Martínez, "Carlos Montúfar y Larrea (1780-1816)", 711-720.

²¹ Marqués de Casa Irujo to Pedro Cevallos, 22 de junio 1804, *Archivo Histórico Nacional*, Sección IX, Papeles de Estado, legajo 5.631, Legación de España en los Estados Unidos, apartado 1, n. 417-468, vol. II (Correspondencia del embajador marqués de Casa Irujo), n. 428.

thinking that this would be a similar situation to those explorers in Spanish services, who after the completion of their expedition would return to report to the Court. In any case, the tone of his note also suggests that he seemed to see him rather as an explorer, as a pure natural scientist and not as a potential informant of the American government. Given his royal loyalty, and his passionate defense of all the potential interests of the Spanish crown in the United States, if he had had any suspicion with this regard, most likely he would have immediately reported back to Madrid and informed about this potential risk. He might have even made an effort to make a personal encounter possible, given the circumstance that for the whole time of Humboldt's visit in Philadelphia, Irujo happened to be present in town as well.

Although his position as ambassador required him to be based in the new capital Washington, due to his ties to his wife's family, and particularly to Governor McKean, he tended to spend as much time in Philadelphia as possible. In those years Washington was only in the process of construction and the former capital was still a much more sophisticated place to live. Therefore, Irujo must have seen Philadelphia as the much more appropriate environment for him and took advantage of every opportunity to return to this city. From Irujo's correspondence we know that he came into town on 27 April, just a few days after Humboldt's arrival, and that he stayed there for the entire summer. So he could easily have arranged a personal meeting with the famous Prussian, in order to know more about his exploration voyage carried out under the protection of the Spanish crown. Interestingly, during his entire time in Philadelphia, Humboldt seemed to be in close contact to McKean, he even indicated the Governor as possible contact point for those who wished to get in touch with him. Already in his letters of introduction to Jefferson and Madison, just after his arrival, he asked them, should they wish to respond, to direct their respective messages to the Governor, who would then pass it along. McKean indeed forwarded the notes to the Prussian, as Humboldt confirmed in his farewell letter to the President.²² Though it remains unclear how this contact to the politician was initially established, it certainly indicates a kind of familiarity with him. This also means that an unofficial encounter between Humboldt and Irujo at McKean's Residence could well have been possible, though it is nowhere reflected. In any case, it would also have been an excellent opportunity to obtain first-hand information on the situation in the Spanish colonies. However, these seemed not to be his key interests at that moment.

²² Alexander von Humboldt to Thomas Jefferson, Philadelphia, 24 May 1804, in: Schwarz, *Humboldt und die Vereinigten Staaten*, 88-90.

Spanish-American diplomatic tensions

Given that throughout the Spanish colonies people were eager to have the famous Prussian explorer as a guest in their home, and the same hospitality was shown to him in the United States, one might wonder why there was no invitation from the highest representative of the Spanish crown? Particularly if he believed that Humboldt was on his way to Spain he could have even understood it as his diplomatic duty to establish contact with him, even if he had no personal interest in the Prussian visitor or his scientific enterprise.

However, a closer look at both his private and his official correspondence reveals several potential explanations: Some of them are purely pragmatic, some are more related to his character, while others were the result of the particularly complex historical moment amidst political challenges. As he wrote to the Spanish Secretary of State Pedro Cevallos, on his arrival in Philadelphia he and his family initially had to stay in the residence of his father-in-law while looking for temporary accommodation in town, and that he thus did not dispose of a suitable home to entertain guests at that moment.²³ The same letter, which in fact is a fifteen-page defense in response to numerous complaints about his person and his work, also reveals that once again he was personally at a particularly difficult moment, where he had to protect himself against attacks from multiple sides. The diplomatic correspondence in which he was involved gives an idea of the broad array of topics he had to address in world politics during those months: Besides the ongoing dispute over the Louisiana Purchase between Spain and the United States, between February and April 1804 the massacre of the white population in St. Domingue took place, ordered by Jean-Jacques Dessalines, which resulted in the deaths of between 3,000 and 5,000 people. Given that the insurgents had also penetrated the Spanish part of the island and fought against the settlers there, this was another urgent topic for the Spanish minister to deal with.

Also right after Humboldt's departure the political events kept him busy and he did not have the time to reflect on the larger meaning of his visit and the close connections of the Prussian to the American government. At this moment it was the Hamilton-Burr duel and its unfortunate ending on 11 July 1804, which was much commented on in political and social circles: Irujo immediately wrote a five-page report to Cevallos.²⁴ One of the reasons he reported at length about this event and its consequences for the election campaign in 1804 was the fact that even before this duel took place his father-

²³ Marqués de Casa Irujo to Pedro Cevallos, 13 June 1804, n. 9, AHN.

²⁴ 3892 bis 2, Exp. 3, no. 15, (n. 431, 20 July).

in-law, Governor McKean, had been contacted to find out if he was interested in presenting himself as vice-president, or even as president, in those elections.²⁵ Given his friendship with Jefferson, McKean showed no interest; however, these were important issues to be discussed in his family and would certainly occupy his mind during this time. Last but not least, another diplomatic matter the ambassador had to deal with at this moment was the fact that Jérôme-Napoléon Bonaparte, Napoleon's youngest brother, married to Elizabeth Patterson, the daughter of a shipowner in Baltimore, planned to spend the summer of 1804 in New York.²⁶

All the diverse issues that Irujo referred to in his report give us a good impression of the crucial developments happening around the time of Humboldt's visit. Many topics needed to be addressed simultaneously by the ambassador of the Spanish empire in the United States, at a moment when he was also personally occupied with his temporary relocation in Philadelphia. Moreover, at this moment there was another important personal conflict he had to address: the relations between Irujo and Foronda had reached a low ebb, as Irujo's report to Cevallo reveals, written precisely on 20 May, the day Humboldt arrived in the United States.²⁷ Here the ambassador refers rather disparagingly to the Spanish consul, attesting him a worrisome lack of knowledge about the country, the English language, American politics, the people, in brief, anything the should be aware of. In Irujo's eyes, Foronda was thus the "least appropriate person" for the diplomatic position he occupied. Certainly this attitude would hardly favor good communication or exchange of information between the two diplomats during the Prussian's visit. It is yet another example how Irujo's personal intrigues had an impact on the diplomatic relations.

Representing opposing sides of Spain

Foronda and Irujo were indeed two rather different characters, and represented two opposite concepts of the Spanish nation. While one concept was deeply rooted in an allegedly glorious past, presented usually by the privileged members of society, who aimed to keep the *status quo* of the social

²⁵ See letter from Anthony J. Dallas to Thomas McKean, dated 14 October, 1803, proposing McKean's candidacy for Vice Presidency in the 1804 Presidential election. A note on the letter indicates that McKean replied to Dallas with a letter declining on October 16th, 1803 (<https://digitallibrary.hsp.org/index.php/Detail/objects/11895>).

²⁶ Document n. 430, 30 June 1804, AHN.

²⁷ Marqués de Casa Irujo to Pedro Cevallos, 20 May 1804, AHN.

structure, the other side embraced the new ideas that came with Enlightenment and their application to society. This side of the nation was aware of the challenges that lay ahead in those new times, and looked for solutions for the future. These were mainly well-educated, open-minded people, receptive to innovative thoughts and societal changes, who would later, during the French occupation to Spain, be known as *afrancesados*. Irujo is an excellent representative of the first category, whereas Foronda clearly belonged to the second. This explains the different fates of Irujo and Foronda, once they returned to Spain, to a country that was not yet ready for the challenges that lay ahead: While the first continued his career in the position of Secretary of State at various times (1812, 1818-1819, 1823), as well as a position as Spanish ambassador in France (1820-1823), Foronda had to face political persecution and imprisonment due to his liberal ideas. These two *Weltanschauungen* (views of the world (*Weltanschauungen*)), that began with the French Revolution, would persist in Spain throughout the nineteenth century, with the Carlist Wars and the reaction to the loss of a great part of the colonies in 1898. These are the politically antagonistic sides, which would eventually clash violently a century later, with the outbreak of the Civil War (1936-1939), and would continue to mark the fate of the nation even beyond the twentieth century.

However, coming back to the situation in spring of 1804: The important issue is that while key people in the United States were immediately aware of the wider significance of Humboldt's visit at this particular moment, it seemed to have escaped the attention of the Spanish diplomats in Philadelphia. Although Foronda did organize a personal acquaintance with the famous explorer, he rather seemed to see in Humboldt an enlightened traveler, but not the potential leaker of information. And although Irujo was known for being an extremely well-connected and well-informed person, who would send his personal impression of most leading figures in the United States to Madrid and even paid spies and remunerated people for obtaining any information that he deemed useful for his government,²⁸ in this case though he seemed not to be alarmed. Both diplomats might have assumed that, since the Prussian was a natural scientist, American interest in him would be purely scientific. They seemed to have failed to connect the dots in terms of Jefferson's long-term interest in the Louisiana territory in particular, and in the Spanish possessions in North America in general.

Hence, in order to understand the situation, we have to recall that Humboldt travelled under orders from Madrid and that neither Irujo nor

²⁸ Marqués de Casa Irujo to Manuel Godoy, 24 July 1797, AHN, Estado 3896, cited in Sealove 1963, p. 39.

Foronda would have wished to raise questions that might irritate their superiors in Spain. Why would the Spanish ambassador in the US question the documents authorized by his monarch? Albeit for different reasons, both diplomats would not have wished to raise concerns that might irritate their superiors in Madrid. This might have put them in a delicate situation, and thus, in their own interests, it might have been the easier solution not to get entangled in those questions. A brief look at the official travel authorization shows that the passport granted was notable for its wide scope and its strikingly liberal terms: The text of the documents, one signed by the Secretary of State Urquijo, and another by José Antonio Caballero, the of the Minister of Justice at the *Secretaría de Gracia y Justicia de España e Indias*, indicated that the bearer was authorized by the King to carry out any research and studies that he considered relevant, and clearly instructed all Spanish officials in all port cities not to cause any impediment to his scientific endeavor. Moreover, the passport expressly stated that the Spanish administration should provide all the help that would be necessary (“todo el favor, auxilio, y protección que necesitasen”). If the Spanish officials knew this document, then being silent on this topic can be seen as a wise - or cautious - decision. Particularly in the case of Foronda this interpretation becomes likely, given that it was Secretary of State Urquijo, who was a key person in supporting Humboldt’s requests for this authorization and protection through the Spanish monarchy, that means, the same person who had also launched Foronda’s own career towards this diplomatic position in the United States. These were not good fundamentals to raise any concerns about the legitimacy or the risk of the Prussian’s visit to the country.

In any case, things would probably have turned out not very differently even if the Spanish authorities in the United States had been more attentive, or more concerned about Humboldt’s visit and his connection to the political and scientific elite of the country, like the colonial government in some places of Spanish America had been. Looking at the Prussian’s way of proceeding with the knowledge in his hands, circulating in freely and making it accessible to all those that were interested in it, there is probably little they could have done to change the events to come.

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