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WILLIAM AUGUSTUS BOWLES  
AND THE STATE OF MUSKOGEE

by LYLE N. MCALISTER

AS THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY approached its end, the decline of the imperial power of Spain was reflected and magnified in the borderland provinces of East and West Florida. In these outposts of empire the hand of authority was weak and resources for defense were almost non-existent. The military establishment consisted of understrength garrisons in the presidios at St. Augustine, San Marcos de Apalache, Mobile, and Pensacola, and the sparsity and dispersion of the population precluded reliance on troops raised locally. Moreover, the Viceroy of Mexico and the Captain General of Cuba, who were responsible for the defense of the northern frontier, were themselves so desperately short of military and financial resources that they could offer only emergency assistance and when called for even this was generally too little and too late.<sup>1</sup>

To defend the Floridas, Spain relied not on her garrisons which were hardly more than token but on control of the southern Indian nations in the hope that they could be used as a buffer against the pressure of the American frontier which constituted the principal threat to the two provinces. Even in the execution of this policy, however, Spanish authorities had to depend on two alien instruments. One of these was Alexander McGillivray, the son of a Scots trader and a Creek princess, who occupied a position of great influence among the nations.<sup>2</sup> The other was a British trading firm, the Panton, Leslie Company, which had been granted permission to remain in the Floridas after the return of those provinces to Spain in 1783, with the role of maintaining

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1. The strategic situation of the Floridas toward the end of the eighteenth century is described in Arthur P. Whitaker, *The Spanish-American Frontier: 1783-1795* (Boston and New York, 1927), Chaps. I, II, and in the same author's *Documents Relating to the Commercial Policy of Spain in the Floridas* (Deland, Fla., 1931), xix-xxii.
  2. The career of this colorful figure is recounted in John Walton Caughey, *McGillivray of the Creeks* (Norman, Okla., 1938), particularly pp. 3-57.

the allegiance of the Indians by supplying them with trade goods.<sup>3</sup>

It was against this background of declining Spanish power that the drama of the rise and fall of William Augustus Bowles and the State of Muskogee was played. Bowles, who was both the director and principal actor in the spectacle, first appeared on the stage as an ensign in a unit of Maryland loyalists which was sent to strengthen the English garrison of West Florida when in 1779 Spain joined France and the thirteen colonies in the war against Britain. However, some breach of discipline caused his dismissal from the service and as a young lad of fifteen he was left adrift in Pensacola. Fortunately he was befriended by a party of Creeks who chanced to be in the neighborhood and went off to live with them in Indian country. Here he adopted their customs, learned their language, married the daughter of one of their chiefs, and through this connection became a chief in his own right. Bowles must not have felt too bitter about his disgrace, for on two occasions he assisted the British in actions against the Spanish who were attempting to regain the Floridas. As a consequence of his conduct in these operations he was reinstated in the army and after the fall of Pensacola in 1781 he was repatriated with other British prisoners to New York and retired on half-pay. His experiences, however, apparently did not satisfy his taste for adventure because he soon made his way back to the Floridas and resumed his life among the Creeks. Here he remained until 1785 when he was evacuated to New Providence in the Bahamas by the departing British.<sup>4</sup>

In Providence, opportunity of a sort came Bowles' way. The trading firm of Miller and Bonamy, whose headquarters were in Nassau, was very much interested in opening trade with the Florida Indians and breaking the monopoly of the Panton, Leslie Company. They had secured the backing of Lord Dunmore, the governor, for their undertaking. These enterprisers became acquainted with Bowles and recognized in him an instrument tai-

3. A brief description of the activities of this firm is contained in Whitaker, *Documents*, xxx-xxxix.

4. Lawrence Kinnaird, "The Significance of William Augustus Bowles' Seizure of Panton's Apalachee Store in 1792," *Florida Historical Quarterly*, IX (July, 1930-April, 1931), 159-160. Bowles' own account of his adventures may be found in *The Authentic Memoirs of William Augustus Bowles, Esquire, Ambassador from the United Nations of Creeks and Cherokees, to the Court of London* (London, 1791). See also *Public Characters, or Contemporary Biography* (Baltimore, 1803), 332-359.

lored for their designs. Not only was he thoroughly familiar with the Indians and their country, but he was a person of some standing among them. Moreover, he was on excellent terms with Alexander McGillivray, whose support was essential to any enterprise among the Creeks. Bowles, who had been making a rather precarious living as an actor and portrait painter, fell in with the scheme and in June, 1788, was dispatched to Florida to sound out McGillivray.

The Creek chieftain, who was temporarily on the outs with the Spanish and Pantón, agreed to the introduction of goods from Providence but when the operation was actually launched, it turned out to be somewhat more ambitious than a mere trading venture. In October, Bowles landed at Indian River with the mission of not only seizing Pantón's stores at Lake George and San Marcos de Apalache but of subverting Spanish authority throughout the Floridas. The operation, however, rapidly developed into a fiasco. A change of Spanish policy had redeemed the loyalty of McGillivray, the Spanish garrisons were alerted, and the filibusters recruited in Providence deserted when they did not meet with the easy success they had been led to anticipate. By the end of the year the expedition had disintegrated and Bowles himself was a fugitive.<sup>5</sup>

Although his first invasion was a failure, Bowles did not abandon his plans for filibustering in the Floridas. On the contrary they expanded in scope. Apparently inspired by the visions of Alexander McGillivray, he conceived the idea of a sovereign Indian nation which was to be carved out of territory claimed by Spain and the United States. The nucleus of the new state was to be the Creek nation and the Seminoles, but subsequently the Cherokees, Chickasaws, and Choctaws were to be incorporated.<sup>6</sup> Initially the project was rather vague in concept and appears to have been merely an adjunct to earlier plans for the commercial penetration of the Floridas. However, its architect certainly had in mind several basic considerations. In the first place, the constitutional foundation of the state was to rest on the claim ad-

5. Kinnaird, "Bowles' Seizure of Pantón's Store," 160-162; Caughey, *McGillivray*, 36.

6. Kinnaird, "Bowles' Seizure of Pantón's Store," 164-166; Lawrence Kinnaird, "International Rivalry in the Creek Country, Part I. The Ascendency of Alexander McGillivray," *Florida Historical Quarterly*, X (July, 1931-April, 1932), 73.

vanced by McGillivray and taken up by Bowles that the Indian tribes of the Southeast had always been sovereign, that they had been recognized as such by Great Britain, and that the transfer of the territory involved to Spain and the United States in 1783 had in no way alienated this sovereignty. In the second place, general Indian support had to be obtained. Bowles recognized two lines of approach to this problem. One was to play on the very real fear of the tribes that the encroaching whites would deprive them of their lands; the other was the provision of a steady supply of ball, powder, and trade goods to the Indians. The latter tactic tied up very well with the plans already developed by Bowles and his associates for the commercial penetration of the Floridas. Finally, in order to give the Indian nation any chance of success against the certain hostility of Spain and the United States, official support had to be obtained.

Bowles' first important move after the Florida fiasco of 1788 was to secure British aid. In 1790, accompanied by several Creek and Cherokee Indians, he made his way to Nova Scotia. At Halifax he convinced the governor of his value to British policy and was dispatched to the governor general in Quebec and thence to England at government expense. In London he represented himself and his savage companions as an official delegation from the "United Nation of Creeks and Cherokees," and sought from the government recognition for the Indian state, a commercial treaty, and an alliance. In connection with his attempts to convince officials of the desirability of such an association, Bowles revealed a project even more grandiose than that of his Indian state. This involved nothing less than the enlistment in the Floridas of an army of Indians and American frontiersmen, the invasion and liberation of Mexico, and eventually that of Peru also. The bait was, of course, commercial concessions to England in the liberated Spanish colonies.<sup>7</sup> Bowles arrived a little too late to secure the most favorable atmosphere for his negotiations since the danger of a break between England and Spain over the Nootka Sound question had been averted. He was, however, feted by British society and treated cordially by the government, possibly because he was regarded as a useful tool should Spain and England

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7. Bowles to Lord Grenville, Adelphi, January 7, 1791, Archivo General de Indias: Papeles de Cuba, Legajo 2372 (Transcript in J. B. Lockey Papers, P.K. Yonge Library of Florida History).

fall out again. Indeed, he partially accomplished his aims in that all vessels flying the flag of the Creek and Cherokee Nation were granted access to the free ports in the British West Indies.<sup>8</sup>

Upon his return to Florida in the autumn of 1791, Bowles took definite steps to implement his scheme. He arranged for his supporters to elect him "Director of Affairs" of the Creek and Cherokee Nation and in his new executive capacity began to experiment with balance of power politics.<sup>9</sup> Bowles was shrewd enough to recognize that in the long run the greatest obstacle to his designs was not the declining power of Spain but the young, vigorous, and expanding United States. He accordingly directed a memorial to the Spanish government demanding recognition of the independent Creek and Cherokee Nation and of its right to establish free ports in its territory. In return for these concessions, Bowles offered friendship and an alliance between Spain and the Indian nation.<sup>10</sup> In order to lend some attraction to such a presumptuous offer he referred to the very real threat of American aggression against Spanish territory and pointed out that the Creek and Cherokee nation would provide a very desirable buffer between the Floridas and the United States. This offer, however, proved to be an instrument of his undoing. Bowles' seizure of Pantón's store at San Marcos in January, 1792, confirmed the conviction of the Spanish government that he was a dangerous troublemaker, and Baron Carondelet, the governor of Louisiana, invited the Director of Affairs to New Orleans on the pretext that he wished to discuss the proposed treaty. Here Bowles was arrested and the first phase of his imperial design came to an abrupt and rather ignominious conclusion.<sup>11</sup>

During the next five years Bowles, as a Spanish prisoner, was transferred from New Orleans to Havana, from Havana to Madrid, and from Madrid to Manila. Despite his record he was treated with courtesy and on occasion with deference, apparently because Spain recognized his influence among the Florida Indians and hoped to win his allegiance. Bowles accepted this treatment

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8. Frederick Jackson Turner, ed., "English Policy," *American Historical Review*, VII (Oct., 1901-July, 1902), 708, 726-735; Kinnaird, "Bowles' Seizure of Pantón's Store," 163; Caughey, *McGillivray*, 47-48, 296-297.

9. Bowles to Arturo O'Neill, December 4, 1791, AGI: PC Leg. 2371 (Lockey Papers).

10. Caughey, *McGillivray*, 48-49.

11. *Ibid.*, 49-50; Kinnaird, "Bowles' Seizure of Pantón's Store," *passim*.

as his due and then, while being transferred from the Philippines back to Madrid, he escaped in the British African colony of Sierra Leone. Here he was able to convince the governor that he was an important instrument of British policy in America and was sent on to England.<sup>12</sup>

During his captivity Bowles had not abandoned his vision of an independent Indian state and in London renewed his petition for British support. As was the case on his earlier visit to England, he was well received. Although his representations did not obtain open recognition of Indian sovereignty, he was certainly given some assistance and his return to New Providence was facilitated. In Nassau Bowles renewed his connections. Governor Thomas Halkett, who had replaced Lord Dunmore, was not unfavorably disposed toward his plans, and the merchants of Providence were just as eager to break the Panton, Leslie Company's monopoly in the Floridas as they had been ten years earlier. After making arrangements for the trade that was to be opened as soon as he had reestablished himself, the filibuster left New Providence in a British gunboat which had been placed at his disposal and in early October, 1799, arrived at the Apalachicola River.<sup>13</sup>

Shortly after his return to the Floridas, Bowles established a temporary headquarters on the Ochlockonee River and rallied his old friends among the Indians. Through their influence a congress of Seminole and lower Creek chiefs elected him "Director General" of the "State of Muskogee," as the Indian nation was now to be called. Vested with this authority Bowles turned his attention to affairs of state.<sup>14</sup>

The most urgent problem that faced the State of Muskogee was that of relations with its two neighbors, Spain and the United States. In October, 1799, Bowles directed a communication to American officials reviewing the history of relations between the northern republic and the southern Indians, denouncing the usurpation of Indian lands, attacking the treaty of New York which

12. Caughey, *McGillivray*, 50.

13. Merritt B. Pound, *Benjamin Hawkins-Indian Agent* (Athens, Georgia, 1951), 191; Mark F. Boyd, "The Fortifications of San Marcos de Apalache," *Florida Historical Quarterly*, XV (July, 1936-April, 1937), 19-20; Edward Forrester to William Panton, Apalachee, October 16, 1799, in the Cruzat Papers, Florida Historical Society Library.

14. "A talk from the Chiefs of the Creek Nation to his Excellency the Governor Genl at New Orleans," Ochaulafau, October 5, 1802, AGI: PC, leg. 2355 (Lockey Papers).

McGillivray, acting for the Creeks, had signed with the United States in 1790, and protesting the surveying of the boundary line between the United States and the Floridas which had been established by the Spanish-American Treaty of 1795. The Director General then went on to state that although aggressions of the past were serious, Muskogee would be willing to negotiate a treaty with the United States on the basis of American recognition of Muskogean sovereignty and the immediate termination of the work of the boundary commission. If, on the other hand, the United States persisted in its effort to run the line or made any attempt to alter or subvert the sovereignty of the State of Muskogee, such acts would be regarded not only as a rejection of the proposed treaty but as grounds for a declaration of war against the United States. This representation was followed by a proclamation issued on October 31, ordering the departure from Muskogean territory of all persons holding commissions from either Spain or the United States.<sup>15</sup>

Relations with Spain were even more critical. Bowles must have been convinced that any rapprochement with that power was hopeless in view of his capture, imprisonment, and escape, and of a more recent Spanish proclamation offering 4,500 pesos for his capture. On April 5, 1800, the State of Muskogee declared war against Spain, citing as grounds the Spanish-American Treaty of 1795, Spanish intrigues in the internal affairs of the State, and ultimately an attack by Spanish forces against Bowles' headquarters on the Ochlockonee River.<sup>16</sup>

In the meantime, Bowles occupied himself with implementing the internal structure of the State of Muskogee. By a series of acts and decrees the nation was equipped with the trappings and machinery of sovereignty. Mikasuke, a Seminole village near Tallahassee, was designated as the national capital, and a national flag was designed. The motto "God save the State of Muskogee" was adopted and appeared on State papers. In signing these documents Bowles assumed the executive or royal "We" after the form employed by European monarchs.<sup>17</sup>

15. Pound, *Benjamin Hawkins*, 191.

16. AGI: PC, leg. 2372.

17. *Ibid.*, "A talk from the Chiefs of the Creek Nation," *loc. cit.* The flag, rectangular in shape, was divided into four quarters by crossed vertical and horizontal broad blue bars bordered by thinner white stripes. The upper left and the lower left and right quarters were red. The upper right quarter was blue and had in its left center



To assist him in matters of government and administration, the Director General naturalized and appointed to state offices fellow filibusters who had arrived with him from Providence or who had joined him subsequently. Thus one, William McGirt, of unknown antecedents, was named Commissary of Marine, Judge of the Court of Admiralty, and, in addition, performed the functions of Minister of State.<sup>18</sup> A renegade Irishman, James Devereux Delacy, who had in 1801 descended the Mississippi to New Orleans, represented himself variously as a lawyer, doctor, and Mexican landowner, and then left the city just ahead of his creditors, became Bowles' representative in New Providence.<sup>19</sup>

The Director General also professed an interest in the cultural and economic development of Muskogee. Schools were to be organized for the instruction of the Indians in the arts of civilization; commerce was to be stimulated by the establishment of a free port at the mouth of the Apalachicola; agriculture and the crafts were to be encouraged. In order to accomplish the latter objective advertisements were placed in the *Nassau Gazette* extolling the opportunities that existed in Muskogee and offering free land and other concessions to farmers and artisans who would settle in the country.<sup>20</sup> As a sequel to this publicity it might be mentioned that in the summer of 1802, Peter Sarketh, farmer, and Frank Parker, mason, arrived at Bowles' headquarters to take advantage of the Director General's offers. Although Bowles received them cordially enough, it was immediately obvious that the opportunities in Muskogee were somewhat less than the glowing description in the *Gazette* had led them to believe and it soon became apparent that the Director General was unwilling or unable to redeem his promises. Sarketh and Parker wished to return directly to New Providence, but having heard that certain other white men who had parted company with Bowles had been assassinated, the two disillusioned men engineered an escape and

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a sun to which was added human features. I am indebted for information about the flag as well as many other items about the State of Muskogee, to a letter to me dated March 21, 1954, from Lawrence Kinnaird, Professor of History Emeritus, University of California at Berkeley.

18. "A talk from the Chiefs of the Creek Nation," *loc. cit.*

19. Correspondence of DeLacy and Bowles, AGI: PC, Leg. 2372.

20. Article on conditions in the "State of Muskogee" presented for publication in the *Nassau Gazette*, Cruzat Papers.

made their way overland to sanctuary at San Marcos de Apalache.<sup>21</sup>

In view of the unsatisfactory relations between Muskogee and its neighbors, Bowles devoted considerable attention to the organization of the armed forces of the state. An army was formed consisting of the Seminole warriors of the Tallahassee region and leavened by some of Bowles' white associates and a number of Negroes and mulattoes who had deserted from Spanish garrisons at St. Augustine and Pensacola. Bowles, with the commission of General, assumed personal command.<sup>22</sup> Shortly after the declaration of war against Spain, he appeared at the head of his army before the Spanish fort at San Marcos de Apalache and proceeded to invest the post. On May 19, 1800, San Marcos surrendered but the victory was of short duration, for five weeks later a Spanish relief expedition forced Bowles to withdraw.<sup>23</sup> The Director General also attempted to carry the war against Spain to the sea by forming a small navy. This consisted of several vessels armed as privateers and was placed under the command of one Richard Powers, who carried the title of "Senior Officer of Marine of the State of Muskogee." In 1801 this force was launched against the enemy. Although its efforts were limited to the seizure of Spanish shipping, in this field of activity it experienced some success and caused Spanish authorities annoyance and embarrassment.<sup>24</sup>

In the meantime, however, the forces at work against Bowles were accumulating. The first serious reverse that he suffered was the loss of British support. Through the representations of the Panton, Leslie Company and the Spanish government in London, British officials who had supported Bowles became convinced that he was not only a useless but a dangerous tool and orders were issued to the various colonial governors to the effect that he was

21. Report of Sarketh, AGI: PC, Leg. 2372.

22. Article on conditions in the "State of Muskogee," *loc. cit.* The term "army" is somewhat pretentious. Bowles' forces probably never exceeded 400 men. Benjamin Hawkins stated that his effective fighting force consisted only of some sixty men "more attentive to frolicking than fighting." Arthur P. Whitaker, *The Mississippi Question, 1795-1803* (New York, 1934), 172; Pound, *Benjamin Hawkins*, 192.

23. Enclosure of Tomas Portell to Vicente Folch, San Carlos de Barrancas, June 7, 1800, AGI: PC, leg. 2355; Mark F. Royd "Fortifications," 19-21.

24. See Lyle N. McAlister "The Marine Forces of William Augustus Rowles and his State of Muskogee," *Florida Historical Quarterly*, XXXII (July, 1953), 3-27.

to be refused any further assistance or encouragement. Indeed, the British attitude changed from support to hostility as reflected in the decision of the vice-admiralty court at Nassau which not only denied his claim to a prize he had taken but denounced the State of Muskogee as a farce and Bowles and his companions as unprincipled adventurers.<sup>25</sup>

In Florida itself events were working against Bowles. Spanish authorities were fearful that his influence would increase if he were not removed from the scene, and were embarrassed and humiliated by the impunity with which he acted. Moreover, the Treaty of 1795 provided that each party to it was responsible for the maintenance of peace and order on its side of the line, and Benjamin Hawkins, the American agent among the Southern Indians, was pressing for action. Since it had been impossible to apprehend the filibuster by force, more indirect methods were adopted to secure his undoing. Governor Vicente Folch of Pensacola, who realized that the influence of Bowles among the tribes depended on his ability to redeem his promises of a steady supply of ball, powder, and trade goods, established a naval blockade of the coast of West Florida which interrupted Bowles' communications with his Providence Island backers. At the same time, Lieutenant Colonel Jacobo DuBreuil, the new commander at San Marcos, attempted to subvert the Indian followers of the Director General and was successful to the extent that in August, 1802, a treaty of peace was negotiated between Spain and the Seminoles. DuBreuil, with the connivance of Hawkins, also intrigued with certain Lower Creek chiefs who were hostile to Bowles, with the object of seizing the person of the Director General.

The downfall of Bowles, however, was accomplished not so much by Spain as by the initiative of Hawkins. In May, 1803, a general congress of Seminoles, Creeks, Cherokees, Chickasaws, and Choctaws was held at Toukabatchee on the American side of the line. It was anticipated that Bowles would attend and careful plans for his arrest were laid by Hawkins and his friends among the Lower Creeks. The Director General did not disappoint his enemies. On May 24, he arrived accompanied by a retinue of

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25. John Leslie to William Panton, London, February 26, 1799, Gordon to Panton, London, March 11, 1800 (transcripts in the Lockey Papers); Juan Madraz vs. Richard Power, Proceedings in the Court of Vice Admiralty of the Bahama Islands, March 31, 1802-May 29, 1802, in the Cruzat Papers.

Seminole and Upper Creek chiefs. Although he was aware that something was afoot, he apparently felt that he could restore his fortunes by some bold stroke. Indeed, he openly announced that the outcome of the congress would be his election as king of the four nations. However, the support that he had hoped to organize among the Indians did not materialize and on the following day he was seized by the Hawkins faction, placed in chains, and subsequently delivered to Governor Folch in Pensacola. This time there was no spectacular escape. From Pensacola he was taken to Havana and three years later died in a cell in Morro Castle.<sup>26</sup>

In attempting to place Bowles and the State of Muskogee in historical perspective two questions present themselves. One of these involves an interpretation of the man himself. There is no doubt that he possessed a high degree of talent and resource, and his spectacular escapes, his feats of derringdo and the sheer audacity of his plans and actions cannot help but excite admiration. His powers of persuasion were quite remarkable and he could tailor them to meet the requirements of a council of savages or the sophisticated company of a London drawing room. Although those whose interests he crossed hated him bitterly, his flair for public relations won him many admirers, and in the metropolitan centers of England and the United States he was something of a public figure. In Baltimore, for instance, there was published in 1803 a volume entitled *Public Characters, or Contemporary Biography*, in which the life of "General Bowles" is included along with biographies of Thomas Jefferson, William Pitt, Lord Nelson, and many other national and international figures.

An interpretation of Bowles, however, cannot be made without asking how he employed his undoubted talents. Was he simply an adventurer, a pirate, a scoundrel as he was represented by his enemies, or was he a builder, a civilizer, a protector of the Indians as he, himself, and his many admirers claimed? The evidence does not allow a categorical answer but only an opinion. To give him the benefit of the doubt, his early life among the Creeks, his constant championship of the Indians and his plans for their economic and cultural betterment might seem to indicate a sincere concern for the race of his adoption. On the other

26. "A Journal of John Forbes, May, 1803," *Florida Historical Quarterly*, IX (July, 1930-April, 1931), 279-289; Pound, *Benjamin Hawkins*, 194; Caughey, *McGillivray*, 186, n. 130.

hand, a man of intelligence-and Bowles was no fool-must have realized that his plan for a sovereign Indian nation had not the slightest chance for permanent success. His incitement of the Creeks and Seminoles to futile action against Spain and the United States was unquestionably a disservice to them. Moreover, his correspondence and his pronouncements taken as a whole reveal an inconsistency, a disregard for the truth, and an egotism that cannot be reconciled with sincerity of purpose and action. It is difficult to escape the conclusion that Bowles was interested primarily in personal gain and that his policies were based on expediency. Yet there is a lingering feeling that perhaps he deserved, if not a better end, at least something more heroic than a lingering death in a Spanish dungeon.

The second question to be answered relates to the historical significance of Bowles and the State of Muskogee. To those who are interested in history primarily as a fascinating story of men and events, one might answer that Bowles added a broad dash of color to Florida's already vivid past. For those who desire a more philosophical interpretation, the answer lies in the very impunity with which the filibuster invaded Florida, roused the Indians, and attacked Spanish establishments. Although his successes were temporary, it is significant that Spain was not able to muster enough military strength to drive him from her territory but had to rely on duplicity to accomplish his downfall. The Bowles episode, then, provided a revelation of Spanish impotency and foreshadowed the ultimate withdrawal of Spain from the Floridas.