

# Spain's Covert Contribution to the American Revolution, 1778

## Introduction

---

This 1778 unpublished letter from Diego de Gardoqui, head of the commercial firm of Joseph Gardoqui and Sons in Bilbao, Spain, to Arthur Lee, a diplomat from Virginia, documents Spanish contributions to the American Revolution.

Prior to this correspondence, the Second Continental Congress had appointed Arthur Lee, Benjamin Franklin, and Silas Deane as commissioners to France. Their aim, beginning in September 1776, was to gather foreign support for the American Revolution. In early 1777, Lee traveled to Spain to secure aid. In March, he secretly met in Spain with Diego de Gardoqui, of Joseph Gardoqui y Hijos, and the Marquis de Grimaldi, former minister of state, in the city of Burgos. They could not meet in Madrid because they wanted to avoid raising the suspicions of the British diplomats at the Spanish court.

As a result of these meetings, the pretense of Spanish neutrality was maintained while Spanish assistance was secured. Lee reported to Congress that Spain would open a secret line of credit worth four million *reales de vellón*, equivalent to half a million Continental dollars (more than \$17 million in 2024 dollars). The trading company Joseph Gardoqui and Sons, in turn, provided the Spanish blankets, tents, boots, and uniforms that kept hundreds of Continental Army soldiers warm at Valley Forge during the harsh winter of 1777. The firm proved an excellent choice for funneling the Spanish-made goods to the Continental Army because it had established commercial routes between Bilbao and New England.

This April 1778 letter attests to Spain's faithful support of the American Revolution. Gardoqui updates Lee on shipments of blankets, credited and debited funds in the American accounts, and the possibility of buying Spanish uniforms for American troops.

This correspondence suggests that Spain's declaration of war on England on June 21, 1779, was not a departure in Spanish policy, but rather the extension of an already strong commitment to the United States.

## Excerpt

---

Our Brother is still at Court, where you may freely command him at foot you have a Memorandum of what will cost in this place a whole Soldiers white Uniforme & wish it may turn to some Account, butt if the collour of the Uniforme should be blue green or yallow in that case it will stand in 18 Riales more. . . .

## Spain's Covert Contribution to the American Revolution, 1778

Memorandum of a Soldiers full white uniforme with turnings & if the same  
Cloath, as given in the Spanish Service

the coat with Bottons & Ready made . . . . .	Riales	78.17.
the west coatt . . . . .		43.17.
Breechees. . . . .		24.17
Hatte . . . . .		11.17.
a pair of Stockings strong & good. . . . .		6
a pair of shoes ....d°...d° . . . . .		11.17
	Riales of Vellon	172 17

### Questions for Discussion

---

1. In this document, what is meant by the word “Riales”?
2. What was the most expensive article of a soldier’s uniform?
3. What does the description of stockings as “strong & good” suggest about soldiers’ experiences and needs?
4. What must have been true about American industry if the Continental Army needed to purchase uniforms from Spain?
5. Why did Arthur Lee travel to Spain?

### Making Connections across Learning Resources

To help answer these questions, visit the issue of the Gilder Lehrman Institute’s online journal [History Now](#) on the role of Spain in the American Revolution and the resources in our special initiative on [Spanish Influence on the American Revolution](#).

1. How powerful was [Spain in the eighteenth century](#)?
2. When did [Spain begin to provide support for the Continental Army](#) and when did Spain declare war on England?
3. Who ran [Joseph Gardoqui and Sons](#) in 1778? Why was the Spanish trading company Joseph Gardoqui and Sons able to assist the Continental Army?

## Spain's Covert Contribution to the American Revolution, 1778

## Images

Arthur Lee Esq. Bilbao the 4<sup>th</sup> April 1778.  
 Honoured Sir

On the 15<sup>th</sup> ~~inst~~ we advised you the liberty we had then taken to value on your Account on M<sup>r</sup>. LeGrand of Paris three bills ammounting to Livres 44599. the payment whereof we recommended to your care with a Request of your placing its ammount at the Exchange of 77<sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub> p d. to our debitt in Liales 56733 & 29 mis of Vellon which Sum was duelly paid by us to your Credit: we also transmitted you under the same date Invoice of 92 Bales containing 2296 Blanketts shipt on Board the John Cap<sup>t</sup> Azararah Woodbury for Boston the ammount whereof if light begd you would Credit us in Liales 67125 & 45 mis of Vellon all which must beg leave to confirm again advising you with pleasure that the above Vepell departed hence with a fine wind the same day 15<sup>th</sup> & cordially wish may safely reach his desired home; therefore continuing our Blankett Exports with all possible Expedition have now also to informe you our having shipt for Gloucester Cape Ann on the Brigg George Cap<sup>t</sup> Jobbe Knight as you will see by the within Invoice 75 Bales containing 1926 fine large Palencia Blanketts consigned in Boston as the Farmers to James Warrons Esq<sup>r</sup> as such be pleased order the same to be Examined & if free from Errors after due Examination Credit us its ammount in Liales 55485 & 44 mis of Vellon with which your Account stands duelly debitted: Cap<sup>t</sup> Knight was dispatched the 28<sup>th</sup> & the weather being favourable suppose sailed yesterday, of which should we receive a true Account before this is Sealed up, depend on being duelly informd of a Govern<sup>r</sup>

you will see by the above Invoice that agreable to what you are pleased to communicatte us in your very Esteemd favour of the 6<sup>th</sup> Instant we have reduced our Comission to 3<sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub> p cent. Dear Sir besides our being allowed 5<sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub> p cent by all the American friends that we have workt for in the present troublesome times severall of whom have been & actually are Eyewitnesses of our trouble, as those Blanketts must be collecttd in the Country round about Palencia & the money must be Remitted in Specie there

Joseph Gardoqui &amp; Hijos to Arthur Lee, Bilbao, Spain, April 4, 1778. (Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History, GLC01450.523, p.1)

## Spain's Covert Contribution to the American Revolution, 1778

long before hand for the purpose, and only obliged to pay  
 freight thereof & turn the charge of it, but also to make good  
 to the persons Employ'd in their collection their Expence of trouble  
 the whole out our Commission so that at present we reckon that  
 half of it will be our profit, however at any rate, shall  
 allways be proud to be honoured with your Commands & should  
 you resolve the continuance of the Blanchett Exports, would be  
 glad you would Innuente to us in answer how many you  
 would have us order, this being the only proper Season for the  
 purpose. We most cordially congratulate you on the News  
 Received here this post from Paris that the Honourable Doctor  
 Franklin had been presented to His Majesty as an Ambassador  
 of the United Colonys in America, the truth whereof hope  
 to have it confirmed by your owne pen;  
 Our Brother is still at Court, where you may freely command him.  
 at foot you have a Memorandum of what will cost in this place  
 a whole Soldiers white Uniforme & wish it may turn to some  
 Account, but if the Collour of the Uniforme should be blue  
 green or yellow in that case it will stand in 48 Liales more  
 We most Respectfully Salute you & are

Honoured Sir

your m<sup>ost</sup> aff<sup>ectionate</sup> & obed<sup>ient</sup> Serv<sup>ant</sup>.

J. G. H<sup>o</sup>

Memorandum of a Soldiers full white uniforme with  
 turnings of the same Cloath, as given in the Spanish Service  
 the Coat with Bottons & ready made. . . . . Liales . . . 78. 17.  
 the West coat . . . . . 43. 17.  
 Breeches . . . . . 24. 17.  
 Hatte . . . . . 11. 17.  
 a pair of Stockings strong & good . . . . . 6. . . . .  
 a pair of Shoes . . . . . 11. 17.  
 Liales of Vellons 472. 17.

Joseph Gardoqui & Hijos to Arthur Lee, Bilbao, Spain, April 4, 1778. (Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History, GLC01450.523, p.2)

## Spain's Covert Contribution to the American Revolution, 1778

### Transcript

Joseph Gardoqui & Hijos to Arthur Lee, Bilbao, Spain, April 4, 1778, 2 pages + Address

[Ar]thur Lee Esq<sup>r</sup>

Bilbao the 4<sup>th</sup> April 1778.

Honoured Sir

On the 15<sup>th</sup> ~~ult~~ we adviced you the liberty we had than taken to value on your Account on Mr. LeGrand of Paris three bills ammounting to Livers 14599, the payment whereof we Recommended to your care with a Request of your placing it's ammount at the Exchange of 77 ½ & 0 to our debitt in Riales 56733 & 29 mis of Vellon which Sum was duelly pass'd by us to your Credit: we also transmitted you under the same datte Invoice of 92 Balles containing 2296 Blanketts shipt on Board the *John* Cap<sup>t</sup> Azaraiah Woodbury for Boston the ammount whereof if Right beg'd you would Credit us in Riales 67125 & 15 mis of Vellon all which must beg leave to confirm again advicing you with pleasure that the above Vessell departed hence with a fine wind the same day 15<sup>th</sup> & cordially wish may safely Reach his desired home; therefore continueing our Blankett Exports with all possible Expedition have now also to informe you our haveing shipt for Glowcester Cape Ann on the Brigg *George* Cap<sup>t</sup> Jobbe Knight as you will see by the within Invoice 75 Bales containing 1926 fine large Palencia Blanketts consigned in Boston as the formers to James Warren Esq<sup>r</sup> as such be pleased order the same to be Examined & if free from Errors after due Examination Credit us its ammount in Riales 55185 & 11 mis of Vellon with which your Account stands duelly debitted: Cap<sup>t</sup> Knight was dispatched the 28<sup>th</sup> & the weather being favourable suppose sailed yesterday, of which should we Receive a true Account before this is Sealed up, depend on being duelly informed of a Governour.

You will see by the above Invoice that agreeable to what you are pleased to communicatte us in your very Esteemd favour of the 6<sup>th</sup> Instant we have Reduced our Commition to 3 & 6<sup>t</sup> butt—Dear Sir besides our being allowed 5 & 6<sup>t</sup> by all the American friends that we have workt for in the present troublesome times severall of whome have been & actually are Eyewitnesses of our trouble, as those Blanketts must be collectted in the Country Round about Palencia & the money must be Remmitted in Specie there [page 2] long before hand for the purp[ose][illegible] or by obliged to pa[text loss] freight thereof & Run the Risque of it, butt also to make [good] to the persons Employd in their collection their Expences & trouble the whole out our Commition so that at present we Reckon that half of it will be our profitt, however at any Ratte, shall allways be proud to be honoured with your Commands & should you Resolve the continuance of the Blankett Exports, would be glad you would Insinuatte to us in answer how many you would have us order, this being the only proper Season for the purpose. We most cordially congratulatte you on the News Received here this post from Paris that the Honourable Doctor

## Spain's Covert Contribution to the American Revolution, 1778

Franklin had been presented to His Majesty as an Ambassador of the United Collonys in America, the truth whereof hope to have it confirmed by your owne pen;—

Our Brother is still at Court, where you may freely command him at foot you have a Memorandum of what will cost in this place a whole Soldiers white Uniforme & wish it may turn to some Account, butt if the collour of the Uniforme should be blue green or yallow in that case it will stand in 18 Riales more—

We most Respectfully Salutte you & are—

Honored Sir

Your m<sup>st</sup> aff<sup>t</sup> hble & ob<sup>t</sup> Servts.

J : G : H

Memorandum of a Soldiers full white uniforme with turnings & if the same Cloath, as given in the Spanish Service

the coat with Bottons & Ready made . . . . .	Riales . .	78.17.
the west coatt . . . . .		43.17.
Breechees. . . . .		24.17
Hatte . . . . .		11.17.
a pair of Stockings strong & good. . . . .		.6
a pair of shoes ....d°...d° . . . . .		11.17
	Riales of Vellon	172.17

[Address]

The Honble Arthur Lee Esq<sup>f</sup>

At

Challiott

Pres de

Paris

[docket]

Soldiers cloathing in Spain