America's first Gulf War: the United States campaign for the Gulf Coast, 1810-1819

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Abstract:
As we approach the 200-year anniversary of the U.S. acquisition of Florida, it is important to take another look at what led to that event in our nation's history. Although several conflicts occurred in the old Southwest prior to the 1819 treaty with Spain, no historian has linked them together as a single conflict. This thesis aims to show how the Patriot War, the War of 1812 in the South, the Creek War and the First Seminole War are all part of a singular conflict instigated by American southern expansionists in 1810, which concluded in 1819 with the Adams-Onís Treaty and the U.S. acquisition of Florida. Prior to 1810, the U.S. government severed the unending western claims of the original thirteen states to create territories west of the Appalachian Mountains. In the North, displaced Indian tribes, nominally supported by Great Britain, remained the only obstacle to westward expansion. In the South, however, multiple barriers existed. The Mississippi Territory, sparsely settled by European-Americans, was inhabited by sedentary Indian tribes and boxied in by the Spanish, who controlled all access to the Gulf of Mexico. White populations lived primarily along the borders of Georgia and Tennessee with the vast interior inhabited by the Cherokee, Choctaw, Chickasaw, and Creek peoples. Southern expansionists sought to increase white settlement in these lands to acquire more wealth, as well as to eliminate the wilderness safe haven where many escaped slaves sought sanctuary. By living with the Indians or creating their own communities, these escaped slaves, known as Maroons, posed a menace to plantation owners and increased the threat of armed rebellion. Regarding socioeconomic changes in the Gulf Coast region, this thesis will examine the pace of white American settlement as well as the intentions of southern expansionists regarding Indian removal. Although U.S. interest in the Spanish Floridas developed in the 1780s, an outright invasion could not be justified. With the Louisiana Purchase in 1803, the nation quickly gained a western empire—especially with the addition of New Orleans. But New Orleans, the vital gateway to the Mississippi River, remained vulnerable and detached due to its proximity to Spanish West Florida. Additionally, the United States inherited a sundry population of French, British, and Spanish inhabitants with the acquisition of this territory. The West Florida Rebellion in 1810 sparked the idea that internal Spanish struggles could be exploited to acquire the region. By 1812, American intervention escalated into the Patriot War in East Florida. That same year, war with Great Britain increased the prospect of U.S. intervention against Britain's European ally, Spain. By viii 1814, military activities endorsed by Great Britain accelerated American military intervention in the Spanish Floridas and initiated the ruin of the Creek Confederacy. In 1815, the War of 1812 ended with the Treaty of Ghent, which allegedly returned borders to "status quo ante bellum." However, captured Creek lands were retained and settlers flooded the region. In Florida, remaining hostile Creeks and Seminoles displaced by warfare caused continued border tensions leading to the First Seminole War, which lasted until 1818. By 1819, the constant pressure and violations of Spanish sovereignty compelled Spain to cede both East and West Florida to the United States. This thesis will examine the conduct of these wars and argue that they are all really one conflict; a conflict that gave southern expansionists the power to realize their territorial ambitions and advance the westward movement of the Cotton Kingdom across the American South. This study is primarily from the point of view of American policy makers, not to demonstrate bias, but to look into their decision making process based on the context of their knowledge at the time. To maintain the integrity of historical documents I have not corrected original spelling errors unless absolutely necessary to understand the words of a document's author. This theater of American history is not new to me. Not only did I begin researching this period of history more than eight years ago, but I have also personally visited the locations of most of the critical events of this conflict. Although I have not found new primary sources, I believe those that are already known are more than enough to support my argument. The events of this struggle are well documented and with my re-evaluation of the historical record I intend to re-write this chapter of American history.

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The Gulf Coast of the United States is the coastline along which the Southern United States meets the Gulf of Mexico. The coastal states that have a shoreline on the Gulf of Mexico are Texas, Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama, and Florida, and these are known as the Gulf States. The economy of the Gulf Coast area is dominated by industries related to energy, petrochemicals, fishing, aerospace, agriculture, and tourism. The large Spanish role in the independence of the United States was part of its dispute over colonial supremacy with the Kingdom of Great Britain. Spain declared war on Britain as an ally of France, itself an ally of the American colonies, and provided supplies and munitions to the American forces. Beginning in 1776, it jointly funded Roderigue Hortalez and Company, a trading company that provided critical military supplies. Spain also provided financing for the final Siege of Yorktown in 1781 with a collection 1806–1810: Action in the Gulf of Mexico: American gunboats operated from New Orleans against Spanish and French privateers off the Mississippi Delta, chiefly under Captain John Shaw and Master Commandant David Porter. 1810–1819: West Florida (Spanish territory): Governor William C. C. Claiborne of Louisiana, on orders of President James Madison, occupied with troops territory in dispute east of the Mississippi as far as the Pearl River, later the eastern boundary of Louisiana. In 1819 the Floridas were ceded to the United States. 1817: Amelia Island (Spanish territory off Florida): Under orders of President James Monroe, United States forces landed and expelled a group of smugglers, adventurers, and freebooters.