

James Monroe to Andrew Jackson, July 19, 1818, from Correspondence of Andrew Jackson. Edited by John Spencer Bassett.

PRESIDENT MONROE TO JACKSON.1

1 This letter was given to the public in Calhoun's pamphlet against Jackson in February, 1831, and appeared in the *United States Telegraph* for the seventeenth of that month. It was widely reprinted, as showing that Monroe disavowed Jackson's entry into Florida.

Washington, July 19, 1818.

Dear Sir, I received, lately, your letter of June 2nd by Mr. Hambly, at my farm in Loudon, to which I had retired, to await your report and the return of our Commissioners from Buenos Ayres. In reply to your letter, I shall express myself, with the freedom and candour, which I have invariably used in my communications with you. I shall withhold nothing in regard to your attack of the Spanish posts and occupancy of them, particularly Pensacola, which you ought to know, it being an occurrence of the most delicate and interesting nature, and which without a circumspect and cautious policy, looking to all the objects, which claim attention, may produce the most serious and unfavorable consequences. It is by a knowledge of all the circumstances, and a comprehensive view of the whole subject, that the danger to which this measure is exposed may be avoided, and all the good, which you have contemplated by it, as I trust, be fully realized.²

2 The protests of Onís, the Spanish minister in Washington, against Jackson's entry into West Florida began on June 17. They initiated a long correspondence between him and John Quincy Adams, Secretary of State. The able letters of the secretary in

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defense of Jackson's Japanese source course constitute the most interesting part of this correspondence. See *Am. St. Papers, For. Aff.*, IV. 495 et seq.

In calling you into active service against the Seminoles, and communicating to you the orders, which had been given just before to Genl. Gaines, the views and intentions of government, were fully disclosed in respect to the operations in Florida. In transcending the limit prescribed by those orders, you acted on your own responsibility, on facts and circumstances, which were unknown to the government, when the orders were given, many of which occurred afterwards, and which you thought imposed on you the measure, as an act of patriotism, essential to the honour and interests of your country.

The U. States stand justified in ordering their troops into Florida in pursuit of their enemy. They have this right by the Law of nations, if the Seminoles were Inhabitants of another country and had entered Florida to elude our pursuit. Being inhabitants of Florida, with a species of Sovereignty over that part of the Territory and a right to the soil, our right to give such an order is the more complete and unquestionable. It is not an act of hostility to Spain. It is the less so, because her government is bound by treaty to restrain by arms, if necessary, the Indians there, from committing hostilities against the U. States.

But an order by the government to attack a Spanish Post, would assume another character. It would authorize war, to which by the principles of our constitution, the Executive is incompetent. Congress alone possess the Power. I am aware, that cases may occur, where the Commanding General, acting on his own responsibility, may with safety pass this limit, and with essential advantage to his country. The officers and troops of the neutral power, forget the obligations, incident to their neutral character; they stimulate the enemy to make war; they furnish them with arms and munitions of war to carry it on; they take an active part in other respects in their favor; they afford them an asylum in their retreat. The general obtaining victory, pursues them to this post, the gates of which are shut against him. He attacks and carries it and rests on those acts for his justification. The affair is then brought before his government, by the power, whose post has thus been

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attacked and carried. If the government, whose officer made the attack, had given an order for it, the officer would have no merit in it. He exercised no discretion, nor did he act on his own responsibility. The merit of the Service, if there be any in it would not be his. This is the ground, on which this occurrence rests, as to the past I will now look to the future.3

3 Monroe's attitude on this question is further shown in his letter to C. J. Ingersoll, July 24, 1818 (copy in the Jackson MSS.), in which is the following:

“The fact is, that the General acted without authority, and even against his orders, in the material circumstance of taking Pensacola. The conduct however of the Spanish officers, is thought to have justified him. They stimulated the Indians to the War, furnished them with munitions of War to carry it on, embarrassed his operations by refusing a passage to his provisions, furnished an assylum, as you state, to a principal chief etc. the facts on which he rests his justification were not known to the Govt. when his orders were given, many of them indeed occur'd afterwards; tho I do not think, had they been known, or anticipated, that the Executive could have given an order to take the posts. such an order would have been War, and that power belongs exclusively to Congress, in the first instance. To retain the posts, would be as objectionable on principle, as to take them, and might lead to the same consequences. It is therefore thought proper to restore them. But as the Spanish officers are the aggressors, and every thing that has been done is imputable to them, the minister of Spain is informed, that the evidence proving their misconduct, will be embodied, as the ground of an application to his Govt. for their punishment. He is further informed that it is expected, that his Govt. will place a force in Florida, sufficient to fulfill the Stipulation of the treaty of 1795, wherby it is bound, to restrain the Indians from committing hostilities against the U. States.”

“There were two courses of proceeding, in direct opposition to each other, and differing, each, from that which has been adopted, one was to hold the posts, and meet the consequences. This was objectionable for the reasons assigned above. The other, not

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only, to state that no orders had been given for taking them but to bring to trial the officer who took them, for disobedience of orders. If his defense is good, as I think it is there is no ground on which to try him, in regard to Spain. This trial, therefore, would be a triumph to that power, over a General, who had on his own responsibility, avenged the injuries of his country, and to which triumph his own Govt. would be made instrumental. Such a measure would announce to Spain, that, let her act as she might, Florida was in no danger; we would never take it. It would confirm her in the disposition not to cede it. By avoiding both extremes, we have endeavoured, to turn the incident to the best account we could for our country, and to the credit of the General, without committing a breach of the constitution, or incurring the imputation of it, or furnishing to Spain just cause of war. Should war follow, the Executive will not be responsible for it. It will be the expedient of desperate councils, adopted as the last resource to save their Colonies, in the hope of uniting Europe against us, and then, on the calculation that if the U States, and Spain engage in war, it will soon become General, in favor of Spain. Should war not ensue, it seems p[r]obable, that the multiplied proofs which have been offered, to the Spanish Govt. of the impossibility of fulfilling its engagements to the U States, in regard to Florida, will induce it, to cede the p[r]ovence.”