In the wake of the fall of the Spanish monarchy and the outbreak of the revolutionary movement that swept across the Spanish empire, the Madison administration sent agents to Buenos Aires, Santiago de Chile, Caracas and Havana to collect information on the progress of the revolutions and the developments of the war against the Spanish royalist army, to assess trading opportunities in the empire and inform the rebels of the good disposition of the United States towards them. Agents were also sent to West and East Florida and the Texas-Louisiana border. Of all these missions to the Spanish empire neighboring Texas and the Floridas turned out to be the more complicated ones. The executive agents in these colonies got involved in revolutionary activities and filibustering raids, which historian Harris Gaylord Warren has defined as “an attempt on the part of a supposedly neutral country to gain the objectives of a military expedition without incurring the obligations and disadvantages of formal warfare.”

Hence the consensus among U.S. historians has been that the policy of President Madison was expansion to these provinces by first overthrowing the local Spanish authorities with the help of the agents. Frank Owsley and Gene Smith have argued that like his predecessor Thomas Jefferson and successor James Monroe, Madison was a “fervent expansionist willing to go to almost any length to secure additional territory in the South and Southwest.” Therefore his was a coherent policy on the Spanish borderlands to seize lands through “unofficial” federally sponsored efforts. Yet recently J.C. A. Stagg has warned against the idea so far held by many scholars that President Madison clearly sanctioned these covert operations. In fact, he has contended that because Madison believed in annexing territory in accordance with the law of nations the president was much more of a cautious foreign-policy maker than a rash expansionist. Moreover, Stagg has cautioned against a simplistic generalization of the history of West and East Florida and Texas between 1810 and 1813 as the situation in the three Spanish territories differed.

3 Ibid., 5.
This contemporary scholarly discussion should not obliterate however the fact that at the time Spaniards regarded U.S. filibustering and revolutionary activities on the borderlands as a disruptive and aggressive expansionist movement to dispossess their King of his dominions. In fact, the borderlands became a thorn in the monarch’s side. Patrolling these peripheral provinces against incursions led by U.S. agents into the wealthy northern heartland of the empire, that is Mexico, and stifling the Floridian revolutions put further strain on the already overstretched Spanish authorities and army struggling to keep the empire from dismembering completely. Yet despite being sparsely populated, economically less developed than the other colonies and financially dependent on subsidies from the viceroyalty of New Spain, West and East Florida and Texas were still important as buffer zones. Texas was the barrier to protect Mexico, the “silver province” from which Spain drew two-thirds of her imperial revenue.\(^5\) The Spanish army also needed to reinforce the Louisiana-Texas border in order to stop Anglo-Americans from coming into close contact with two populous and powerful Indian nations, the Taovay-Wichitas and the Comanches in the Provincias Internas of New Spain, and thus creating additional havoc in the viceroyalty.\(^6\) Possessing West and East Florida amounted to blocking transportation of U.S. produce and the movement of Anglo-Americans and U.S. troops down the many rivers east of the Mississippi that flowed from U.S. territory into the Gulf Coast. Moreover, East Florida had long been a Spanish-promoted haven for deserters, runaway slaves, Indian tribes and British loyalists. Control of the Floridian peninsula gave Spain the possibility of using this potentially troublesome population to harass the United States on its southern Georgia border whenever she deemed it necessary.

Yet the early 19\(^{\text{th}}\) century Spanish borderlands have attracted little attention from Latin American historians, who have concentrated almost exclusively on the process of revolution, independence and nation-building in the more densely populated and wealthier Spanish colonies in Central and South America. Therefore most of the scholarship about the Spanish territories that the United States eventually annexed has been in the hands of U. S. historians, who have focused primarily on immigration, land settlement, slavery, frontier economy, society and culture as well as relations with the southern Indian tribes.\(^7\) On the other hand, as mentioned above, the history of the borderlands between the U.S. occupation of West Florida in 1810 and the signing of the Transcontinental Treaty of

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1819, by virtue of which the Floridas were annexed to the United States, has also been studied in the context of expansion and Manifest Destiny, either to confirm the existence of an incipient form of the ideology in the first decades of the 19th century, or to show that the tenet underlying early expansionism was rather American continentalism, i.e. the United States should replace the rival European empires on the North American continent. In other words, what drove the Early Republic leaders was more their concern about securing the geopolitical situation of the United States rather than the belief that the nation had a destiny set out for it and theirs was the mission to accomplish it.8

Hence given these predominantly U.S.-perspective monographs about the history of the future Gulf Coast states, would it be worthwhile attempting to study the Spanish borderlands in the 1810-1813 period from another angle? Would it make sense to examine events in Texas and the Floridas within the context of the Spanish-American revolutions? Would it be possible to place them in a different narrative other than the history of the borderlands, or more generally of the West, or the history of the troubled U.S.-Spain relations? A possible way of reconnecting the history of the southern U.S. and the history of the Spanish-American revolutions would be by putting both back into the history of the Western Hemisphere, and this could be undertaken by focusing on relations between the United States and the Spanish-American colonies and republics to be. And in order to explore this path, the first step would be to revisit the major events that caused not only the revolutions in Central and South America but also changed the course of history in southern North America.

In April 1808 Napoleon seized and imprisoned the Bourbon king Ferdinand VII and replaced him with his brother Joseph Bonaparte as king of Spain and the Indies. The usurpation of the Spanish throne by the French led to the insurrection of the Spanish population, which did not recognize the new king. The Spanish formed a coalition of provincial juntas that acted in the name of the imprisoned Spanish king and the Supreme Junta in Seville. Yet in 1809 the Supreme Junta had to retire to Cádiz in the far south as French troops advanced towards Portugal. Finally in 1810 the Regency took over in the name of Ferdinand VII and set out to reorganize the rebellion by summoning a parliament (the Cortes) in which both Spain and its American colonies were represented. Across the empire insurrectionary juntas also emerged. They did not recognize the authority of Joseph Bonaparte (el Rey intruso) and continued to pledge allegiance to Ferdinand VII. Yet behind the máscara de Fernando (mask of Ferdinand) the juntas upheld, most of the members of the juntas were American-born Spaniards, the criollos (creoles), with grievances against the peninsulares, that is the Spanish officials and soldiers who had ruled them for so

8 Stagg, J. C. A. Borderlines in Borderlands, 5.
many years. Therefore this new and unstable situation gave criollos the opportunity to adopt policies that would lead them to autonomy, if not outright independence from Spain. Back in Europe the Spanish crisis prompted action by the British government. It sent Sir Arthur Wellesley, the future Duke of Wellington, to mobilize Portuguese, Spanish and English forces against French troops in Spain and to liberate the nation from French military occupation. Consequently, many in the United States feared that in exchange for British support the Spanish would allow Great Britain to station troops and ships in Spanish America, giving her footholds in Mexico, Cuba and the Spanish borderlands.

In West Florida several prominent residents, upon receiving news of the uprisings in the colonies, asked the Spanish governor for permission to hold a convention. In fact, Madison had instructed territorial judge William Wykoff to obtain from the most influential Anglo-American settlers between the Mississippi and the Pearl River the organization of a convention to invite the United States to take possession of West Florida and above all, to dissuade West Floridians from forming an independent government. From late July through August 1810 the delegates met at St. Johns Plains, and on September 25 they declared West Florida a free and independent state. President Madison’s response to the declaration of independence was U.S. occupation of West Florida. A few months later the administration asked its executive agent George Mathews, a former governor of Georgia, to visit East Florida where he would spread the message that should the local settlers declare their independence from Spain “their incorporation into the Union would coincide with the sentiments and policy of the United States.” In February 1811, Mathews wrote asking secretary of State James Monroe to redefine his assignment so he could facilitate a revolution in East Florida. According to Mathew’s plan, the United States would provide arms and artillery to the Floridian inhabitants, who in turn would bring about a revolution. The revolutionary authorities would then request East Florida be transferred to the United States. Mathews believed it was important for the United States to occupy the East Florida in order to limit British influence, stop the smuggling, and prevent deserters and runaway slaves from finding asylum in the peninsula. However, Mathew’s demand went unanswered but he still went ahead. The Patriot Army the agent had mustered seized Fernandina. When news of the occupation reached Washington the administration swiftly disavowed George Mathews and transferred his duties to the governor of Georgia. With serious trouble building up with Great Britain the United States could not afford a war with Spain in the South.

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9 Ibid., 94.
In the meantime, in Washington President Madison, Secretary of State James Monroe and Secretary of War William Eustis cordially received José Bernardo Gutiérrez de Lara, the emissary of the revolutionary Mexican leader Miguel Hidalgo. Gutiérrez requested arms, ammunition, troops and trade from the United States. Yet when disagreement over the sending of US troops into Texas to take possession of the province to the Rio Grande disrupted discussions, the administration decided to pay Gutiérrez’s expenses back home to continue working to advance the revolution in Mexico. On his way back to Mexico, Gutiérrez met U.S. agent William Shaler in New Orleans. Shaler had been instructed to persuade the new regime in Mexico not to adhere to the positions of Madrid in the boundary disputes in West Florida and the Texas-Louisiana frontier. At the same time, the instructions precluded the agent from any interference in the internal affairs of Mexico. Shaler and Gutiérrez decided to travel to Natchitoches on the Texas-Louisiana border. There the Mexican set about organizing the Republican Army of the North and together with Augustus Magee, a former US Army lieutenant, headed the military expedition into Texas in early August 1812. William Shaler’s role in the organization of the filibuster remains unclear, which has led to discussions among scholars about how involved he actually got.

In April 1813 the Army occupied San Antonio de Béxar and the Mexicans in the Army drew up a constitution declaring Texas independent from Spain and an integral part of Mexico. Gutiérrez was appointed the first governor of Texas, who promptly had some of the Spanish officers murdered. Uneasy with the way events were going, Shaler denounced the “absurd revolutionary farce” that passed for a constitution. He then managed to get José Alvarez de Toledo, a revolutionary from Cuba, to take over from Gutiérrez. This brought upon Shaler a rebuke from Monroe, who reminded him not to interfere in the affairs of Mexico or “to encourage any armaments of any kind against the existing government”. Shaler apologized but also defended himself by explaining that the preparations of the filibuster had taken place on “the desolate banks of the Sabine”, that is outside the limits of the United States. The excuse was to no avail as Monroe decided to terminate Shaler’s mission in June 1813.

U.S. agents in West and East Florida and Texas failed to carry out their instructions. Yet the study of their missions at an early stage of the Spanish-American revolutions brings forth key issues Madison’s

10 Stagg, J. C. A. Borderlines in Borderlands, 167.
11 Ibid., 167.
successor James Monroe would also have to grapple with during his presidency (1817-1825) as revolutionary events unfolded in the Western Hemisphere. Firstly, the involvement of the agents in the filibusters and organization of revolutions on the borderlands raised the issue of the boundaries of U.S. neutrality vis-à-vis foreign conflicts, i.e. the wars of independence in the Spanish empire. Secondly, the revolutionaries’ request of U.S. acknowledgement of their independence questioned the administration’s policy of recognition. In other words, for the administration the debate focused on whether recognition would be granted in accordance with or in violation of the law of nations. Thirdly, the agents’ instructions put forward two issues: on the one hand, how precisely or vaguely did the administration write the instructions, and on the other hand, how strictly or loosely did the agents interpret them. Hence the question is where did the responsibility for the development of events lie? And this in turn ultimately points at the connections between the decision-making center in Washington, informed by international and national events, and the peripheral borderlands, where action took place and decisions were also taken.