CHAPTER TWO

CARDINAL ALBERONI AND REFORM IN THE AMERICAN EMPIRE

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Carlos Martínez Shaw and Marina Alfonso Mola have recently described the reign of Felipe V as “the opening moment of eighteenth-century absolutism’s reformist policy”.¹ While our distinguished colleagues referred principally to the first Bourbon’s legacy in Spain, it is entirely appropriate to include the American empire within that same concept. Felipe’s reign has traditionally been understood as a time when few innovations entered the American colonies, with reformist ministers preoccupied by more pressing problems in Iberia. This perspective retains a measure of validity in that the terms of the Utrecht settlement, as reinforced by the War of the Quadruple Alliance, inhibited changes in the historic commercial system, leaving little room for innovation until the Treaty of Madrid freed the crown’s hand in 1750.²

On the other hand, other key areas of colonial policy were at play and so too, albeit within limited spheres, was the conduct of the American trade. Indeed, the reformist agenda of Cardinal Giulio Alberoni embraced through major initiatives all four areas of what would later appear as the secular sphere of the Bourbon reformist agenda under Carlos III. In addition to the commercial, these included innovations in the administrative, fiscal, and military realms. More specifically, Alberoni transferred the Casa de la Contratación and the Consulado de Cargadores a Indias from Seville to Cadiz in 1717, a step that entailed profound institutional implications for the colonial trade; he elevated New Granada to a viceroyalty; and he installed a tobacco monopoly in Cuba. Finally, in 1719, he initiated military reform through the establishment of the Fixed Infantry Battalion of Havana, the first permanent American garrison placed on a modern footing. True, these measures came piecemeal, albeit within close chronological proximity, but so too did all the reforms of Carlos III, except, of

course, in Cuba, where he defined his reformist agenda.\(^3\) Alberoni’s initiatives have attracted little attention to this point, and with some justification, as all but the military were undone following the cardinal’s fall and exile. Yet they were salvaged in due time by Alberoni’s disciple, the better known José Patiño, and they left a legacy upon which subsequent reformers could advance a more comprehensive agenda.

The Italian favorite of Isabel de Farnesio, the second wife of Felipe V, Abbot Giulio Alberoni, became the de facto prime minister by 1715. Although of a humble birthright from the Duchy of Piacenza and Parma, he secured a Jesuit education, receiving minor orders.\(^4\) His breakout came during the War of Succession when he found favor with Marshal duke of Vendôme, commander of the French forces operating in Italy. Known for his fabulous cooking and Italian cuisine, he subsequently accompanied the French force to Madrid where Queen Maria Luisa took him under her personal protection, awarding Spanish citizenship to the suave Italian.\(^5\) Now a prominent figure at court, Alberoni remained in Madrid after the duke’s death in 1712. Following the premature passing of Maria Luisa, he influenced Felipe’s decision to select Isabel, who hailed from his native Parma, as queen.\(^6\) This transformation guaranteed his position at court.

Thereafter, Alberoni continued to improve his relationship with the royal family and to consolidate his power. In April, 1715, he toppled the Francophile Bernardo Tinajero, the first magistrate to act as secretary of the Office for Marine and the Indies.\(^7\) Tinajero, whose priority was the Atlantic, stood in the path of Isabel’s Mediterranean agenda, which focused on the Italian holdings that Spain had lost at Utrecht as well as her personal inheritance. Alberoni then assigned the functions of Marine and the Indies to the surviving three ministries.\(^8\) When in July of 1716, he felled his rival Italian, Inquisitor General Cardinal Giudice, in the shadowy

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\(^5\) For Alberoni’s skills in the kitchen, see María de los Ángeles Pérez Samper, *Isabel de Farnesio* (Barcelona: Plaza & Janes, 2003), pp. 330–2.


\(^7\) “Minister of State José Grimaldo to Tinajero”, Buen Retiro, 28 April 1715, AHN, Estado, 2933.

\(^8\) “Royal decree”, Palace, 3 April 1717, AGMAB, 5021.