CHAPTER THREE

“THE HONOR OF THE SPANISH NATION”: MILITARY OFFICERS, MEDITERRANEAN CAMPAIGNS AND AMERICAN GOVERNMENT UNDER FELIPE V

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“Chi brama far fortuna? / ...
Correte allor soldati / In Italia, dov’è rota la Guerra / Contro al Tedesco / ...
Se vieni, fratello, / Sarai caporale; / E tu colonnello, / E tu generale. / Il dio furfantello / Dall’arco immortale / Farà di cappello / Al bravo uffizial.”

In their 1977 landmark study of Spanish American audiencias, Mark Burkholder and D.S. Chandler argued that, from 1750 onwards, the Spanish crown had successfully transformed the profile of these key governmental institutions in at least two ways. By putting an end to the sale of office and favoring the appointment of judges born in the Iberian Peninsula—to the almost complete exclusion of Creole oidores who had previously dominated the tribunals—the crown had managed to reassert its control over the government of overseas provinces overcoming the “impotence” which had characterized Spain’s position vis-à-vis Spanish American government since 1687. Simultaneously, through the appointment of a growing number of oidores who had received their legal education in peripheral universities in Spain—as as opposed to the colegios mayores\(^1\) at the universities of Salamanca, Valladolid and Alcalá, whose graduates had traditionally monopolized the Spanish magistracy—the crown had

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1 Preziosilla addressing a group of Spanish muleteers and peasants in the village of Hornachuelos, in Giuseppe Verdi’s *La Forza del Destino* (libretto by Francesco Maria Piave), Act 2, Scene 1.

2 Colegios Mayores, initially instituted as residence halls for a few deserving students had, by the sixteenth century, become privileged institutions closely linked to the governing councils of the monarchy. By restricting admission to the six Colegios Mayores to their own scions, and securing quick promotion into audiencias, chancelleries and councils for their graduates, the Spanish judicial elite came to successfully control access to and membership within its ranks; see, amongst others, Richard L. Kagan, *Students and Society in Early Modern Spain* (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974), especially pp. 77–158.
successfully placed American audiencias in the hands of a “new bureaucracy” based more on merit than privilege and status.³

As much of the historiography produced in the 1970s and 1980s, which contributed to a significant reinterpretation of Spanish America’s late eighteenth century,⁴ From Impotence to Authority espoused and provided substantial support for two key assumptions about Bourbon reforms and their impact in the Indies: that reforms had only begun to be successfully implemented in the second half of the eighteenth century; and that, by dislodging American elites from the government of Spanish America, reforms had accentuated creole feelings of oppression and discrimination by Peninsular Spaniards which would, eventually, play a key role in bringing about the Wars of Independence.

While it is difficult to find fault with Burkholder and Chandler’s erudite reconstruction of the roster of oidores and their careers, and hence with their overall description of the changes affecting the profile of Spanish American audiencia judges throughout the eighteenth century, the same cannot be said about their analysis of the mechanisms behind these changes and much less about their periodization. As much of the historiography on Colonial Spanish America to this day, the attention paid by Burkholder and Chandler to the context within which Spanish policy for the Americas was decided was limited. While the authors did point towards the existence of different opinions and positions in Madrid, and mentioned in passing that these may be manifestations of intense political tensions and factionalism at court,⁵ they failed to fully apprehend the implications which the changing balance of power in Spain would have for American governance. Often implicitly, historians of Spanish America tend to assume that the central institutions of the monarchy functioned as a “black box” which produced policy in tune with clearly identified and univocal “royal” interests from information sent from Spanish America.⁶ This is probably the reason why Burkholder and Chandler seemed to

⁴ See Antonio Annino, and Rafael Rojas with collaboration from Francisco A. Eissa-Barroso, La Independencia. Los libros de la patria (Mexico City: Centro de Investigación y Docencia Económicas / Fondo de Cultura Económica, 2008), pp. 128–32.
⁵ See, for instance, Burkholder and Chandler, Impotence to Authority, p. 37.
⁶ For a general critique of scholars’ tendency to think about ‘the state’ as constituting a black box see Theda Skocpol, “Bringing the State back in: strategies of analysis in current research”, in Peter B. Evans, Dietrich Rueschemeyer, and Theda Skocpol (eds.) Bringing the State Back In (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), pp. 169–91.