The British Invasions of the River Plate

It is probable that the British invasions of the River Plate would never have taken place had it not been for the determination of Sir Home Popham. He had been exploring the possibilities of carrying out his plan for an expedition to this area for six years. Although the other commanders who took part in this expedition and the British Government itself were also to blame for the many mistakes made during this enterprise, Sir Home Popham was responsible for ensuring that the River Plate expedition got under way in the first place.

The only person who could have prevented Popham’s expedition from setting out was the Military Commander in the Cape of Good Hope, Sir David Baird. He agreed to give Popham permission to embark on this project as Naval Commander, and supplied him with troops which were placed under the command of General William Carr Beresford. The following words addressed to Beresford by Baird express the ambiguity and confusion that would characterize the expedition:

> it is alike impossible and unnecessary for me to give you any specific instructions or advice. Your proceedings can alone be governed by circumstances, and I feel the fullest persuasion, that the general good of the service will be the leading principles of your conduct in all situations.¹

One would have thought that the ‘leading principles’ of Beresford’s conduct should have been provided by Popham, who...
after all had spent so many years – with Pitt, Melville, and Miranda among others – sketching out memoranda on all sorts of expeditions to South America. Nevertheless, two days later Baird wrote to Lord Castlereagh at the War Office, assuming joint responsibility for the enterprise on behalf of both himself and of Sir Home:

In forming this determination I am perfectly aware that both the Commodore and myself have taken upon ourselves a high responsibility; but the great importance of the object, in a national point of view will, I trust, bear us out, and excuse us to His Majesty, for conducting a service, having previously received his special and gracious commands.²

By this time, however, Lord Castlereagh was no longer in office. On the death of Pitt, the Government was replaced by the ‘Ministry of All the Talents’.

Popham, for his part, was also in touch with Lord Castlereagh, as well as with William Marsden at the Admiralty. In his first letter to Castlereagh, he sent a copy of his 1804 memorandum proposing an expedition to the River Plate by way of justifying his present conduct. He added:

You will observe my Lord; that the paper in question holds out under certain combinations, some prospect of a general emancipation in South America, and that the great organ of action in this undertaking is General Miranda who is now in London. Rio de la Plata is one of the points proposed to be attacked, and was considered more a military position than one of absolute negotiation, though considerable dependence was placed on the effect which a successful issue in other places might have had in that respect. If therefore such an enterprise on general grounds of advantage to the Kingdom has been so long in agitation by different cabinets, I have reason to conclude that no formidable objection has ever existed either to the principle or policy of the measure. I am however aware that much has been said on the expediency of foreign territorial acquisition, taken simply as a conquest, but the agreement applied to situations without commercial resources, and which were exceedingly remote from the inspection or intercourse of the mother country.³