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British Foreign Policy and the Falkland Islands Crisis of 1770–1

Geoffrey W. Rice*

Much has been written about the dispute between Britain and Spain over the Falkland Islands which brought Europe to the brink of a major war in late 1770, and it may be thought that there is little to be added to such a well-trampled subject, but it is the contention of this article that the British side of this crisis has never been fully revealed, especially the roles of the two Secretaries of State, Lords Weymouth and Rochford, and that nearly all existing accounts are flawed in some way, if not demonstrably erroneous in matters of detail and interpretation. This is not the place for a detailed narrative of the entire negotiation. Instead this article aims at a closer analysis of key primary sources in order to offer a new interpretation of the British side of the diplomatic negotiations.

Older accounts of the Falklands crisis tend to be one-sided and to rely on the most easily accessible diplomatic archives. For example, Spanish historians naturally relied on the Spanish diplomatic correspondence, whereas French historians such as Blart, Coquelle, Daubigny, and Renaut relied chiefly on the French archives. None of these historians had access to the most essential sources on the British side of the Falklands crisis, and their accounts are not to be relied on as accurate representations of British foreign policy. Much the same can be said of the standard account in English, the American legal historian Julius Goebel’s 1927 ‘study in legal and diplomatic history’. Goebel’s book remains an impressive attempt to summarize the surviving evidence on all sides of the crisis, and brings together much detail from both the French and Spanish diplomatic correspondence, yet his coverage of the British side is seriously deficient, not merely thanks to his palpable pro-Spanish bias but because his British evidence is drawn from a narrow range of printed sources such as the journals of Horace Walpole, pre-Namierite political studies and opposition speeches from Cobbett’s Parliamentary History. Goebel had no access to the Royal Archives at Windsor, or to Fortescue’s printed edition of George III’s correspondence, which first appeared in that same year, 1927. The king’s secret correspondence with his First Minister, Lord North, and his Secretaries of State Weymouth and Rochford, alone reveals the inside story of the British side of the Falklands negotiation and the ministerial reshuffle of December 1770 which saw Rochford replace Weymouth. Outside observers and opposition politicians could only speculate, often erroneously, about the formulation and conduct of Britain’s foreign policy by this inner circle of government. Goebel never revised his book, and the 1982 facsimile reprint merely added a new preface and a 1968 essay by J. C. J. Metford which argued (against

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Goebel) that Britain’s claim to the Falklands in international law was stronger than that of Argentina.

Like many earlier historians of the crisis, Goebel places heavy emphasis on what he terms North’s ‘secret promise’ (his title for chapter seven), made verbally to the French chargé d’affaires in London, Bertrand de Francès, that Britain would at some future date abandon the Falklands provided Spain agreed to Britain’s immediate demands for restitution of her outpost on the Falklands and disavowal of the Spanish officer who had expelled the garrison.

However, it is the contention of this article that, far from being the solution to the crisis that most historians have assumed, North’s amateurish intervention (he had no previous experience of diplomatic negotiations) came close to wrecking what had been up to that point a firm and agreed response by the British government to Spain’s peacetime insult to the British flag. Though the French and Spanish diplomats, and their ministers in their respective capitals, were convinced that some such promise had been made, neither George III nor the British cabinet ever confirmed it, and ministers (most notably Rochford) always denied that any valid promise had been made.

Nicholas Tracy’s excellent 1975 account of the Falklands crisis from a naval perspective demonstrates that there was no need for any secret promise. Britain’s prompt and massive naval armament gained the initiative, while the slowness of the French and Spanish naval responses placed them at a disadvantage. When Louis XV dismissed his Foreign Minister the Duc de Choiseul on Christmas Eve 1770, and the Spanish King Carlos III realised he would have to fight Britain alone, the Spanish promptly backed down and agreed to meet Britain’s simple demand.

Tracy locates the Falklands crisis in the wider context of Britain’s need for ‘careful statesmanship’ after her sweeping victories in the Seven Years’ War, to reassure Europe that her naval dominance was no threat to peace. It was widely known among diplomats and politicians of the 1760s that Choiseul was planning a surprise war of revenge on Britain to recoup Bourbon losses in the Seven Years’ War, as soon as the French and Spanish fleets had rebuilt a credible combined force. Lack of money had forced him to keep postponing the year of this revanche, but many observers feared that, ready or not, he would seize the opportunity offered by the dispute over the Falklands to unleash his war of revenge. It was this fear, coupled with Spain’s intransigence, that led North to warn Parliament on 22 November 1770 that war was highly likely (his actual words were ‘too probable’).

Though he cites Fortescue’s edition of George III’s correspondence, Tracy relies on Goebel’s summary of the French and Spanish diplomatic correspondence, and misses several key steps in the formulation and implementation of Britain’s response to the crisis, most notably Rochford’s 19 September order to increase the fleet by another 22 ships and the 30 November cabinet meeting which rejected any royal endorsement of North’s secret promise. Following Valentine’s biography of North, Tracy misattributes Rochford’s important 6 December memo on the state of the navy, misled by the king’s own handwritten heading.

A revised version of Tracy’s article appeared as a chapter in his 1988 book, *Navies, Deterrence and American Independence*, which notices Rochford’s 19 September order to mobilize the fleet and adds statistical tables comparing Britain’s naval strength in 1770 with three dates during the Seven Years’ War. Though there were only 86 ships of the line in 1770 compared with 97 in 1759, the Admiralty argued that in terms of tonnage, manning, and number of guns the fleet...
was of similar strength. Tracy also adds details of the state of manning derived from the ADM 36 series of muster books to show that although manning was slow for the 55 ships ordered for readiness, the first forty ships were 61.5 per cent manned by the start of 1771, so that 24 ships of the line could have been fully manned if required.\(^{10}\) However, on the diplomatic side, Tracy’s summary remains sketchy and makes no reference to any of the foreign diplomatic correspondence. One quotation attributed to North in fact comes from one of George III’s letters to North.\(^{11}\) Tracy is correct, however, in noticing that while North made his secret promise to France’s that Britain would abandon the Falklands at some future date if Spain met Britain’s demand for restitution and disavowal, Rochford was careful not to make any such offer to the Spanish ambassador in London, Prince Masserano ‘because Masserano had not yet made an acceptable statement’.\(^{12}\)

Older biographies of Britain’s Prime Minister during the Falklands crisis predictably portray North as the controlling hand on the British side of the diplomatic negotiations, but thereby underestimate the role of the king and the influence of other ministers.\(^{13}\) Peter Thomas’s 1976 biography of North is much more accurate and comprehensive than these older works, yet still credits North with taking the initiative to break the diplomatic deadlock in late November 1770 with his secret promise. However, Thomas is incorrect when he claims that ‘the cabinet promptly endorsed his proposal, with the condition that the promise of evacuation must remain secret.’\(^{14}\) In fact, as the foreign diplomatic correspondence shows, the cabinet meeting of 30 November rejected any such promise, and any royal endorsement of a verbal promise, on the grounds that the satisfaction had to be complete and public. The idea that Britain would abandon the Falklands soon after Spain had restored the British garrison to Port Egmont was already current in the London newspapers as early as 20 November. Peter Whiteley’s 1996 biography of North draws upon Goebel, Valentine, and Thomas, adding a few details from Horace Walpole and Margaret Morison’s 1910 article on Choiseul,\(^{15}\) but repeats Thomas’s claim that the cabinet endorsed North’s secret promise and makes no use of the foreign diplomatic sources.\(^{16}\)

Unpublished theses often provide more detailed treatment of diplomatic crises than biographies but unfortunately some of them are flawed or deficient. Ramon Eugenio Abarca’s vague and wordy 1965 doctoral thesis relies heavily on Goebel and Blart,\(^{17}\) while Juan Lalaguna Lasala’s 1968 thesis candidly admits that his account of the Falklands crisis is based ‘almost entirely’ on Martin-Allanic’s biography of the French explorer Bougainville.\(^{18}\) As a result both share the weaknesses of their sources regarding the inside story of the British side of negotiations. M. T. Hamer’s 1971 Cambridge doctoral thesis devotes a chapter to the Falklands crisis, describing it as the first ‘great crisis of foreign affairs’ in North’s premiership, but his emphasis is on domestic politics and he relies on Blart and Renaut for the French diplomatic correspondence while noting Goebel’s strong anti-British bias.\(^{19}\) He makes no mention of Martin-Allanic, but makes good use of Fortescue’s edition of the correspondence of George III to argue that the Falklands crisis came close to unseating North and had the outcome of strengthening his administration after the resignation of Weymouth. However, it will be argued below that Hamer has failed to grasp Rochford’s role in the diplomatic negotiations and has exaggerated the importance of North’s secret promise.

The best of the unpublished research is Margaret Escott’s 1988 doctoral thesis, which devotes three chapters to the Falklands crisis and combines a summary of the
diplomatic negotiations with detailed analysis of domestic politics and coverage by the London newspapers, with extensive quotation from the speeches and correspondence of leading opposition politicians. However, as noted above, outside observers (especially opposition politicians) were not privy to the high-level secret talks between North, Weymouth, Rochford and the French and Spanish diplomats in London, nor to George III’s secret correspondence with his key ministers. Sources that had no direct access to participants in the negotiations are thus filled with ill-informed and often highly inaccurate speculation. While these may be of interest to students of British domestic politics, they are worthless as evidence for the formulation and implementation of foreign policy.

The best recent account of the Falklands crisis is to be found in Hamish Scott’s authoritative survey of British foreign policy in the period 1763–83. He notes that although it began as a colonial dispute between Britain and Spain, the Falklands crisis soon involved France because the Spanish were relying on French naval assistance under the Family Compact in the event of war. In 1766 the Falklands had been linked by Choiseul to Britain’s claim to the Manila Ransom, but that negotiation had collapsed thanks to confusion and division within the British cabinet. As Scott remarks, the problem had merely been shelved. Spanish ministers were adamant that these islands belonged to them under the terms of the Treaty of Tordesillas (1494) and its confirmation at the Peace of Utrecht (1713). However, Britain had never accepted that part of Utrecht, claiming that all nations should be free to navigate and explore in the southern oceans, and to settle any unoccupied islands or territories that might be discovered. The 1767 evacuation of Bougainville’s French settlement at Port Louis on the East Falkland Island in response to a Spanish complaint had seemed to confirm Spanish ownership, and a Spanish governor now resided at Port Louis, renamed Puerto de la Soledad. After Commodore John Byron (the poet’s grandfather) had taken possession of the West Falkland Island in 1765 (which Britain claimed by right of discovery in 1690), Captain John McBride had returned with a hundred settlers and soldiers to begin farming near Port Egmont, where they erected a prefabricated wooden fort and ran up the Union flag. Alarmed by reports of this settlement, the Spanish government in 1768 sent general instructions to Governor Bucareli at Buenos Aires to remove any British settlements found on Spanish territory. In the meantime, two Spanish warships visited Port Egmont and ordered the British to leave. The British naval officer, Captain Hunt, asserted Britain’s right to possession by discovery and settlement, and threatened force to resist any Spanish attempt to remove him. The Spanish officers, and their superiors, regarded Hunt’s reply as insulting. Acting on his previous general orders, Bucareli despatched a substantial squadron of warships and 1,400 troops in May 1770 to expel the British from Port Egmont.

News of Hunt’s encounter with the Spanish frigates reached London in early June 1770. The British government’s initial response was cautious and low-key. The crews of several of the guard-ships stationed in the Channel ports were quietly augmented and the ships were moved out of the dockyards to be anchored off Spithead and Plymouth. In addition, two third-rate warships, Edgar and Dorsetshire, were ordered to be outfitted for Channel service. This was after the passage of the Russian fleet to the Mediterranean and prior to its success in the battle of Chesmé. When news reached London that the French were building two new frigates at Toulon for service in the Levant, the British chargé d’affaires at Paris, the Hon. Robert Walpole (brother of the writer Horace Walpole) was instructed to tell the
French foreign minister Choiseul that Britain reserved the right to send two ships there as well. In July the Edgar and Dorsetshire were sent off to join Commodore Proby’s small Mediterranean squadron.\textsuperscript{23}

The Spanish Foreign Minister Grimaldi, a close friend and confidant of Choiseul, had been preoccupied with delicate negotiations at Rome over the expulsion of the Jesuits,\textsuperscript{24} and was anxious lest a colonial dispute escalate into war before the Spanish were ready for it. He therefore sent a friendly warning to the British government in August that an expedition had sailed against Port Egmont on the initiative of the Governor of Buenos Aires. Bucareli’s squadron arrived at Port Egmont on 4 June 1770 and delivered an ultimatum to the senior British officers there. They rejected the demand to surrender and the Spanish fired two shots over the frigate Favourite, the only British warship defending Port Egmont. Though the hopelessly outnumbered garrison gamely returned fire, they were obliged to surrender. The Spanish commanding officer Madariaga ordered the British to wait for twenty days before taking the news to England, and removed the frigate’s rudder just to make sure. Madariaga sailed to report to Bucareli at Buenos Aires, and was sent straight home to Spain with a full account of events.\textsuperscript{25}

Madariaga reached Cadiz on 11 August 1770. The Spanish government agreed to keep news of the capture of Port Egmont secret while Foreign Minister Grimaldi consulted with Choiseul, but an alert British captain at Cadiz reported Madariaga’s arrival to the Admiralty, with the rumour that the Spanish had attacked Port Egmont. This letter was forwarded to Weymouth as Southern Secretary on 7 September, and cabinet ministers were immediately summoned to London from their summer holidays in the country.\textsuperscript{26}

The Falklands issue had now become much more serious, as a British fort had been seized by force in peacetime and the British flag taken down. Scott claims that the British response was shaped by the Southern Secretary, Weymouth, in whose department relations with the Bourbon powers lay. He sees the response as a return to the successful ‘gunboat diplomacy’ of the Grenville administration in 1764–5. This is a reasonable deduction from the fact that the orders issuing from the cabinet meeting on 8 September went out under Weymouth’s name. We have no evidence for the cabinet’s discussions that day, but there is a strong circumstantial case to be made that British policy on the Falklands was a collective decision guided by expert advice.

It is important to establish the credentials and experience of the key players on the British side of the Falklands negotiation, starting with the two Secretaries of State, Weymouth and Rochford. Thomas Thynne, third Viscount Weymouth (1734–96), later first Marquess of Bath, was a young and inexperienced Secretary of State. He had been on the Grand Tour in 1754 and had been educated in Germany, but he had seen no diplomatic service and had never served in high office. He was addicted to alcohol and gambling and lived so far beyond his means that he had contemplated fleeing abroad to escape his creditors. He was saved by an offer to become Lord Lieutenant of Ireland in 1765, when nobody else wanted the post. He pocketed the £3,000 equipage grant, but resigned within three months and never went to Ireland. He entered cabinet as Northern Secretary in January 1768 as a political makeweight from the Duke of Bedford’s faction, and when Shelburne resigned in October he insisted on being transferred to the more important Southern Department. Weymouth was notoriously lazy, leaving the routine correspondence to his clever but corrupt undersecretary Robert Wood. Scott has noted that for the nine months
he was Northern Secretary Weymouth failed to pass on the secret intercepts from Hanover on which British foreign policy in Sweden was based. Weymouth showed occasional flashes of intelligence and ability, but his dissipated habits and chronic laziness did not endear him to George III.27

By contrast, his brother secretary the fourth Earl of Rochford (1717–81) was an experienced and hard-working diplomat, recently British ambassador at Madrid (1763–6) and Paris (1766–8), where he had been involved in the negotiations over the Manila Ransom and Falkland Islands, as well as the French acquisition of Corsica in 1768. He had had regular audiences with both Carlos III and Louis XV and attended weekly meetings with their foreign ministers Grimaldi and Choiseul, sometimes in tense and heated discussions. Rochford had returned to England with a reputation for toughness towards the Bourbons. More than anyone else in the British cabinet, he was well aware of Choiseul’s plans for a war of revanche and of Spanish stubbornness over such issues as the Falklands and Manila Ransom. He knew that at the Spanish court Grimaldi was under pressure from leading courtiers such as Aranda and Arriaga to take a more bellicose line with Britain, but they were all constrained by the poor state of the Spanish navy. Rochford’s anger that his government had done nothing to prevent Choiseul’s swift and secretive acquisition of Corsica had been appeased by his appointment as secretary of state, but he had been appointed to the Northern Department, even though all his diplomatic experience had been in the Southern Department. Since his appointment he had been pursuing a Russian alliance, by judicious investments of Secret Service money to influence Swedish politics. Rochford by 1770 had a broad grasp of Britain’s foreign policy in both departments and was the only career diplomat in the British cabinet. His advice would be sought and respected by his colleagues and by George III.28

Rochford had good reason to mistrust Choiseul, and he knew that the French minister’s situation at court was much less secure than it had been in 1768, thanks to the rapid advance of the French king’s new mistress, Madame du Barry. Choiseul had tactlessly referred to her plebeian origins, and offended both king and mistress. He was likely to support Spain in a war with Britain, since war would make him indispensable as the king’s most experienced minister and a former minister of marine. The Spanish remembered that he had predicted the long-awaited war of revenge would occur in 1770, and they counted on French naval support. Rochford’s advice to king and cabinet on 8 September, based on his own experience and his personal knowledge of the French and Spanish courts, would have been for Britain to arm promptly and threaten Spain with war if she failed to restore the fort at Port Egmont and disavow the Spanish officer responsible.

Rochford had met Bucareli at court when he was ambassador to Spain, and had reported on him thus in 1765: ‘I am only sorry that M Bucareli goes to Buenos Ayres, as he is a very hot-headed Man and of course will be troublesome to the Portuguese. He formerly commanded the Spanish camp at Gibraltar and at the solicitation of the Earl of Bristol was removed from that command.’29 Bucareli had been urging Carlos III to expel the British from Gibraltar. It is inconceivable that George III would omit to ask Rochford his opinion about the Falklands issue, and equally inconceivable that Rochford would fail to tell his colleagues what he knew or could guess of the intentions of Choiseul and Grimaldi. Nobody else in the British government could match his recent diplomatic experience.

Rochford had another powerful motive for advising his monarch to adopt a firm stance over the Falklands. He had twice suffered humiliation at the hands of
Choiseul, first over the Manila–Falklands fiasco of 1766, and again over Corsica in 1768, when the British cabinet had been too divided and indecisive to support its ambassador. The damage to British prestige on the continent as a result of these defeats had been considerable. Hamish Scott has remarked that British foreign policy in 1768 had ‘drifted dangerously close to the rocks’, and that Rochford’s diligent work in the Northern Department was helping to avert the impending shipwreck.30 Rochford’s clinching argument to George III would have been that Britain dare not risk being outwitted by Choiseul for a third time.

In 1770 North was at the start of his long and controversial career as Prime Minister (he disliked the term and discouraged colleagues from using it). Only 38, he was the eldest son of the long-lived Earl of Guilford, and was known as Lord North. In his youth he had been on the Grand Tour and spoke excellent French. Six years in the Treasury had demonstrated that he was exceptionally able, efficient and reliable, and this had been followed by his appointment as Chancellor of the Exchequer in 1767, in which role he proved himself an asset to the administration of Chatham and Grafton. In January 1770 George III offered him the post of First Lord of the Treasury to head the ministry abandoned by Grafton. In the Commons, his good humour, honesty and politeness won over the country gentry and he surpassed expectations by securing and maintaining comfortable majorities for the government. However, he had no more diplomatic experience than Weymouth, and in foreign policy matters he always deferred to his monarch’s wishes.31

George III in 1770 had been king for a decade and had matured remarkably from the shy, naïve but well-intentioned young bachelor of 1760.32 He was now a married man with a growing family, and took his duties as monarch very seriously. He was still suspicious of faction and impatient with the rapid turnover of ministries since 1760, failing to see that his refusal to use government funds to influence elections contributed to the political instability of these years. He took a close interest in foreign policy, which he saw as one of his prime prerogatives, and by 1770 he had a better grasp of European affairs than any of his ministers, except of course the only career diplomat in his cabinet, Lord Rochford. Earlier historians have tended to underestimate the role of the king in the formulation of British foreign policy, but Hamish Scott has shown that George III was an active king, reading all important dispatches as they arrived and approving drafts of replies. He made his views known, and ministers nearly always respected his wishes.33

Britain’s response to the Spanish capture of its outpost on the Falkland Islands was decided at a cabinet meeting on 10 September. Rochford had a private meeting with George III the day before, and it seems likely that they agreed on an appropriate course of action. No minutes or descriptions of this meeting have survived, but the outcome of the discussion is clear from the orders then issued. With George III’s approval, the cabinet agreed to ask the Admiralty to man all sixteen of the Channel guardships and to outfit a corresponding number of frigates. Two more warships, the *Albion* and *Prince of Wales*, were to be outfitted to replace the now-departed *Edgar* and *Dorsetshire*.34

This was a prompt and firm response. Rochford would have argued, and George III would have agreed, that a blatant Spanish insult to the British flag in time of peace could not be ignored or Britain’s reputation abroad would be seriously damaged. Weymouth’s input to the debate is unknown, but the two Secretaries of State were clearly in agreement on the need for a firm response. Weymouth was to instruct the young British chargé d’affaires at Madrid, James Harris, to find out
whether an attack had in fact been made on Port Egmont and, if it was true, to demand Spain’s immediate disavowal of the officer responsible and restoration of the fort to British control. This gave the Spanish government an easy escape route from a potentially dangerous confrontation. Disavowal and restitution were to remain the British government’s simple bottom line throughout the crisis that now began to develop.35

The Spanish ambassador in London was Don Filippo-Vittorio-Amadeo Ferrero de Biella, Marquis de Crévecœur and Prince of Masserano (1713–77). He had come to London after the Peace of Paris in December 1764 and lived at Powis House in Audley Street until 1771. Horace Walpole thought Masserano a fashionable Spanish grandee, ‘a sensible very good-humoured man’, but prone to illness: ‘I never saw a man so full of orders and disorders.’ 36 Masserano suffered a long illness across the summer of 1770, and was still recuperating when the Falklands crisis developed.

The French representative in London, Bertrand de Francès, who had remained chargé d’affaires after the departure of the previous French ambassador Châtelet, was one of Choiseul’s handpicked young diplomats. Horace Walpole described him as ‘a very shrewd and artful man’ who had lived in England incognito for three years before his appointment, ‘in which time he made himself master of our language and affairs. He was the confidential creature of Choiseul . . .’37 Francès was to play a central role in the secret diplomacy of the Falklands crisis, but whether or not his role can be described as mediation is questionable.

Though Rochford was Northern Secretary, and the Falklands negotiation lay in Weymouth’s Southern Department, there is clear evidence that Rochford in effect took charge of Anglo-Bourbon policy from September 1770, not only ordering warships to be prepared but even taking over the correspondence with diplomats at southern courts when Weymouth was out of town. Historians have not hitherto recognized the full extent of Rochford’s role in the closing months of 1770, or the possibility that Rochford used the Falklands crisis to push Weymouth out of office so that he could become de facto Foreign Minister. (The ancient geographical division between the two British Secretaries of State was not resolved into Home and Foreign offices until 1782.) Hamish Scott has suggested that Weymouth was prepared to collapse North’s ministry in order to bring Chatham back to power, calculating that real power would then devolve to himself;38 instead, it was Weymouth who resigned, and Rochford who became sole Foreign Minister, thanks to his expert advice on foreign policy and his close working relationship with George III.

On 19 September 1770, in Weymouth’s absence but with George III’s approval, Rochford ordered the Admiralty to mobilize twenty-two more first-rate ships of the line.39 Unlike the Channel fleet, which was charged with the defence of home waters, this fleet was intended for overseas service. Its first task would be to blockade the French and Spanish fleets inside their ports. A fleet mobilization in the eighteenth century was a complex and cumbersome exercise, and the power that armed first had the best chance of gaining the initiative at sea. Rochford’s order of 19 September was designed to give Britain that advantage. This order marks the start of Britain’s serious war preparations and the opening phase of the Falklands crisis.

Britain’s chargé d’affaires at Paris, the Hon Robert Walpole, reported on 18 September that Choiseul seemed anxious to avoid war, remarking that the Falkland Islands were an object of ‘too Trivial a Nature to put the several Powers in a flame about’. Choiseul boasted that he had written to Grimaldi telling him to persuade the
Spanish king Carlos III to agree to the British demand, and that he had ordered Francès in London to ask the British government not to mobilize its fleet, for two reasons: first, the Spanish had given early notice of their officer’s action, ‘in a fair and friendly manner’, and, second, he was sure that the Spanish would agree to the British demand for disavowal and restitution. The news that Britain was arming the Channel guardships had alarmed the Spanish and they had asked Choiseul to arm a similar number of warships as a precautionary measure. Choiseul therefore asked Walpole to recommend to his government that Britain suspend its naval mobilization until an answer was received from Madrid.40

Walpole’s report reached London on 21 September 1770 and, since Weymouth was again absent in the country, it was Rochford who replied, after consulting George III. Rochford reiterated Britain’s ‘strong desire’ for peace and instructed Walpole to assure Choiseul that Britain would indeed suspend her naval armament if the Spanish reply proved satisfactory. But until that was received Britain had to take precautions and would continue to arm. Rochford sent orders to Walpole on 22 September to impress upon Choiseul, ‘in such Terms as He cannot mistake’, that he trusted France would not arm as well, since that would only inflame the situation.41

This was Britain’s formal and official position, but Rochford was a realist, and in a separate and secret letter of the same date he gave Walpole further detailed information and advice:

You will not fail to transmit the earliest Intelligence you can procure of any Armament going on, or of Orders given for that Purpose. Our Accounts from Toulon are that the two Men of War building there are in great Forewardness, and one of them is to carry Sixty-four, the other Twenty-four, guns; that there are likewise two Frigates on the Stocks; that a number of carpenters from different parts have been sent to Toulon lately, who are now employed on the abovementioned ships; that they are, at the same time, putting up Masts in some of the Men of War, and it is also said that Twenty Battalions are expected at Toulon to be immediately embarked for Corsica . . . You will perhaps be able to judge the Truth of this Intelligence, and if you could engage anybody to proceed to Ferrol & bring you an Account of what is doing there, any Expences you are at for that Purpose will be paid. Paris abounds with proper subjects to be employed upon such an Occasion, who may be dispatched from thence without Suspicion.42

This letter shows that Rochford as Northern Secretary was as much in control of British policy towards the Bourbon powers as the Southern Secretary Weymouth by September of 1770. He wrote at the King’s command and directed the diplomat in Paris not only to check his current intelligence but to hire a suitable spy to report on any naval preparations at Ferrol. These were the instructions of an experienced diplomat who knew how these things were done. This was also the letter of an imaginative Foreign Minister who was prepared to pay to get the best and latest intelligence. Weymouth’s last letter to Walpole had merely enclosed a copy of his instructions to Harris, asking him to inform Choiseul of its contents as a sign of Britain’s good faith.43

Francès complained to Choiseul on 21 September that it was difficult to find a British cabinet minister in town. Weymouth was still on his summer holidays in the country and Gower was going off to visit his cousins until early October. That left only Rochford who, according to Francès, was more likely to spoil matters than conciliate them. Francès thought he would try to catch Lord North when he returned to town for the next week’s council meeting with the king. North usually avoided discussing foreign affairs with the diplomatic corps but Francès was
confident that the Falklands dispute was important enough to persuade him to break his rule, and to talk about it either one-to-one or with Rochford present. Francés felt sure he would get nothing out of Rochford alone. On balance Francés thought war unlikely; those in the cabinet favouring war were in a minority and in his opinion ‘trop hardi et trop désespéré’ [too rash and too desperate] to prevail.44

We need to remind ourselves that Francés was always careful to write what he thought would please Choiseul. They both regarded Rochford as anti-Bourbon and likely to favour a pre-emptive war, but here Francés is clearly mistaken about the British cabinet, most of whom favoured a strong response to Spain, as did George III himself. Francés’ decision to bypass the Secretary of State and discuss the Falklands dispute with North could be seen as an attempt to go to the top, but it could also indicate that Francés perceived Rochford as one of the hardliners of the ministry, favouring war. However, North was evasive and non-committal, and merely referred Francés back to the Secretaries of State.

There are two pieces of evidence apart from the official correspondence that reveal Rochford’s attitude at this point. The first is a private letter to Lord Denbigh, who was the equivalent of the ministry’s whip in the House of Lords and a key supporter of North’s administration. Writing on 24 September, Rochford agreed that it was necessary to call Parliament together in order to explain the need for a naval armament, which he hoped and believed would prevent a war:

I can tell your Lordship with great Truth that everybody in general approves of what we are doing. As to myself, I declare to God that I never took share in any Measure that ever gave me half the satisfaction this has done. Both France and Spain would have not only in all probability not given us satisfaction for any injury they have done us, but would have continued insulting us whilst we were not in a situation to resent it . . . for me I would not for any Consideration had to answer for leaving ourselves unarmed in so critical a situation, specially after an insult offered; when reparation is made I shall then be as ready to disarm as I have wished to see us in a respectable situation . . . The stocks it is true have fallen considerably but depend upon it they will get up again very soon, but if they do not, wise ministers are not to frame their conduct by the Barometer of Jobbers.45

The Danish minister in London, Baron Diede, reported next day to his royal master Christian VII that the fall in the funds had been caused by the Dukes of Bedford and Hertford, who had taken fright at the prospect of war and sold off large amounts of their stock. The London newspapers were full of speculation about the Falklands and rumours that Spain had seized a British fort. Diede thought this fully justified Britain’s decision to start arming the fleet. He added that ‘le comte Rochford semble être dans son Élément.’46

The Spanish response to Britain’s demand for disavowal and restitution was sent to Masserano on 3 October and took a week to reach London. Nothing happened for several days because Masserano was unwell and unable to deliver it. Weymouth was still out of town. In the meantime, both Grimaldi, the Spanish Foreign Minister, and Ossun, the French ambassador at Madrid, wrote to Choiseul, commenting on the Spanish response. Masserano was instructed to draw up a paper admitting the expulsion of the British from Port Egmont, and Spain’s readiness to disavow Captain Bucareli’s action, yet at the same time noting that he had acted on earlier general instructions to uphold the colonial laws of Spain and the Treaty of Utrecht.47 Spain agreed to restore the British settlers to Port Egmont but rejected the British request that Spain provide the transports and demanded that Britain disavow
Captain Hunt’s insulting declaration to Captain Bucareli. Masserano was further to propose that Britain and Spain evacuate the Falklands jointly at a time to be chosen by the British, and leave the islands deserted. This would leave the thorny question of sovereignty to be resolved at some later date. Grimaldi assured Choiseul that while the Spanish ministers wanted peace they were not afraid of war. 48

By the time Choiseul saw the text of this paper he had heard about Rochford’s orders for a substantial increase in Britain’s naval readiness and realised that his letter advising acceptance of the British terms had crossed Grimaldi’s instructions to Masserano. He saw at once that the Spanish response would not be acceptable to the British and that the North administration was seriously preparing for war. He therefore instructed Francês in London to do his utmost to persuade Masserano to follow the French plan rather than Grimaldi’s instructions. Choiseul boasted to Francês that if the British wanted peace they could do no better than rely on France as a mediator, because the Spanish would do whatever he, Choiseul, told them to do.49

We may be certain that this was not Rochford’s view of the matter, nor that of George III. In late September Rochford sent a note to the king advising that as Weymouth was still in the country he had written him a letter to keep him fully informed of the latest intelligence from abroad, in preparation for a cabinet meeting on 31 September.50 In a later letter to North, George III recalled that Mansfield had suggested postponing the meeting of Parliament until a reply had come back from Spain, but his advice was that such a delay would signal to the Bourbon courts that Britain was willing to compromise or even back down, and that they would be encouraged to raise their demands and make war inevitable.51 This advice could only have come from Rochford, and this letter shows that George III at this point still supported Rochford’s tough line, even though it ran the risk of war.

Weymouth presumably returned to London in time for this cabinet meeting (for which no evidence has survived) and took up Rochford’s tough line with enthusiasm. He now instructed the Admiralty to send secret warnings to commanders of ships and bases overseas to be on their guard and to avoid giving Spain any pretext for an early declaration of hostilities.52 On 17 October the Admiralty reported thirty ships of the line being prepared for active service and when Weymouth asked if this number could be increased he was told that only a few ships could be readied at a time because of limited dockyard capacity. Even so, their lordships were confident of having ten more warships ready by the end of October.53

Choiseul was right in thinking that the Spanish response would prove unacceptable to the British government. After consulting with Rochford and the King, Weymouth wrote to Harris at Madrid and Walpole at Paris on 17 October, flatly rejecting Masserano’s proposed solution. Britain demanded the disavowal of Bucareli and the restoration of Port Egmont with no further debate or discussion. They would certainly not disavow Captain Hunt, as this would in effect concede Spain’s claim to sovereignty of the Falklands. George III strongly objected to any suggestion of French mediation. Weymouth noted that it was Francês who had used the word mediation, but this was totally unacceptable to Britain. The dispute had to be settled directly with Spain, not through any intermediary. France would do well to use her influence to advise the Spanish to keep the peace.

The wording of Weymouth’s instructions to Walpole embodied technical advice that could only have come from Rochford:
without entering into the unsurmountable objections to the Matter of this proposed Convention, the Manner alone is totally inadmissible; for His Majesty cannot accept, under a Convention, that Satisfaction to which he has so just a Title, without entering into any Engagements in order to procure it; That the idea of His Majesty’s becoming a Contracting Party, upon this Occasion, is entirely foreign to the Case . . .

Weymouth had no diplomatic experience and by his actions showed little or no understanding of the finer points of diplomatic negotiation, whereas Rochford was an experienced ambassador, well versed in the technicalities of conventions and memorials. Even the style is more like that of Rochford than Weymouth.

When Harris called on Grimaldi on 29 October to convey Britain’s rejection of the Spanish response, Grimaldi told him that Spain was very willing to agree to Britain’s two main demands, but that Carlos III had felt his honour had been insulted by Captain Hunt’s declaration that the islands were British territory. Harris replied that Britain could not accept a conditional disavowal. At a later meeting Grimaldi reassured the young diplomat that Masserano had been given full powers to negotiate a settlement in London, and he was confident that a compromise could be found that gave George III the satisfaction he required while preserving the honour of Carlos III.

Now that Weymouth was back in town and Masserano had recovered from his illness, serious talks to resolve the Falklands dispute at last began in early November. Masserano submitted two draft declarations that included a reciprocal disavowal of the officers by both sides, but Weymouth rejected this idea as potentially conceding the question of sovereignty. Masserano then offered to drop the demand for disavowal of Hunt if Britain agreed to a joint evacuation of the islands, but when he reported this back to Madrid Grimaldi asked him to think again, as he wanted to combine the issues of reparation and sovereignty. Grimaldi suspected that the British would never agree to abandon the islands without some other compensation.

Weymouth failed to keep his cabinet colleagues fully informed of his talks with Masserano. Rochford must have felt frustrated and alarmed at being kept in the dark by Weymouth, after he had personally managed the opening phase of the negotiation and the naval armament. According to the Secretary of State for the Colonies, Lord Hillsborough, Weymouth’s talks with Masserano were ‘rough and hostile’. Weymouth had no understanding of diplomacy and the need to maintain trust and confidence between the parties to a negotiation. He took the simplistic view that Britain was the injured party and all the fault lay with the Spanish. Masserano on the other hand believed that Spain’s monopoly on South America and the Pacific was at stake, and was well worth a war to defend. He therefore dug in his heels and refused to compromise. By early November the talks in London had reached an impasse.

Rochford meanwhile had his own department to run. His correspondence as Northern Secretary in late 1770 was still dominated by the search for a Russian alliance, and the Turkish bid to include Austria rather than Britain as a mediator to end the Russo-Turkish War. The surprise dismissal of Denmark’s First Minister J. H. E. Bernstorff in the autumn of 1770 had suddenly intensified Rochford’s correspondence with the British envoy at Copenhagen and signalled the start of a crisis that would involve George III’s youngest sister. On the other hand, things were quiet in Sweden and the British envoy at Berlin complained in November that he had not heard from Rochford since September. Such uncharacteristic neglect suggests
that Rochford had been fully preoccupied with the first phase of the Falklands dispute in September and October, especially when Weymouth removed himself to his country estate for weeks on end. Baron Diede noted early in October that the foreign ministers had not seen Weymouth for weeks, and that he had left their regular interviews to Rochford. 59

The British Parliament reassembled with its usual pomp and pageantry on 13 November 1770. George III’s speech from the throne gave both Lords and Commons their first official statement about the Falklands dispute, whose wording quickly became a focus for attention by the newspaper press and foreign observers. The speech was usually drafted by one of the Secretaries of State, then checked and approved by leading figures in cabinet. The King began by recalling his speech at the opening of the previous session, when he had expressed his commitment to preserving ‘the General Tranquility’. Since then, considerations of honour had compelled him to prepare for ‘a different situation’. The seizure of a British possession by the Governor of Buenos Aires had affected his honour and the security of his subjects’ rights. A demand had been made for proper satisfaction and reparation, and, until a satisfactory answer was received from the Court of Spain, he would prepare himself ‘for enabling me to do myself justice’ in case the Spanish court failed to procure it. 60 By laying the blame squarely on Bucareli the speech left an obvious escape route for the Spanish king, to disavow his officer and avoid war. The address passed easily without amendment and the brief debate showed all observers that Parliament fully supported the government’s policy of demanding satisfaction from Spain, whatever it might cost.

Choiseul had predicted that the attitude of the British Parliament would be critical in deciding whether they would have war or peace. His anxiety in advance of the opening of Parliament had led him the week before to request a huge sum (8 million livres) for the French Navy to prepare itself for war. Much to his surprise, his arch-enemies at court, the ministers Terray and Maupeou, readily agreed, saying that war now seemed inevitable and that France should prepare itself for the worst. However, Louis XV made it plain that he did not want war and the council meeting ended with the King forcing Choiseul to promise that he would do his utmost to preserve the peace. 61 In the event, of course, the promised subsidies were never seen, for the French Treasury was almost empty. Terray had made big cuts in France’s highest-spending departments of government, including the army and navy, run by Choiseul and his cousin Praslin, and there had been a partial state bankruptcy in February 1770. 62

Whatever Choiseul’s personal hopes for a war of revenge against England, France was in no shape to fight a major war at sea in 1770. Yet he chose to regard George III’s very moderate speech from the throne as tantamount to a declaration of war, and he ordered an immediate increase in France’s naval readiness. Robert Walpole’s dispatches from Paris in late October and early November reported on this steady naval build-up: sixteen ships of the line and nine frigates made ready at Brest, eight ships of the line and fourteen frigates at Rochefort, fourteen ships of the line and six frigates at Toulon. Large numbers of bakers were called up to bake ships’ biscuits for the long months to be spent at sea. Unfortunately, some of these ships had been laid up for so long that their timbers were found to be rotten, and of the 72,000 registered seamen only 5,000 initially responded to their call-up. On land eighty battalions were ordered to march to the protection of the major naval bases in case the British attempted a pre-emptive strike. 63
This was the tap of naval intelligence that Rochford had asked Walpole to turn on in September, yet in reply Weymouth wrote only two brief letters during October, and the second of these merely referred Walpole to Rochford’s 22 September letter as the best guide for his discussions with Choiseul. All that Weymouth could contribute by way of instructions was to tell Walpole to encourage Choiseul to use his influence with the Spanish court towards a peaceful settlement, and to warn him that any attempt by France to mediate would be regarded as ‘highly improper’. Harris had been slow to report on Spanish naval preparations, but predicted that they would have a mere ten capital ships ready for sea by the end of November. Rochford’s 19 September order to increase the navy’s mobilization had given Britain a clear lead.

Britain’s ambassador to France, Simon Harcourt, first Earl Harcourt, had been in England on home leave but was now ordered back to his post. He arrived in Paris on 17 November and at his first meeting with Choiseul he was greeted with the French minister’s accusation that the king’s speech from the throne at the opening of Parliament had been tantamount to a declaration of war. Harcourt was a soldier and courtier, but not a career diplomat. Historians have regarded him as a man of mediocre abilities who was thrust into posts far above his capacity. He had briefly been governor to George III in 1751–2, before a scandal over Jacobite principles forced his resignation. He was a supporter of Bute and Grenville, but he deserted the ministry to vote with the Bedfordites against Rockingham, before returning to support the government. The Paris embassy was his reward for this support, yet he spent long periods away from his post. Horace Walpole described him as ‘an empty man, devoted to the Court but diffident and complaisant.’ Harcourt was no match for Choiseul. He assured Choiseul that George III preferred peace to war, and that his speech was meant to be open and explicit. Choiseul replied that this was exactly what the British ministers were telling Francès in London. For once the British were all singing from the same hymn sheet.

Looming war clouds now prompted the French court to send a new ambassador to London in late November. Choiseul sent Adrian-Louis, Comte de Guines, with strict instructions to leave the detailed negotiations to Francès, who was fully au fait with the talks so far. Like Harcourt, Guines was a soldier rather than a career diplomat. Soon after his arrival in London in late November, Guines asked Francès to assure Lord North that the Bourbon powers wanted to find a peaceful solution to the Falklands dispute between Britain and Spain, and repeated Choiseul’s offer of mediation. Francès, however, warned Guines that he suspected the British were bent on war.

According to the Danish minister Diede, Masserano had three meetings with Weymouth on 23 November but all of his proposals were rejected. Diede was not the only one to think that the negotiations had stalled and that war was imminent, for he remarked that the stocks had fallen sharply. On 21 November Weymouth asked George III to order an augmentation of the army and to name an admiral to command an enlarged Mediterranean fleet. The king sensibly deferred this request for a few days while he consulted Rochford and North, but after a long cabinet meeting on 24 November orders went out for all land officers to report to their posts. The cabinet met again on 28 November and, while no minutes have survived, it is plain from Rochford’s statements to Masserano and Francès the next day that the British ministers were united in their resolve to recommend war if Spain failed to meet their basic demand for disavowal of Bucareli and restoration of Port Egmont.
This was a pivotal cabinet meeting, for this was the point at which George III and North began to get cold feet at the imminent prospect of war. This led North to intervene directly in the negotiation, which had reached a stalemate between Weymouth and Masserano. North’s main concern was the enormous and unpredictable cost of a major war at sea just when he had begun to reduce the public debt remaining from the Seven Years’ War. North was universally recognized as an astute and economical Chancellor of the Exchequer, but in the Falklands crisis his concern for retrenchment and cost-saving came close to wrecking what had been up to this point a firm and effective diplomatic and military response to Spain’s insult to the British flag. George III had a different reason for wanting to avoid war. In a letter to North written on the evening of 28 November, the king gloomily noted that there seemed little hope of any change in the Spanish offer, yet he wanted to avoid war, ‘if it can be accomplished provided the honour of this country is preserved’. His reasons were simple: ‘for every feeling of humanity and knowledge of the distress war must occasion’.71

On the same day as this pivotal cabinet meeting (28 November), Francês had a long meeting with North. Weymouth had refused to have any further talks with Masserano, and had written to Harris in Madrid instructing him to warn the consuls and the Governor of Gibraltar of the ‘danger of a Rupture’, as there seemed little prospect of a satisfactory response from Spain. Francês told North that although Guines had no particular instructions from Choiseul, he (Choiseul) was so anxious to avoid war that he (Francês) was certain Spain would give the satisfaction required if Britain fixed a date for a future evacuation of the Falklands. North replied that Britain wanted complete satisfaction without any such declaration, and added that he suspected Masserano’s powers were greater than he had admitted, implying that the matter could be resolved in London. Francês denied this, but then asked whether or not Britain would abandon the West Falkland Island once Spain had restored the British garrison to Port Egmont.

North’s reply was another pivotal moment in the dispute. There is nothing of this in any British source. We only know of these conversations from the French and Spanish diplomatic correspondence, and have to trust that Francês and Masserano reported them accurately. North said that he could not speak officially but, if Francês promised that their conversation would not be made public, he could say in confidence that Britain had no desire to keep the Falklands and that if Spain gave the public satisfaction demanded then Britain would certainly abandon the island. This is the origin of the ‘secret promise’ which has ever since complicated accounts of the Falklands crisis.

Francês replied that he did not know whether Masserano’s previous offer of an exchange of declarations would be insisted on by the Bourbon courts, and suggested that Masserano have an audience with George III to seek an assurance that his ministers would settle the question of sovereignty over the Falklands. North’s response was noncommittal, but he promised an answer after consulting the king.72

Next day (29 November) Masserano visited Rochford at his office in Cleveland Row. Weymouth had gone back to the country after the cabinet meeting. Rochford began by emphasising Britain’s undoubted claim to the Falklands by right of discovery and settlement. He then promised (according to Masserano) that if Spain gave the desired satisfaction, then Britain would agree to negotiate the legal issue of Spain’s claim to the territory by treaty rights. Masserano replied that there would have to be a mutual evacuation first, in order to reserve the question of right. He
added, rather coolly, that Rochford’s views were not shared by all of his cabinet colleagues (probably meaning Weymouth), and that if Spain gave satisfaction without first securing a reciprocal evacuation then Spain’s position would be hopelessly compromised. Rochford’s response was that war seemed inevitable, as Chatham’s speeches in the House of Lords were pushing the government in that direction.73

Francès arrived just as Masserano was leaving Rochford’s office. According to Francès, Rochford repeated to him that war now seemed inevitable and that he could not understand why Spain would not rely on Britain’s good faith, for if Spain gave the satisfaction demanded, without conditions, Britain would in due course abandon the Falklands, as the islands were not worth a war. This was very similar to North’s conversation with Masserano, but Rochford stopped short of North’s explicit *quid pro quo* promise. Francès remarked that the ministry seemed bent on war. Rochford denied this, but added that North was the only one who hoped for peace. Francès then told Rochford that he had spoken privately with North, and Rochford warmly approved of this step, to help revive the stalemated negotiation.

Diede reported on 30 November that Rochford had told him all of Masserano’s proposals had been rejected, and that Britain had refused any conditional reparation, as well as any thought of French mediation. He could not get Rochford to divulge anything about the terms offered, and remarked that the British ministers were being extremely secretive.74

North called a cabinet meeting on 30 November to discuss Francès’ suggestion of an audience for Masserano at which George III would confirm North’s verbal promise to evacuate the Falklands, but the ministers rejected this on the grounds that the satisfaction had to be complete and public. This rejection has often been overlooked in accounts of the Falklands crisis which emphasize North’s secret promise as the key to resolving the dispute. It shows that the cabinet still supported Rochford’s original policy of standing firm and preparing for war. It is important to note that there was no further talk of any secret promise from either North or Rochford.75

North immediately informed Francès of the cabinet’s decision, at which the French diplomat exclaimed that Britain had opted for war, pointing to Britain’s massive naval preparations. North countered by observing that France and Spain were also preparing for war. He reminded Francès that Masserano had advised all Spanish ships in the Thames to leave for home at once, in ballast if necessary. They agreed to meet again next day, Saturday 1 December, and here Francès produced a softened version of Masserano’s last proposal. North said he could not go back on what he had said in the Commons, and insisted that they were not discussing the question of right but only that of satisfaction for the insult offered to the British flag in time of peace. Francès said he would need to consult Masserano, and they agreed to meet again on Monday.

Over that weekend North also consulted Rochford and the king, who presumably went through the modified proposal line by line. When North met Francès on the Monday, he first of all pointed out the implied disavowal of Hunt, but Francès was ready for this, and said Masserano had insisted on it as a point of honour his royal master would never yield. North then suggested some minor rewording, and they agreed that if Masserano made a declaration then Britain would make a counter-declaration in the same form. Once again Francès requested an
audience for Masserano, and once again North refused, saying that Spain would have to rely on Britain’s good faith.

When Francés reported these conversations to Masserano, the Spanish ambassador was very doubtful of North’s professions of good faith and said he would advise his court to continue its preparations for war. Masserano wondered how united the British cabinet was, and therefore went to talk to Weymouth on 6 December, but he was unable to get a clear answer about North’s secret promise. Francés also saw Weymouth that day and found him mysterious and enigmatic. The Bourbon diplomats assumed that Weymouth was waiting for the courier to return from Madrid and that peace would be preserved if the Spanish king gave way on Britain’s original demand without insisting on the issue of sovereignty. But they must also have noted with alarm that Weymouth did not endorse North’s proposed solution to the diplomatic impasse.

North had asked Parliament on 25 November to increase the navy vote from 16,000 to 40,000 seamen to man the warships currently being readied for service, and on 4 December Weymouth asked the Admiralty to prepare another fifteen ships of the line with a proportionate number of frigates. These would require an additional 9,282 seamen and cost the navy £482,664. The reason for this third augmentation of the fleet was that several of the guardships sent to Ireland to embark troops had been damaged in a storm and one of the replacement ships recently outfitted had been found to have rotten timbers. North and his cabinet were now alarmed that more ships that had been laid up for long periods might also be found unfit for service.

From this point in the negotiation Rochford’s surviving correspondence with George III enables us to trace the parallel crisis in the British cabinet which led to Weymouth’s resignation and ultimately to the resolution of the Falklands crisis. Rochford wrote to the king early on the morning of Thursday 6 December (the letter is endorsed 8 am) enclosing a paper on the navy’s state of preparedness. Rochford reported a meeting with Weymouth’s undersecretary Wood who was ‘outraged’ that Weymouth was prevented from giving France ‘a most fatal blow’ in India because the fleet was not ready. Rochford expected some heated debate at next day’s cabinet meeting, as Weymouth seemed bent on provoking war, ‘but he must be overruled in a measure so destructive whilst there is the least glimmering of hope of its being accommodated’. Rochford promised the king he would ‘continue to be watchful to the minutest event at this Critical Period’ and would let the king know at once of any new developments.

George III replied to Rochford at 10 am to say that he would not see him alone that day in case it aroused suspicion and would therefore put his thoughts on paper ahead of the cabinet meeting called for Friday 7 December. The king noted that at Tuesday’s cabinet meeting Weymouth had avoided answering Rochford’s ‘very proper question’ whether all present were willing to accept from Spain a simple declaration that disavowed Bucareli and promised to restore Port Egmont. The very next day (5 December) Weymouth had asked for the king’s permission to recall Harris from Madrid. George III saw this as a deliberate move to prevent Spain from reaching a negotiated settlement. While he was not optimistic that Spain would end the affair amicably, the king did not want the Spanish to say that they would have settled if Britain had not recalled its representative while the negotiation was proceeding. He could see that reopening direct negotiations with Masserano would be ‘highly improper’ given the previous Spanish reply, yet delaying Harris’s recall much longer would be ‘no less so’. He therefore wondered if Harris could be sent an
exact draft of the sort of declaration that Britain would find acceptable with instructions to say that if the Spanish king could not accept it exactly as it stood, ‘without the alteration of one iota’, then Harris would quit Spain the next day. This would enable Masserano to remain in London to receive any fresh instructions. If they recalled Harris without any notice or explanation, the Spanish would be obliged to recall Masserano and hostilities would commence. George III reminded Rochford that such a move would ‘entirely shut the door against amending this irksome affair, as every honest and considerate man must wish’. As for Weymouth’s proposal to let the East India Company attack French positions in Bengal, the king thought this ‘highly improper’.78

Rochford replied to the king promptly at midday from his house in Berkeley Square, and agreed that Harris should warn the Spanish ministers that the negotiation in London was at a stalemate and that unless Britain’s original demand was ‘simply and instantly complied with’, Harris would depart Madrid within twenty-four hours: ‘A Measure of this kind cannot hurt Your Majesty’s Dignity and any opposition to it can only arise from a wish to see this unhappy affair terminate fatally’. Rochford then suggested that the Friday cabinet meeting be brought forward to approve this plan. As for the East India Company’s concerns, Rochford thought a frigate sent in a month’s time would meet their demands. He then added this important sentence:

Ld Rochford takes the liberty to send Your Majesty copies of Letters that passed between him and Lord Shelburne relative to Falkland Islands and the Manilla Ransom which perhaps Your Majesty may be curious to revise at Your Leisure and then Your Majesty will have the Goodness to return them to Lord Rochford.79

The king sent Rochford a brief note that evening, thanking him for his memo on the navy and urging him to make ‘the best possible use of it’ at the cabinet meeting. He emphasized that the East India Company’s affairs had to be decided in accordance with his expressed wishes, and remarked that Wood’s conduct [stock-jobbing] seemed ‘every day more unbecoming to his station’. The king concluded to Rochford: ‘I rely on Your acquainting Me with the minutest events that may regard this Critical Period’, echoing the wording of Rochford’s note that morning.80 These exchanges demonstrate that British foreign policy was now being shaped by George III himself, in close consultation with Rochford, his only minister with recent ambassadorial experience, and that Weymouth was becoming increasingly isolated from the rest of his cabinet colleagues.

Rochford’s memo on the navy was later headed by George III in his own hand: ‘Reflections on the Present State of the Navy and the Reasons why the Fleet is not in greater forwardness than it is, and the evil Consequences that may arise in case of War if the present management is not changed.’ Rochford reviewed the armaments so far ordered, by Weymouth on 7 September and himself on 19 September, which required forty ships to be made ready for service. The fifteen more recently ordered ‘would make a respectable Fleet and enable us to begin the War, if necessary, with success’. It was not so much the number of ships or their manning that worried Rochford, but their condition: ‘if these Ships are deficient in any Respect the disappointment [of losing the war] will be equally felt.’ Rochford had been greatly alarmed by the damage suffered by the warships sent to collect troops from Ireland: ‘their bottoms were not clean [and] they ran great risk of foundering at sea.’ We must remember that Rochford was himself a yachtsman of long experience, and was
Vice-Admiral of the Coasts of Essex. He well knew the vulnerability of wooden ships in storms at sea, especially if rotten timbers in their hulls were concealed by an accumulation of weed from spending long periods laid up in port.

Rochford’s suggestion was that in future, when the Admiralty made a return of the state of the fleet to the Secretaries of State, another column should be added to the list showing when each warship had last had its bottom scraped clean: ‘then the true state of the Fleet will appear in its exact state’ [sic]. As there was only one dock at Sheerness, two at Portsmouth and four at Plymouth, only seven warships at a time could be docked for cleaning. The present procedure took ‘an immense time’. Rochford’s second suggestion was that as the reserve fleet was mostly still in ballast and had not yet shipped its guns, these vessels could be heaved alongside old hulks and careened one side at a time, as Admiral Vernon had done in the West Indies. Rochford said he made this suggestion only because ‘infinite Mischief’ would arise if more ships were found to have rotten timbers in the course of being cleaned. 81

When we consider this sequence of letters and memoranda as a whole, it becomes clear that Rochford was greatly concerned about the state of the fleet and the timing of Weymouth’s proposed recall of Harris from Madrid. Why had Rochford asked the king to read his correspondence with Shelburne in 1766? Most likely because those letters had urged Shelburne to keep up the pressure on Spain, threatening the use of naval force to defend the Falklands in order to compel Spain to pay the Manila Ransom. Britain’s failure to maintain a credible threat of force had caused the collapse and failure of that negotiation. Rochford was in effect warning George III that Britain needed to maintain a tough line with no wavering. 82

Two things could have prevented a successful outcome for Britain in the Falklands crisis. One was any doubt about the strength or preparedness of the fleet, and the other was any doubt about Britain’s seriousness in maintaining a claim to the Falklands. At this point, in early December 1770, Rochford had grounds for alarm on both scores.

He knew that North was telling Francès (and thus Masserano) that the Falklands were of no value to Britain and would be abandoned once Spain had satisfied George III’s honour, and now the Admiralty was admitting that not all of the ships required for war duty were in fact seaworthy. The two logical conclusions that followed from these circumstances were that the Admiralty needed more time to check the seaworthiness of its ships, and that Harris could not be recalled until the fleet was fit for service. Weymouth’s insistence on recalling Harris was premature, and had to be stopped.

What happened at the cabinet meeting on 7 December 1770 is known only from Rochford’s letter to George III the next morning. The king’s proposal to instruct Harris to make ‘the Categorical Demand’ and to depart if it was rejected was proposed and ‘long debated’, but Weymouth refused to order Harris to reopen the negotiation. The rest of the cabinet, ‘rather than be disunited in this Critical Situation’, agreed to send no messenger at all, and to wait for the next courier from Madrid, in case a final answer was on its way. Rochford added, in all fairness, that Weymouth had shown ‘the greatest Temper & Moderation’. When Rochford pressed him to say whether or not he would accept Spain’s answer if it came, Weymouth said he expected them to make yet ‘Higher demands’, but if he was wrong and no further demands were made he would then acquiesce with the majority view.

Weymouth then produced a draft letter to the chairman of the East India Company, which would have given the company leave to attack the French
possessions in India if they saw any sort of defensive preparations being made. Rochford thought this letter both ‘confusedly written’ and directly contrary to the expressed wishes of the rest of the cabinet. He insisted that the last part of the letter be deleted. Weymouth finally agreed to Rochford’s deletions, ‘though with great reluctance’. This exchange demonstrates that Rochford was now in full control of Britain’s response to the Falklands crisis, and that his long experience as an ambassador and drafter of dispatches carried more weight with the cabinet than Weymouth’s impetuosity. It was extremely unusual for one British secretary of state to overrule the other, and Rochford could only have done this with the king’s full support.83

Later that day Rochford again wrote to George III to report that Lord Hillsborough, Secretary of State for the Colonies, now thought the first part of Weymouth’s letter ‘too full of ambiguities to send as it is’. Rochford did not see the matter in quite such a strong light, but agreed with Hillsborough that it could have been expressed more precisely. Rochford then went to see the First Lord of the Admiralty, the elderly and ailing Sir Edward Hawke, and spent ‘above two hours’ discussing the state of the fleet.

Rochford came away from this meeting greatly reassured. Hawke informed him that the twenty-two ships of the line now in commission had not only all been docked but had been sheathed in copper as well. The eighteen guardships had also been docked, but would have to be cleaned again next spring. Sir Edward approved of Rochford’s idea for an extra column to be added to the lists of ships in readiness and assured him that the admirals at Chatham, Portsmouth and Plymouth were all pressing ahead with the naval armament at their ports. Darker nights in a week’s time would enable the press gangs to operate more effectively and the surveyors and shipwrights had been threatened with suspension if they did not give ‘their utmost attention to duty’.84

The king approved of Hawke’s report, and the additional column suggested by Rochford, but after reading Weymouth’s draft letter to the East India Company he could not see why Hillsborough was so concerned about the first part, as its lack of precision was no worse than many of the letters sent out by Hillsborough’s own American Department.85

Though 9 December was a Sunday, Rochford visited Weymouth and had a long talk about the recent cabinet meetings. Weymouth complained that it was impossible for him to go on when he was contradicted by colleagues on five occasions where his own department was directly concerned. He said he did not want to break up the present administration, but he was resolved to ask the king to find some means of quitting his post with dignity. His chief complaint, according to Rochford, was that they were in ‘a state of uncertainty and [were] taking no measure to distress the enemy’. Rochford tried in vain to convince Weymouth that the fleet was not quite ready for hostilities, and Weymouth again proposed recalling Harris without any further negotiations. Rochford reported this conversation to North, who resolved to see the king next day. Concluding his letter to the king, Rochford offered his ‘humble services’ in any capacity ‘that can tend to extricate Government at this time from this very critical situation’. He finally advised the king when he received Weymouth to listen only, and to take twenty-four hours to consider ‘any proposition that may come from Lord Weymouth’.86

The king replied that evening: ‘The conduct of Lord Weymouth at this critical moment is rather distressing . . . ‘He echoed Rochford’s advice as his own decision,
agreeing to take a day’s consideration on whatever Weymouth proposed, but Weymouth in the event proved as enigmatic and evasive as he had previously been to Francès. It took another meeting between Rochford and Weymouth on 11 December to establish that he would rather leave the cabinet than take any other office. If Sandwich was made Northern Secretary, Weymouth asked that the Post Office be given to his brother Mr Thynne, to show the world that he had no quarrel with North’s administration. George III then asked Weymouth to keep the seals for a few more days, while other options were explored, and Rochford was very careful to insist that this request was made by North rather than by him, in case Weymouth accused Rochford of trying to push him out of office.87

Though not privy to the inner workings of the British cabinet, the Danish minister, Baron Diede, probably recorded the prevailing rumours among the diplomatic corps in London when he reported on 14 December that the cabinet was divided. He thought North and the Bedfordites wanted peace, almost at any price, but that Weymouth, Hawke, and Conway wanted war. The Duke of Grafton was undecided. According to Diede, Rochford was the only one who believed war was inevitable, and was taking measures accordingly, but this had given rise to new disagreements with some of his cabinet colleagues.88

There can be little doubt that Rochford was ambitious to replace Weymouth as Southern Secretary and, preferably, to take sole command of British foreign policy. His previous diplomatic experience at Madrid and Paris, his personal knowledge of Grimaldi and Choiseul, and his broad understanding of European affairs derived from his period as northern secretary, all made Rochford uniquely well qualified to take charge of the Falklands negotiation. Yet he had been frustrated by Weymouth’s obstinate refusal to pursue a negotiated solution, and now he was alarmed by what he saw as deficiencies in the fleet’s ability to fight a successful war at sea. Rochford had intervened at the Admiralty (as he was fully entitled to, as a Secretary of State) to satisfy his doubts on the latter score, and he had clashed with Weymouth in cabinet over the recall of Harris, which Rochford saw as premature.

Rochford’s policy, based on his personal experience of Britain’s previous humiliations over the Manila Ransom and the French acquisition of Corsica, was to return to the gunboat diplomacy of George Grenville’s 1764–5 government, using the threat of naval power to force Spain to meet Britain’s demand over the Falklands. North’s unofficial offer of a secret promise to abandon the Falklands at some future date had the potential to undermine this policy, because it might persuade the Bourbon powers that the British government was not serious in its demand for the restoration of Port Egmont. Rochford therefore had to maintain a credible threat of war while exploring avenues for a negotiated settlement. All the while, time was running out for the effective deployment of the fleet. Prompt naval armament had given Britain the initiative, but with every passing week the Bourbon fleets were approaching readiness for war, and the initiative could easily be lost if one of them put to sea ahead of the British fleet.89

Though Weymouth’s departure was delayed until 19 December, diplomatic developments during the first two weeks of that month were already favouring a negotiated settlement. Choiseul’s position at the French court was increasingly precarious now that his most powerful critic and enemy, the Duc d’Aiguillon, had returned to royal favour, reinforcing his other enemies Terray and Maupeou. Choiseul’s gratuitous insult to the French king’s new mistress, Madame du Barry, had made another implacable enemy, and one who had the king’s ear. Like
Rochford, Choiseul doubted whether the French fleet was ready for another major war. Intelligence reports reaching London in early December were reassuring for Rochford. According to Harcourt, many of the warships at Brest were in urgent need of repair, and the ships built after the Seven Years’ War, paid for by the cities and provinces of France, were in ‘a very Crazy Condition’.90

Historians have been puzzled by Choiseul’s role in the Falklands crisis, some suspecting him of a double-game, professing peaceful intentions while preparing for his long-awaited war of revenge against Britain. In October he seemed anxious to avoid war, and to accept Weymouth’s early assurances of Britain’s desire to maintain the peace. However, by early December, like Rochford, he had come to regard war as inevitable. He wrote to Francès, ‘Je crois que le Ministre Anglais veut la guerre, je vois sa détermination dans vos conférences avec Milord North.’ 91 [I believe the English minister (presumably he means Weymouth) wishes for war, I see his determination from your conferences with Lord North.] He was even gloomier in his secret correspondence with Grimaldi, writing on 10 December: ‘vous êtes en guerre’. [You are at war.] He observed that Masserano’s talks with the British were stalemated, and that war could start at any time.

Choiseul’s new proposal was very close to the original British demand and comprised three main points: reciprocal disavowal of Bucareli and Hunt, acknowledgment of Bucareli’s fault, and reciprocal evacuation of the Falklands. His aim, he told Grimaldi, was a simple and amicable negotiation that should satisfy both sides. If Britain rejected it, then the blame for war would rest with them rather than with Spain. Spain could easily disavow its ambassador if Carlos III disapproved of the declaration, and devise a new one that he would approve. Choiseul anticipated some resistance from Grimaldi, and warned him that if a war broke out it would inevitably involve France as well as Spain.92

Choiseul’s new proposal arrived in London on 13 December and Francès at once tried to persuade Masserano to accept it, but the Spanish ambassador refused to act without explicit instructions from Madrid, and said he was sure the British would not accept such a proposal. Francès therefore decided to lay it before the British ministers himself. His comments on the British cabinet are interesting. He thought North too timid to overcome Weymouth’s obvious preference for war and declared the ministry totally devoid of imagination and unable to depart from its previous demand. North agreed to meet Francès on 16 December, and though Weymouth at first said he would attend as an observer he did not in fact do so. Francès showed North three draft declarations, comprising the disavowal and restitution, a reservation of Spanish right, and Britain’s approval of the satisfaction and reservation. North at once observed that this was different from the previous proposals, and that Britain could never publicly admit any Spanish right to the Falklands, but he finally agreed to take Choiseul’s proposal to cabinet.93 The British cabinet met on 19 December and predictably rejected any admission of a Spanish claim to the Falklands. This was the day on which Rochford officially transferred from the Northern to the Southern Department and Sandwich accepted the seals as the new Northern Secretary. Most importantly, Rochford persuaded the cabinet that as the fleet was now ready for service the time was right for a final ultimatum to Spain, and the recall of Harris if it was rejected. The latest intelligence from France indicated vigorous military preparations, including the movement of ‘a Considerable Body of Troops’ towards the Channel coast, commanded by Choiseul’s own brother. With George III’s approval, Rochford sent instructions to Harris on 21 December to
make a final demand at Madrid, first allowing a week for the courier to warn the British consuls in Spain and the commander at Gibraltar. If no satisfactory answer was forthcoming, he was to leave Madrid and return to England. Then the fleet would put to sea and Britain would be at war.\textsuperscript{94}

In a letter to Harcourt at Paris that same day, Rochford professed surprise at Choiseul’s latest proposal: ‘Negociation has long been at an end between Us and the Court of Spain.’ Rochford added that there would be ‘great Impropiety’ in any renewal of negotiations through the French court. He warned Harcourt not to be drawn into any discussions with Choiseul, and agreed that ‘very little Credit’ was to be given to the French minister’s ‘Artful Insinuations and Professions’.\textsuperscript{95}

Baron Diede, the Danish minister in London, was as much surprised as the rest of the diplomatic corps at Weymouth’s resignation, which seemed to him somewhat mysterious, but he observed that Rochford’s appointment as southern secretary made good sense, as all his experience as an ambassador had been in that department. Diede thought Weymouth’s conduct of the Falklands negotiations had been extremely poor (‘beaucoup de mal’) and that the cabinet reshuffle now raised hopes of peace. North’s ministry was more united, but with Rochford in control of foreign policy Diede expected the Spanish to face a continued tough line. He described Rochford as one of those who regarded war as inevitable, because he had said so to all his friends.\textsuperscript{96} While he was aware of North’s unofficial conversations with Francès, Rochford had maintained Britain’s uncompromisingly strong stand, both officially and in private. This left the Bourbon diplomats in no doubt that he meant business over the Falklands.

By this time Choiseul had also been convinced that Britain would not back down, and he urged Grimaldi to agree to the British demands in order to avoid hostilities. This letter interestingly gave no explicit promise of French assistance in the event of war. In a letter to the French ambassador at Madrid Ossun a few days later, Choiseul stressed that the decision as to peace or war now lay with Spain and Spain alone. He declared that France did not want a war over such a trifling object as the Falklands, and he hoped that the Spanish would be content with a verbal agreement to reserve the question of right. If they wanted to add anything more, the British would not accept it and war was inevitable.\textsuperscript{97}

Choiseul’s reading of the British position was, for once, perfectly accurate. Francès had two further meetings with North on 20 and 22 December, at which North said he was happy with the wording of the first declaration, but he repeated his refusal to make any written reservation of Spain’s claim to the Falklands. He warned that if Spain insisted on a public statement about right, war was inevitable. In their second meeting, after a long discussion, North asked for a minor amendment to the wording of the first paper, and declared that this was Britain’s final position. Britain would accept and reply to a simple Spanish declaration of disavowal and restoration, without any reference to anterior rights, and the \textit{status quo ante} would be restored. In his report to Choiseul, Francès remarked that Weymouth’s departure had brought greater unity to North’s administration, and that king, cabinet and people were agreed on the basic British demand for satisfaction over the Falklands. North and Rochford had been careful not to put anything on paper about their discussions with Francès in case they were attacked in Parliament.\textsuperscript{98}

But Choiseul never read this interesting letter. Louis XV had become convinced that Choiseul was secretly promoting war, despite his peaceful protestations. After a particularly stormy council meeting in late December, Louis icily warned Choiseul
that he had told him before that he did not want war. Louis was especially incensed by his discovery that Choiseul had been conducting a secret correspondence with Grimaldi, unknown to the king. French kings in the past had often conducted secret diplomatic correspondence without their ministers’ knowledge, but they did not enjoy having the boot on the other foot. On 24 December Choiseul received a lettre de cachet exiling him to his country estate. His cousin Praslin was likewise exiled from court. Choiseul never returned to high office. Louis wrote a personal note to Carlos III that same day, assuring him of France’s commitment to the Family Compact but also making it clear that he wanted peace and that Spain could not expect any help from France if a war broke out between Britain and Spain. At one stroke the French king had achieved the breakthrough that was to resolve the diplomatic standoff.

Choiseul’s fall was the decisive turning point in the Falklands crisis, but the diplomatic settlement took many more weeks, and the risk of war remained high while Britain and Spain both continued their massive naval preparations. The news of Choiseul’s dismissal reached Madrid on 31 December and came just after a serious disagreement between Carlos III and his war minister, Count d’Aranda. The king had seen a letter in which Aranda criticized Spain’s foreign policy, and Carlos III had ordered Aranda to confine himself to his own department. This raised Grimaldi’s favour and influence at court, and reinforced Choiseul’s advice to him to reach an early accommodation with the British. The result was a new declaration approved by the Spanish king and his whole council sent to Masserano on 2 January 1771. This was a simple disavowal and restitution, even simpler than Choiseul’s 19 December proposal, and almost exactly what Britain had been demanding since 12 September. Rochford’s tough line had paid off. He had risked war but averted it. This was brinkmanship of the highest order.

While this latest Spanish declaration was making its slow mid-winter journey from Madrid, much was happening on the diplomatic front in London, where the news of Choiseul’s fall had created a sensation. George III could not conceal his joy and expressed the hope that this would lead to a complete change in France’s foreign policy. Masserano’s first conference with Rochford in his new office as Southern Secretary took place on 3 January 1771 and began with the usual formal remarks about Britain’s desire for peace. Rochford was concerned that bad weather in the Channel had delayed the couriers, but he was still hopeful of a reply from Madrid before the opening of Parliament on 22 January. Masserano said he thought they would have little difficulty in reaching agreement now that Weymouth had resigned, for he had found Weymouth’s obscurity and lack of good faith major obstacles in their talks hitherto. Rochford swore upon his honour that they would have peace if Spain gave satisfaction, for nobody wanted war. But he had to inform Masserano that he had sent instructions to Harris to leave Madrid if he did not receive a clear acceptance of Britain’s original demand.

Masserano was shocked by this news, as the recall of a diplomat usually meant a rupture of relations, closely followed by the outbreak of war. Rochford explained that Harris had recently been elected to Parliament and needed to attend in order to take his seat, but Masserano replied in bitter tones that he was personally aggrieved at such an inconsiderate step when he had worked so hard for peace and had urged his court to rely on Britain’s good faith. Rochford then revealed that Harris had been ordered to delay his ultimatum for a week, and that a reply from Madrid might arrive in London in the meantime (as it did). But Masserano was extremely grumpy
by now, and departed after accusing Rochford of bad faith and toying with him and Francés while Britain prepared for war.

Horace Walpole was mistaken in blaming North for the 'absurd direction' to recall Harris from Madrid. Walpole surmised that North had been 'seized with a panic' on Weymouth's resignation, expecting the Earl of Chatham and the opposition to bellow against his attempts to negotiate peace. Walpole described the recall as 'a rash act dictated by fear from which nothing but Choiseul's fall could have extricated him'. Goebel is also mistaken in claiming that the recall of Harris was entirely Weymouth's idea and that it was opposed by all the other ministers.

It is clear from his correspondence with George III that Rochford advised the recall of Harris at this point as the best way to maintain maximum pressure on the Spanish government, but he was also anxious that the timing had to be right. Britain could not risk an outbreak of hostilities before the fleet was ready for war, and in early December, when Weymouth first proposed recalling Harris, Rochford was not confident that the fleet would be ready in time. Hawke's assurances had resolved that fear, but there was still the inescapable logic of a naval armament to be faced. Whoever armed first had to make use of that force or lose the advantage. This explains Rochford's continued emphasis on Britain's making credible preparations for war, and his anxiety that North's offer of a secret promise of a future evacuation of the Falklands might encourage the Spanish to stall or raise their demands. Viewed in this way, Rochford's policy throughout the Falklands crisis was firm and consistent. The fall of Choiseul ensured its success.

Rochford called on Masserano on the evening of 4 January 1771 to inform him of that day's cabinet meeting with the king. George III had expressed regret at Masserano's reaction to the recall of Harris, pointing out that he was a low-ranking diplomat who was now somewhat redundant as direct negotiations with Spain had been at a standstill for over a month. Rochford added that the ministers were united with the king in their desire to avoid war, and that there would be no difficulty over the question of right as the Falklands were of little value to Britain. Masserano threatened that even if he received instructions to reopen direct negotiations he would refuse to do so until Britain named a new ambassador to Spain. Rochford sympathized, but remarked that they would be better to appoint a new ambassador after receiving a satisfactory reply from Madrid. Rochford ended on a firm note, stating that if there were no satisfactory reply from Spain before Parliament reassembled on 22 January, he and his colleagues would advise the king to declare war. The dispute was not really about the Falklands, but about the insult to the British flag and the honour of George III.

A week later Masserano received Grimaldi's instructions of 17 December authorising him to apply for his passports and depart London if the British ministers refused to reopen direct negotiations with him. This was a dangerous moment, as these instructions had been made redundant by Choiseul's dismissal and the Spanish reply of 2 January. Masserano wisely decided to wait and see what the next courier might bring. Rochford now tried to reassure Masserano that the recall of Harris had been designed as a sop to the parliamentary opposition, which had been accusing the ministers of weakness and inaction. In his usual colourful and dramatic way, Rochford exclaimed that their heads would have been forfeit had they not recalled Harris. Masserano drily remarked that Rochford was always talking about losing his head but no British minister had ever been beheaded for such a thing, and North's comfortable majorities showed that the ministry was stable enough to make war or
peace as it chose. Rochford once again declared that war was inevitable if Spain failed to return a satisfactory answer before Parliament reassembled. Here was a Secretary of State keeping up the pressure and sticking to a consistent policy, even though it risked war.\footnote{107}

While waiting for the Spanish reply, Rochford was closely involved in the restructuring of North's administration. Weymouth had gone, and now the First Lord of the Admiralty, Sir Edward Hawke, was at last persuaded to retire early in January. North had long ago promised the Admiralty to Sandwich, but Grafton now expressed a wish to return to office, and Rochford became the king's intermediary, consulting North and Weymouth as well as talking to Grafton. He handled these delicate talks with tact and finesse. Weymouth thought Grafton would accept a post, but wondered if he might prove troublesome in the cabinet, 'having been there before in a higher situation'. Rochford warned the king that if Weymouth had still been in cabinet he would probably have opposed Grafton's inclusion.\footnote{108} North now argued for Sandwich's previous experience at the Admiralty and his undoubted administrative ability, and the king was convinced. Sandwich became First Lord on 12 January. The Bedfordites Gower and Rigby had refused to follow Weymouth out of office, but the death of the Duke of Bedford on 14 January 1771 left their faction leaderless. George Grenville had died on 13 November 1770, so the two main opposition factions of the 1760s had now lost their leaders. These coincidental deaths indirectly strengthened North's position. He now courted Suffolk, the nominal head of what was left of the Grenvillites. North also secured a legal reshuffle by offering Bathurst a baronage and the office of Lord Chancellor from 24 January. Alexander Wedderburn, a prominent Grenvillite, then came in as Solicitor General.

All this still left the Northern Department vacant. Suffolk and Dartmouth both refused the Northern Department, Suffolk pleading his lack of French, which the king declared 'an absolute requisite' for a secretary who had to deal with the foreign ambassadors.\footnote{109} North's elderly uncle Halifax, an experienced former Secretary of State (who had been Rochford's chief when he was at Madrid) agreed to take the seals as a caretaker, leaving the conduct of foreign affairs entirely in Rochford's hands. Halifax's place as Lord Privy Seal was taken by Suffolk. Gower received the Garter vacated by the death of Bedford, and Rochford's younger brother Richard Savage Nassau was given a lucrative sinecure as Clerk of the Green Cloth on condition that he entered Parliament in the government's interest. By the end of January 1771, therefore, North had greatly strengthened his administration. He now had a team of loyal ministers who presented a united front to whatever criticisms the parliamentary opposition might throw at them.\footnote{110}

Rochford was the de facto Foreign Minister in this new line-up. In the same letter that George III wrote to North about Suffolk's lack of French, the king wondered 'whether Lord R[ochford] could not transact the whole department of Foreign Affairs, which is the case in every other Court, and then Lord Suffolk might have the home departments which would be composed of all the Domestick Affairs with the addition of Scotland and Ireland . . .'.\footnote{111} (This sensible suggestion did not become a reality until 1782, a year after Rochford's death.) While the cabinet restructuring of January 1771 was largely controlled by North and the king, Rochford had proved himself a reliable and trustworthy intermediary. It was not the last time the king would use him in such a role. One of the most striking features of this phase in the Falklands crisis is the very close working relationship that had developed between Rochford and George III.\footnote{112}
The Spanish reply reached Paris on 10 January, with a covering letter from Carlos III to Louis XV, and fresh instructions for Fuentes and Masserano. Louis had now taken personal charge of foreign affairs and sent fresh instructions to his ambassador at London rather than to Choiseul’s man, Francès. These packages all reached London on 16 January, together with a letter from Harcourt to Rochford advising that the Spanish reply was probably favourable. This was just as well, for Harcourt’s previous letter had detailed a massive increase in French naval armament, set in motion by Choiseul just before his dismissal. The Bourbon diplomats in London were greatly relieved to see that a resolution of the crisis now seemed likely, but they agreed not to present Grimaldi’s declaration until they heard what the British intended to do about the recall of Harris. Once again, Francès acted as the go-between, and preferred to see North rather than Rochford.

The French ambassador Guines came to see Rochford on Thursday 17 January 1771 and said there would be war unless the recall of Harris was immediately repaired by the announcement of a new British ambassador to Spain. Rochford made some flippant remark as a joke, and Guines stood up, declaring hotly that he was not the Venetian minister and that he expected to be treated properly as the ambassador of a great power. While Rochford and Guines were exchanging ‘warm words’, North and Francès arrived at Rochford’s office. Francès at once smoothed Guines’ ruffled feathers and announced that fresh proposals had arrived from Madrid. Rochford told Guines that they could not name an ambassador immediately as various people had to be approached, but he promised that he would order Harris to return to Madrid if the Spanish answer was satisfactory. He then asked the French diplomats for an unofficial summary of the Spanish reply, but Francès replied that he could not do that until the order to recall Harris was sent. North intervened and said that the British government could not order the diplomat’s recall until they were sure the Spanish reply was acceptable. Impasse!

It was Francès who gave way first. He summarised the Spanish declaration, which North remarked was very close to the original British demand, but North did not like the preamble, as he had always rejected the idea of disavowing Captain Hunt. Francès agreed to cut this, and North suggested another phrase, ‘His Britannic Majesty having complained . . . ’North also offered to antedate the order reinstating Harris to the day when talks resumed.

The weekend intervened, but first thing on Monday 21 January Rochford sent for Francès and told him that they needed to finish the business next day, before Parliament assembled. Together they drafted a revised declaration, which Francès took to Masserano that evening. Masserano quibbled over the wording of a few phrases, but said he would sign it next morning. Meanwhile, Rochford drew up a letter to send Harris back to Madrid and, as North had promised, backdated it to 18 January. This letter was shown to Masserano when he called at Rochford’s office on the morning of Tuesday 22 January. After a few minor changes to the wording of the declaration, Rochford and Masserano signed their respective documents. That afternoon, when Parliament assembled, notice was given to both Lords and Commons that the documents would be tabled and made public on Friday 25 January.

When Masserano signed the declaration on 22 February he stressed the great sacrifice that his royal master was making in allowing British forces to return to territories claimed by Spain, and added that he relied on North’s verbal promise to evacuate the Falklands sometime in the near future. Rochford had replied that while
he and his cabinet colleagues ‘truly desired peace’ they could make no categorical promise as to evacuation. The opposition in Parliament was certain to attack the declaration, but Rochford expected them to be defeated, and then the ministry would show its good faith. Masserano warned that war could still be a possibility if Britain added any fresh conditions such as compensation, but Rochford assured him that they would keep their promises. He would send the courier to Harris at once and a new ambassador would be named within a week.117

While there was a general feeling of relief in Europe’s capitals that war had been averted, rumours abounded of a secret clause and French mediation that had persuaded the Spanish to sign the declaration. These ideas had been banded about in the London newspapers and by opposition politicians, and were a reasonable deduction from the numerous meetings Masserano and Francès had held with North and Rochford in December and January. North’s anxiety to find a peaceful solution was widely known, but it is questionable whether or not Francès’ liaison between North and Masserano amounted to mediation. French historians have assumed this, but the British always rejected any idea of French intervention. Even Francès acknowledged that North and Rochford were ‘not fully in accord’ over the solution to the crisis. The suggestion of eventual abandonment had come from North, but Rochford had been careful not to make any explicit promises to Masserano.118 Both had dropped the idea when cabinet insisted on a full and public satisfaction by Spain. In fact, it was Rochford who maintained the tough stance of gunboat diplomacy that forced Spain to back down as soon as it was known that Louis XV refused to be drawn into a war over the Falklands.119

Rochford’s negotiations with Masserano for a mutual disarmament occupied the early months of 1771, and their talks were at times stormy. Rochford was a tough negotiator, and would not yield an inch to Masserano’s attempts to link the date of abandonment to the question of sovereignty. In mid-March Rochford again threatened war, and the Spanish feared that Britain would use the large fleet it had at readiness to destroy Spain’s fleet and threaten her extensive American empire.120 The French government warned its diplomats in London to treat the British with ‘gloved hands’ to avoid giving them the slightest pretext for war.121 According to Goebel, the situation in March 1771 was as black as it had been in December 1770.122 Agreement was finally reached in early April for a simultaneous disarmament on 23 April.123 This had been Rochford’s idea, and it was accepted by both the French and Spanish governments. The risk of war finally receded. Orders were sent to South America, and the Spanish restored the British garrison to Port Egmont on 15 September 1771. Masserano complained about this ‘thorn in the foot’ for Spain but the British were in no hurry to abandon these worthless islands. The dispute had never been about the territory but about the insult to the honour of the British king. Finally, early in 1774, the British announced the withdrawal of the garrison as an economy measure, and the troops were evacuated on 20 May 1774.124

Historians have hitherto given Weymouth and North all the credit for the peaceful resolution of the Falklands crisis but, as this article has demonstrated, Rochford was as much in control of the negotiation with the Bourbon powers as Weymouth, until North’s well-intentioned but clumsy secret promise threatened to undermine Britain’s threat of naval force, and Weymouth’s insistence on the premature recall of Harris from Madrid threatened to close the door to a diplomatic solution. Rochford then skillfully isolated Weymouth in cabinet, and contradicted his handling of the negotiation, resulting in Weymouth’s resignation. Though North
continued his unofficial talks with Francès, Rochford took charge of the formal negotiations with Masserano, and used the recall of Harris to maintain pressure on the Spanish to yield. The fall of Choiseul ensured that they would. As Michael Roberts once remarked, it was thanks to Rochford’s ‘supple handling’ that the Falklands crisis ended peacefully and entirely to Britain’s advantage.¹²⁵

Until the dismissal of Choiseul, the British could not be certain that Spain would agree to a simple disavowal and restitution. The Spanish were determined to secure at least a commitment by Britain to discuss the question of sovereignty and the right of other nations under the Treaty of Utrecht to navigate and make discoveries in the southern oceans. The British were equally determined not to debate these issues before they had secured satisfaction over the Falklands. Misled by North’s secret promise to Francès, Masserano realized, after the mutual declarations had been signed, that there was nothing to prevent Britain from resorting to a pre-emptive naval war on any flimsy pretext while the fleet remained armed and ready. Goebel noted this, and remarked that the British had thereby won a significant strategic victory.¹²⁶

Was this victory worth the risk of damaged relations with Spain? Though the disarmament talks between Rochford and Masserano across March and April were often acrimonious, Spanish resentment at being forced to back down appears to have been nicely balanced by their relief at avoiding an expensive war. Choiseul became the focus for Spanish anger rather than the British. During 1771 and 1772 Rochford worked hard to restore Anglo-Spanish relations to normality, showing willingness to resolve long-standing minor disputes with generous compromises. Rochford’s long-term policy was to foster Spanish neutrality and undermine the Family Compact so that in the event of war Spain would not automatically join France in hostilities against Britain. This policy bore fruit during the American War of Independence. While France turned covert support for the Americans into a formal declaration of war in 1778, Spain did not join the war for another fifteen months.¹²⁷

Unlike its feebleness over the first Falklands dispute of 1766, or the French acquisition of Corsica in 1768, this time the British government, thanks largely to Rochford, had taken the risk of war seriously, and had armed promptly and effectively. Though Weymouth gave the initial orders for naval preparations, Britain’s policy in the Falklands crisis was determined by Rochford’s original advice to George III, and he had held to it consistently through to January 1771 and beyond. Rochford’s tough diplomacy, combined with a credible threat of naval force, forced Spain to back down as soon as Choiseul’s fall removed any prospect of French assistance. It was this demonstration of readiness to use naval force that did much to restore Britain’s reputation as a maritime power, and to regain the respect of other powers that Britain had lost during the 1760s. This successful threat of naval force was Rochford’s most important contribution to rebuilding Britain’s foreign policy after the debacle over Corsica.¹²⁸

Notes


² J. Goebel, The Struggle for the Falkland Islands (New Haven, 1927, repr. 1982).
Sir John Fortescue (ed), The Correspondence of George III from 1760 to December 1783 (London, 1927–8), hereafter cited as Fortescue.

Most historians have accepted Goebel's version of the secret promise, including the present writer (see G. W. Rice, ‘Nassau van Zuylenstein, William Henry, fourth Earl of Rochford’, Oxford Dictionary of National Biography, xl, 260–3), but a closer reading of Rochford’s correspondence with George III and the correspondence of foreign diplomats in London has led me to a different conclusion.


H. M. Scott, ‘The Importance of Bourbon Naval Reconstruction on the Strategy of Choiseul after the Seven Years’ War’, International History Review, i (1979), 17–35.


The King to Rochford, 6 December 1770, No. 846, in Fortescue, iii, 177–8.


Tracy, Navies, 86, n.73.

Tracy, Navies, 88 citing Goebel, Falkland Islands, 310, 368.


H. Scott, British Foreign Policy in the Age of the American Revolution (Oxford, 1990), 140–56.


Goebel, Falkland Islands, 276–7.

Tracy, Navies, 52–3, citing National Archives, London, ADM 2/96, 1.


Rochford to Conway, 11 November 1765, SP 94/253, fo. 136.

Scott, British Foreign Policy, 126.


Scott, British Foreign Policy, 15–18. Peter Thomas has questioned the extent of George III’s influence over American policy (‘George III and the American Revolution’, History, lxx [1985], 16–31), but Ian Christie has emphasised his role in major policy decisions,

34 Rochford to George III, 8 September 1770, Fortescue, iii, 813.
35 Weymouth to Harris, 12 September 1770, SP 94/185, fo. 329.
36 Walpole to Hertford, 8 June 1764, *Horace Walpole Correspondence*, ed. W.S. Lewis, xxxviii, 402.

39 Rochford to Lords of Admiralty, 19 September 1770, SP 42/47; also in ADM 1/4128, no. 40. Tracy, *Navies*, astonishingly, omits this important order to augment Britain’s naval armament.
40 Walpole to Weymouth, 18 September 1770, SP 78/281, fo. 140.
41 Rochford to Walpole, 22 September 1770, SP 78/281, fo. 144.
42 Rochford to Walpole, 22 September 1770, No. 24, Separate and Secret, SP 78/281, fo. 146.
43 Weymouth to Walpole, 12 September 1770, SP 78/281, fo. 127.
47 Tracy, *Navies*, 58.
48 Grimaldi to Choiseul, 3 October 1770, AECP Espagne, 561, text in Goebel, 291–3.
49 Choiseul to Francés, 7 October 1770, AECP Angleterre, 493.
50 Rochford to George III, 29 September 1770, Fortescue, iii, No. 815.
51 George III to North, 9 November 1770, Fortescue, iii, No. 822.
53 Admiralty to Weymouth, 17 & 23 October 1770, SP 42/46.
54 Weymouth to Harris, 17 October 1770, No. 11, SP 94/184 (no folio number); Weymouth to Walpole, 17 October 1770, No. 26, SP 78/281, fo. 173.
55 Harris to Weymouth, 7 November 1770, No. 65, SP 94/185 (no folio number).
58 Mitchell to Rochford, 17 November 1770, SP 90/89, fo. 189.
59 Diede to Christian VII, 5 October 1770, Danske Rigsarkiv, TKUA England B, Depecher 1770.
63 Walpole to Weymouth, 17, 28, 30 October, 4, 7, 11 November 1770, SP 78/281, fos. 192, 196, 198, 200, 204, 205.
64 Weymouth to Walpole, 25 October 1770, SP 78/281, fo. 189.
65 Tracy, *Falkland Islands*, 57.
67 Harcourt to Weymouth, 20 November 1770, SP 78/281, fo. 211
70 Masserano to Grimaldi, 3 December 1770, [Archivo] General de [Simancas], [Spain, Estada, Inglaterra], legajo 6980, fo. 3.
71 George III to North, 28 November 1770, Fortescue, iii, no. 841.
72 Goebel, *Falkland Islands*, pp. 307–9, citing Masserano to Grimaldi, 4 December 1770, AGS 6976, fo. 2.
Scott, *British Foreign Policy*, p. 151 notes that Francês’ letter of 3 December is missing, but his conversations with North and Rochford can be reconstructed from his later summary to Choiseul, AECP 494, fos. 311–16.

Diede to Christian VII, 30 November 1770, Danske Rigsarkiv, TKUA England B, Depecher 1770, no. 284.

Masserano to Grimaldi, 4 December 1770, AGS 6976, fo. 2, summarises Francês’ reports to Masserano across 28 November–3 December 1770.

Tracy, *Naries*, pp. 61–3 citing Weymouth to Admiralty, 4 December 1770, ADM 1/4128, no. 77.

Rochford to George III, 8 am, 6 December 1770, Fortescue, iii, no. 842.

George III to Rochford, 10 am, 6 December 1770, Fortescue, iii, no. 844.

Rochford to the King, noon, 6 December 1770, Fortescue, iii, no. 845.

George III to Rochford, 10.05 pm, 6 December 1770, Fortescue, iii, no. 846.


Rochford to George III, 9.15 am, 8 December 1770, Fortescue, iii, no. 848.

Rochford to George III, 8 and 9 December 1770, Fortescue, iii, nos. 849 & 850.

George III to Rochford, 10 December 1770, Fortescue, iii, no. 851.

Rochford to George III, 8.10 am, 10 December 1770, Fortescue, iii, no. 852.

George II to Rochford, 10 December 1770, Rochford to George III, 11 and 12 December 1770, Fortescue, iii, nos. 853–5.


Tracy, *Naries*, 64.

Harcourt to Weymouth, 2 December 1770, SP 78/281, fo. 230.

Choiseul to Francês, 24 October & 8 December 1770, AECP Angleterre 488, fos. 276 and 310.

Choiseul to Grimaldi, 10 December 1770, AECP Espagne 561, fo. 398; Martin-Allanic, ii, 1166 for Choiseul to Ossun, 10 December 1770.

Francês to Choiseul, 14 December 1770, Francês to - [left blank, after the fall of Choiseul], 5 January 1771, AECP Angleterre 495.

Rochford to Harris, 21 December 1770, SP 94/185 [no folio number], No. 17.

Rochford to Harcourt, 21 December 1770, SP 78/281, fo. 253.


Choiseul to Grimaldi, 19 December 1770, Choiseul to Ossun, 23 December 1770, AECP Espagne 561, fos. 445, 466.

Francês to Choiseul, 22 December 1770 [second letter], AECP Angleterre 494.


Tracy, *Naries*, 53, denies that this was brinkmanship, but Rochford had pressed a dangerous situation to the limit of safety in order to win an advantage, by showing that Britain was prepared to fight if necessary.


Goebel, *Falkland Islands*, 348, n. 63, is wrong to allege that Grimaldi had misunderstood Harris, who had indeed been elected MP for Christchurch, Hampshire, on 20 November 1770.

Chatham to Calcraft, 29 December 1770: ‘War I take to be certain, be the ministry what it mat be at Versailles . . .’ *Chatham Correspondence*, iv, 64–5.

Masserano to Grimaldi, 5 January 1771, AGS 6980, fo. 16. Francês reported this interview in almost the same words to whoever was now in charge of foreign affairs at Versailles; AECP Angleterre 495, fo. 6.


Rochford to George III, 7 January 1771, Fortescue, iii, no. 878.
George III to North, 13 January 1771, Fortescue, iii, no. 882.


George III to North, 13 January 1771, Fortescue, iii, no. 882.


Harcourt to Rochford, 12 January 1771, SP 78/282, fo. 27; Martin-Allanic, ii, 1187–9.


Rochford to Harris, 18 January 1771, SP 94/186, no. 1.

Texts in Goebel, Falkland Islands, 358–60.

Goebel, Falkland Islands, 360–1; Martin-Allanic, ii, 1196–1200.

See, for example, Sarah Maza, Private Lives and Public Affairs (Berkeley & London, 1993), 156.

Scott, British Foreign Policy (p. 154) following Goebel, credits the secret promise to Rochford, in three places, but it is clear from the diplomatic correspondence that it came from North.

Masserano to Grimaldi, 9 March 1771, AGS 6980, fo. 64.


Goebel, 397–8.

Masserano to Grimaldi, 24 April 1771, AGS 6978 (old numbering), fo. 575.


Goebel, Falkland Islands, 399.

Scott, British Foreign Policy, 272–6.

Scott, British Foreign Policy, 155.