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SUBJECT: Great Power Rivalry over Diego Garcia in 18th Century

SOURCE: "British Voyages in the Chagos Archipelago and Attempts to form a Settlement at Diego Garcia in the Late 18th Century" by William A. Spray, The Mariner's Mirror (Volume 56, No. 1, January 1960, pages 1-10).

Spray notes that Messrs. Bombay Government visited the Chagos Archipelago in 1785. In 1785 the Board of Control of the East India Company in London instructed the Bombay Government to occupy Diego Garcia as a precautionary measure if war was to break out again with France. The Bombay Government either misinterpreted these instructions or were over anxious to please London. A large and costly expedition settled on Diego in 1786. A few French settlers were found on the island, but they soon left for Mauritius to inform the French Governor of the action taken by the British. The French Governor sent a letter to Bombay protesting the formation of a British settlement when a French settlement was already established on Diego. He demanded its withdrawal, claiming that the French had formed an establishment there in 1770 and the French occupation had been continuous since 1778. Meanwhile, the Governor General General had learned of the settlement and had issued orders to the Bombay Government to withdraw. After the British withdrawal, French settlers returned. Diego was visited in 1800 by the Royal Navy to ascertain whether Diego could be used as a base of operations for the presidencies of India. Although the report was made, the Admiralty took no action. After the Napoleonic Wars British naval activity centered on Trincomalee and a such place until approximately 1960.

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