

EUROPE and AMERICA: 1763 TO 1815

INTRODUCTION

This paper is about the failure of politics in both Europe and America – a failure celebrated by national holidays in both France and the United States. Of course, this period also includes two remarkable triumphs: the American Constitution that ended the revolutionary era in America and the Congress of Vienna that pacified Europe following the revolutionary upheavals in France.

“The American Revolution was a struggle between two peoples who spoke the same language, hated arbitrary government with equal fervor, and proclaimed the idea of liberty under law. It occurred in the empire distinguished above all others in the eighteenth century by the large measure of political, religious, and economic freedom it allowed its colonists overseas. It was mainly directed against the acts of a Parliament which has become renowned as ‘the Mother of Parliaments.’ It took place during the reign of a monarch who scrupulously observed the constitutional limits set by Parliament upon the royal power. And it happened at a time when European philosophers were looking to enlightened despots, rather than to the people, to usher in the new age of progress and reform.” (1/ xiii).

1763 to 1789:

From the End of Seven Years War to the Constitution

The Enlightenment and its Discontents

The philosophes articulated a vision of society as a rationalized meritocracy in which critical intelligence and scientific method would advance human progress. But how was this vision to be implemented in the face of entrenched opposition from conservative forces wedded to the status quo? The philosophes believed that men are eminently teachable. Thus, it was reasonable for them to imagine that they could enlighten the autocrats who would then have the power to rationalize and educate the societies over which they ruled. As we shall see, this program was somewhat problematic.

In the first place, there were autocrats like Russia’s Catherine the Great who embraced Enlightenment the way a conventional church-going Episcopalian embraces Christianity. They said the words, felt better for the exercise, but weren’t really moved by the spirit. Then there were the more

interesting cases of the true believers such as Frederick the Great of Prussia and Joseph II, the Holy Roman Emperor. Frederick was both sincere and effective and, for a time, implemented serious reforms in his realm. Unfortunately, his reforms were undermined by his incompetent successor, Frederick William II.

Joseph II was determined to thoroughly rationalize that most irrational of institutions, The Holy Roman Empire – and to do so in a single decade. He “ reformed the law, declared religious toleration for all, dissolved the contemplative monasteries and used the proceeds to endow hospitals, imposed proportional taxes on everyone, <and> the German language on the whole empire for administrative efficiency, and abolished serfdom and gave the emancipated serfs land. These measures were opposed by the aristocracy, the Roman Catholic Church, and Belgians and Hungarians, who resented having to conduct public business in German. He eventually established a secret police just to watch over all of his enemies...Joseph II died, worn out with care, just ten years after his accession.” (2). At his death, he admitted that he had accomplished almost nothing. Among the paradoxes of his reform efforts was the fact that he was attempting to use the authority of the Emperor to abolish irrational power and traditional prerogatives. However, that very imperial authority was itself totally irrational, and based only on the very traditions that he was proposing to undermine.

That leaves France – where they read the Encyclopedia at court, persecuted the philosophes, and finally supported the creation of an American Republic that would incarnate the meritocracy that was the dream of the philosophes. It would also be a precedent for the destruction of their own monarchy. The French they are a funny race.

What about the British and George III? He too was attempting to behave like an enlightened ruler, seeking to rationalize and tidy up a colonial administration that was chaotic in the extreme. As a result, a prosperous empire was destroyed, tens of thousands of lives were lost and, paradoxically, the goals of the philosophes were largely achieved in what began as a wilderness society. This did not occur as a result of rational planning by elites, but through adaptations made by independent men and women to a primitive environment – people who had come to a new world determined to make a new beginning and who increasingly became conscious of themselves as a new sort of human being – as Americans.

The indigenous peoples in the New World were Mohawks, Ojibwe, Cherokee etc. – not even ‘Indians’(a white man’s term), let alone ‘Americans.’ The first ‘Americans’ were Europeans who chose to leave Europe. That emigration, and the experiences they encountered along the way, made them very different from the people who chose to remain home. This was one of many things that the rural Tory government of George III would fail to understand. In a sense, American independence began with

the revolutionary rejection of the European status quo in the perilous voyage to a new and unknown land, and with the adaptations that would be required to survive there.

The Squandering of English Hegemony after 1763

In the decisive world war, known as ‘The Seven Years War’ in Europe and as the “French and Indian War” in America, Austria and France opposed Prussia and Britain. The conflict ended in 1763 with the complete defeat of France and the humiliation of Austria. Meanwhile, Clive was routing the French in India. Thus, France lost most of its colonial empire to the British who became mistress of the seas, global hegemon and the foremost commercial and colonial power in the world. The American colonies were basking in prosperity and rapid growth. From 1713 to 1763, the colonies tripled in population. It would seem that nothing was seriously broken – so, naturally, it was assumed that things needed to be fixed.

In fairness, it might seem to any right thinking rationalist that there was much to reform. After all, there were no clear lines of administrative authority in colonial administration. During the reigns of George I and George II, England had Hanoverian monarchs whose native language was German. They were not very interested in the affairs of England and were content to leave its governance to the very capable Prime Minister, Sir Robert Walpole. However, when George III ascended the throne as a young man, it is said the his mother enjoined him to be a king – and he was determined to do so. He knew that he could not be an absolute monarch in the continental manner; he understood very well that the days of the Stuart monarchy were over. So he very astutely achieved political dominance within the system of parliamentary government. He beat the parliamentary Whigs at their own corrupt game by using royal patronage simply to out-bribe them. So far, so good.

What about the colonies? Well, apart from being administered in an irrational fashion, they were also failing to enrich the royal treasury as well-behaved colonies were expected to do. Indeed, why else go to the trouble of creating them in the first place? Of course, the Americans were enriching the London merchants with their trade, which is why such Whig leaders as Burke and Pitt were sympathetic to their needs. However, the rural Tory interests were not benefiting from this commercial prosperity and were burdened by war taxes. Further, since the elimination of the French menace to the colonists was one of the benefits the colonies had derived from the war – and since the colonists were prospering so greatly – surely it was reasonable to ask them to contribute to the war burden with taxes, such as the stamp tax, that had long been imposed on British subjects.

Strangely, the colonists didn't see it that way. In the colonies, mercantile regulations were sloppily organized, and enforcement was lax and corrupt. Colonial customs officials were regularly on the take from the likes of John Hancock; so smuggling was open and widespread. Clearly, this was intolerable. Unfortunately, it had to be tolerated. As Ben Franklin observed "It takes a little smuggling to make the British Empire work." He was correct, but some explanation is needed:

For the colonies to be of any value, the colonists had to purchase English manufactured products. The southern planters obtained hard currency by selling cotton and other agricultural products to England. However, the New England and Mid-Atlantic colonies obtained specie by trading with the French and Dutch West Indies, violating the British 'Navigation laws' that restricted trade to members of the Empire. However, it was this illicit trade that enabled those colonies to buy British manufactures despite their adverse balance of trade with the mother country. Of course, what John Hancock called commercial enterprise when he was trading with non-British colonies, the Brits tended to regard as smuggling and, in the reign of George III, they came to view such activity as a serious problem for which corrective action was needed.

I mentioned that under George III's predecessors England had been effectively governed by the Prime Minister, Sir Robert Walpole. Well, Walpole's approach to the colonies has been accurately described as "salutary neglect." For three decades, the colonies largely governed themselves in their internal affairs. They jealously guarded their right to be taxed only by their own legislatures – which they viewed as little parliaments. This was what is meant by "No taxation without representation" – a slogan that was emphatically NOT a demand for representation in Parliament.

So in 1763, Britain and her American colonies were successful and prosperous. However, the authorities in London were aware of threats to the security of the colonies from both the French and the Indians. By contrast, the Americans were increasingly more sensitive to threats from the London authorities than from hostile elements in America. They were irritated when London negotiated treaties with the French and Indians that frustrated their desire for westward expansion. As a precaution, London also thought that it was prudent to maintain a British military presence in America supported by modest taxes on the English colonists. However, the colonists viewed the French threat as extinguished by the Seven Years War, saw no need for the troops, had no desire to pay for them, and no inclination to curb their westward expansion to placate the native Americans. They refused to admit that they needed protection from the

American Indian even though they suffered some two thousand casualties during the Indian uprisings of 1763-1766 when they had proved utterly unable to unite for their own defense. Ultimately, British troops were required to end the conflict. It is hard not to detect an adolescent attitude on the part of the colonists. One can almost imagine the government in London as a parent trying to convince the colonists that it was imposing limits on them for their own good.

Indeed, the colonists engaged in a characteristically adolescent ploy – turning the parent’s moral maxims against parental authority to undermine its legitimacy. The colonists expressed moral outrage at taxes levied by a Parliament that did not represent them. Now, in reality, because of the unreformed British Parliament with its “rotten Boroughs” etc., the idea that every Englishman was represented in Parliament was largely a myth. However, it was the propaganda that had been used a century before in the Glorious Revolution and that remained the contemporary justification of Parliamentary legitimacy. Further, the Colonial legislatures had been exercising the power of the purse for decades. Thus, the prerogative that Parliament was attempting to abrogate was not merely theoretical, but a set of rights that had been regularly exercised – in America, if not in England itself.

Parliament’s first attempt to support its American military presence was the Stamp tax – a device that had long been employed in England without difficulty. Of course, this offended the claim to be taxed only by the colonial legislatures. It also directly affected all the people one would least want to alienate: lawyers, printers and merchants. In response to an American boycott of British manufactures, the British merchants forced Parliament to rescind the tax. Parliament then passed the Declaratory Act to re-assert its right to pass such taxes.

At issue here is a central problem that would vex all of American history down to the present day – the problem of federalism. The issue is easily understood by anyone who has ever worked for an organization with a central administration interacting with branch offices. To what extent should the organization be run by a policy and procedures manual as opposed to allowing a large degree of branch autonomy. Having worked on both sides of this divide, I must confess that this is pre-eminently a case of “where a person stands, depends on where he sits.” In any event, it is an issue that the British never solved and with which we have struggled throughout our history – in the Constitutional Convention and the subsequent conflict between Federalists and Republicans – and most horribly in the Civil War. Indeed, already, in the Stamp Act crisis, violence had been employed by the ruffians who called themselves “Sons of

Liberty,” and assaulted the stamp collectors.

Over the next decade, Parliament and the colonies engaged in a dangerous dance in which Parliament passed a series of taxes that raised very little revenue, largely to prove that it could do so. When the colonists objected, Parliament would repeal the tax – and substitute another pointless tax – to make its point. Finally, Lord North became too clever by half (and the colonists too stupid by far) in the crisis over the tax on tea. The East India Company was having a spot of financial bother with a glut of tea. The government thought of a way to help the company while it made the colonists an offer too good to refuse. They would ship inexpensive tea from the East India Company to the colonies along with a modest tax at a price that was actually cheaper than the smuggled Dutch tea. Surely the Boston housewives would snatch up this undoubted bargain! And so they would have – if John Hancock and his Boston ‘Indians’ had allowed the tea to be unloaded. Instead, they famously dumped it into the sea, in a provocation to which the British disastrously over-reacted. The resulting Coercive Acts, which closed the Port of Boston and militarily occupied and blockaded the city, were based on the miscalculation that they could isolate radical Massachusetts from the other colonies. However, such over-reactions to provocation always erode the influence of moderates on both sides and play into the violent hands of extremists. The presence of troops in the city was bound to agitate the least responsible element of the populace setting the stage for the so-called Boston massacre and for the skirmishes at Lexington and Concord. In the meantime, two Continental Congresses first sent petitions to the King that he didn’t bother to read, and then declared independence.

It should be noted that even after the Boston Tea Party and the passing of the Coercive Acts, there were attempts by moderate adults on both sides to resolve the situation and avoid the slaughter that ensued. “A Continental Congress, meeting in Philadelphia in September 1774, petitioned the king ... North, for his part, brought in measures to restrain the trade of New England, but accompanied them with a proposal not to exercise the right of taxation if the colonists themselves would provide for administration, justice and defense.” (3/507.). Lord North’s sentiments can be seen in a statement he made in the early stages of the war when it was going very well for the British. “I am very melancholy. My idea of American affairs is that if our success is as great as the most sanguine politician wishes or believes, the best use we can make of it is to get out of the dispute as soon as possible.” (3/508ff.).

The conflict, in which tens of thousands of lives were sacrificed and countless more ruined, was a typical counter-insurgency. The Americans

did not need to win, but only to survive until the super-power threw in the towel. After the Battle of Saratoga, the French were more inclined to enter the war against England. Franklin was telling them that they had to hurry before England came to terms with the colonists – and this time, Franklin was actually telling the truth. In fact, Lord North had introduced “a new conciliatory bill in November 1777 which, if passed promptly, might have changed our entire history; but the country MPs had to have their Christmas holidays and Parliament adjourned without passing it. In the meantime, Franklin so worked on French fears of an accommodation with Britain that on 6 February 1778 Vergennes signed two treaties with the United States, one of amity and commerce, and one of alliance. Eleven days later,...Lord North's conciliatory bill passed Parliament. It offered even more than the Second Continental Congress had demanded;...<A Royal Commission was authorized to concede any > insistent demands short of open and avowed independence...Had this plan gone through the revolted colonies would have returned to British allegiance, leaving only war and foreign relations to the crown" (4/254). Thus, in a manner of speaking, while the English may or may not have acquired an empire in a fit of absent mindedness, they lost one in an effusion of holiday spirit.

In the event, the French did enter on the American side and thus won their only victory in their long series of wars with England – a pyrrhic victory, to be sure. The American war helped to bankrupt their treasury and encourage their own radicals – and was thus a significant contributing cause of the French Revolution. After the British surrender at Yorktown and the subsequent Peace of Paris in 1783, the Americans faced a period of severe economic distress while British exports to the colonies increased rapidly. In fact, the immediate economic effect of the Revolution was a decade in which British exports to the newly formed United States soared while imports from their former colonies drastically declined. It is hugely appropriate therefore that the publication date of Adam Smith's masterpiece was 1776 (the same year as the colonies' Declaration of Independence), as the economic lesson of the American Revolution was that a manufacturing and commercial giant does not need colonies to prosper. It can achieve the same gains through trade without the administrative burdens of empire. The British would continue to enjoy European hegemony, while the French slid into bankruptcy, revolution, Napoleonic dictatorship and final defeat in 1815.

From Independence to Federal Republic

In the meantime, it was anything but clear that the new nation would survive its infancy, as the very problem of federalism that the British had failed to solve now confronted the Americans. It was as if a group of branch offices had broken away from their central administration, formed a

new organization – and now needed to create their own head office. If they centralized, they were right back where they started; if they did not, they couldn't survive.

At first, the colonies were so jealous of their liberties that they created a central government incapable of governing. (Why else sacrifice tens of thousands of lives to the cause of liberty?) Actually, the new government that they first established was not a national government at all, but more like a military alliance – the closest contemporary equivalent being the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). It lacked any ability either to coerce or to tax. It could only request financial support from former colonies who now regarded themselves as separate sovereign states. When a patriot from Boston talked about fighting for his country, he did not mean the American nation, but Massachusetts.

After the war, the Americans experienced economic depression, weak national credit, a near worthless currency (“not worth a continental damn”) and financially unsound governments. They also had a national governmental charter, The Articles of Confederation, that could only be amended by unanimous consent of the member states.

Those who saw the need for a more powerful centralized government responded with the coup d'état that we know as the Constitutional Convention. The convention had been called to amend the Articles of Confederation – a process that required unanimous consent. Instead, the delegates, deliberating in total secrecy, quickly decided to scrap the Articles, and then to have their action validated not by the required unanimous vote, but by a two-thirds majority. They finally did obtain unanimous acceptance by twisting the arm of the final holdout. Rhode Island cried uncle when she was threatened with being taxed as if she were part of the union, but denied representation because of her refusal to ratify. (So much for taxation without representation.)

The Constitution was largely the product of a man who wasn't present at the convention. John Adams was currently serving as minister to Great Britain. While the federal constitution was indeed penned by James Madison, it was a virtual crib of the Massachusetts constitution written almost entirely by John Adams. This was the source of the bi-cameral legislature, the independent judiciary, and the strong executive. The document responded to the conundrum posed by Madison: “If men were angels, no government would be necessary. If angels were to govern men, neither external nor internal controls on government would be necessary. In framing a government which is to be administered by men over men, the great difficulty lies in this: you must first enable the government to control the governed; and in the next place oblige it to control itself.” (5). The new constitution solved this problem through a system of checks and balances – a separation of powers between the three branches of government and between the national and state governments. The scheme worked after a

fashion, but the issue of federalism would re-emerge repeatedly throughout American history: in the conflict over a strict versus loose interpretation of the constitution, in the nullification and states rights controversy in the Jackson administration, in the Civil War, during the civil rights struggle and in the Tea Party and militia movements of today.

It is interesting that part of the current ferment concerns militias and the right to bear arms, with its second amendment reference to the necessity for a "well-regulated militia." In fact, on the American side, the Revolution was fought by two sorts of combatants – the various local militias representing the Republican and decentralized principle of the citizen soldier, and a national professional army serving for pay – the Continentals. It was this national army that suffered with Washington and Hamilton during that terrible winter at Valley Forge, and that was drilled into a disciplined and effective fighting force by Baron von Steuben. It was the regular army officers and their supporters who would urge the need for an effective central authority both during the Revolution and afterwards. They, and the troops they commanded, had suffered grievously from the failure of Congress to adequately supply the American forces. They knew first hand the price that had been paid for the jealous localism and political ineptitude of the Continental Congress.

The story is told that, as Ben Franklin was exiting Independence Hall after the Constitution was signed, a lady approached him and asked: "Well, Doctor, what have we got, a republic or a monarchy?" With no hesitation Franklin responded, "An oligarchy, if you can support it." Yes, what he really said was: "A republic, if you can keep it." But wouldn't it be refreshing if he'd had the candor to identify the new government as an oligarchy worthy of support – arguably, the highest praise that can realistically be awarded to any government known to history.

The fact is that the United States has never been a democratic republic even though successful politicians must maintain the fiction of government by a people who have almost never displayed a wish to embrace the burdens of republican virtue. No, we don't really want to take charge of our government because to do so would require us to make the difficult choices and confront the inevitable dilemmas and limited options that reality imposes on our desires. No, we want BOTH enhanced government services AND a balanced budget, but with no increase in our taxes. Then, when government can't deliver on our contradictory demands, we blame the dishonest politicians who know better than to tell us the truths we refuse to hear. No, we do not really want to be in charge. With our government, as with our doctor, our lawyer and our banker, we want to be "in good hands." We want our dependency needs adequately met by others who will take care of us while making us feel autonomous. Or, as Don Marquis put it: "If you make people think they're thinking, they'll love you; but if you really make them think, they'll hate you." Every successful politician understands

that.

The new Constitution commended itself on the promise of a more competent government – a promise largely validated by the personal standing of the one indispensable man, George Washington. It is anything but clear that the document would have been accepted without his imprimatur and his willingness to serve as President in the new government. By contrast, France was just entering into its own revolutionary era as the Americans were domesticating theirs. They had no Washington – and this made at least some of the difference.

1789 to 1799: The French Revolution

What we call “the French Revolution” was not a single event, but a series of disruptions and negotiations by various factions whose interests were often in conflict, over the ten year period from 1789 to ‘99, culminating in the military dictatorship of Napoleon Bonaparte. Arguably, it was ultimately a tax payers revolt – the rising-up of those who paid taxes against those whose privileged status made them exempt. It may also be thought of as the revolt of a consultant and administrative class – of those who had actually been running the society all along – against the unwarranted privileges of those who were only nominally in charge.

On his deathbed in 1715, Louis XIV confessed to the five year old boy who was about to become his successor that he had been “too fond of war.” This was a gigantic understatement. His pointless military adventurism, along with his other extravagances, had bankrupted the nation. Further, the realm was afflicted with a tax structure in which the wealthiest five percent of the nation were virtually exempt from taxation. Finally, the government did not actually collect its own taxes, but contracted out tax collection to haut-bourgeois tax farmers who took much of the amount collected as their own profit. It would be as if the American government were to privatize the I.R.S. in its entirety while giving it the ability to independently determine the amount of taxes you owed based on how much could be extracted from you. Needless to say, tax collectors were not popular – and it was for his job as a tax collector that the great chemist, Lavoisier, went to the guillotine.

Things got no better with the reign of Louis XV who enjoyed an extravagant and financially irresponsible life at Versailles. He also eventually forgot his grandfather’s admonition and developed a taste for war himself – notably The Seven Years War, that lost France an empire. The problems continued in the reign of Louis XVI whose involvement in the American Revolution would complete the bankruptcy of the realm while providing Frenchmen with a revolutionary example that they would soon emulate.

Thus, by 1787, the state was unable to pay its debts. It had neither the means to raise more money nor the fiscal discipline to curb its spending.

The government of France was broke. When efforts to raise money from the aristocracy met with unsurprising failure, Louis was forced to summon the Estates General, an ancient institution that had not met for over a century and a half. Since it was an ancient institution that had always been dominated by the aristocracy, Louis didn't expect it to make much trouble. He was in for a surprise.

As so often the case in politics, the devil was in the details. The Estates General was composed of three separate bodies representing the Clergy, the Nobility, and the so-called "Third Estate" representing about ninety-five percent of the nation. It was agreed that the Third Estate would have six hundred members – equal to the combined total of the other two bodies. Thus everything depended on how the voting was counted. If it was done in the traditional way, with each house voting separately, then the aristocrats would control the show – just as they always had – and as "God had intended." However, if voting was by head, then the Third Estate, with its six hundred members (along with significant defections from liberal minded members of the other estates) would control all decisions. The king at first sided with the aristocrats, but the commoners insisted that the Aristocrats and Clergy meet with them in a single body declaring that, as the National Assembly, they were only legitimate voice of the nation. After they were joined by significant numbers of clergy and nobles, the king ordered the other estates to join them. This was the end of Divine Right Monarchy. France now had a limited monarchy, not all that different from that of England – and not a head had been chopped, nor a shot fired.

Historical crises sometimes bring forth great leaders. Sometimes, alas, they do nothing of the sort. In 1791, France needed a re-incarnation of Henry IV. What it got was Louis XVI – a pious, weak and foolish young man, dominated by a young queen whom he could neither satisfy nor control. Marie Antoinette was "badly educated, extravagant, and completely isolated in the artificial social world of Versailles." (6/379). The fact that she was an Austrian princess, the youngest daughter of Maria Theresa, was, to put it mildly, not helpful. When conciliation with the progressive forces was essential to avoid catastrophe, she and her friends at court effectively opposed the accommodation necessary to allow France to succeed as a constitutional monarchy.

One of my favorite of the many sayings attributed to Yogi Berra (who once protested that "I didn't say all of the things that I said.") is "When you reach a fork in the road, take it." Well, Louis had reached a fork in the road. He could have crushed the revolution, but then how would he obtain the financing that he required. Alternatively, he could have made his only really viable choice: embrace the revolution and lead it. If he had been really clever, he could have formed a political alliance with the proletariat of Paris, the sans-culottes, as a way of out-flanking the Bourgeois National Assembly – and then cut a deal with the moderate leaders of the Assembly.

This would have required a decisive political genius – a description that could never be applied to Louis. Instead, he dithered, vacillated and provoked the Paris mob with troop movements that they believed, correctly or not, were designed to intimidate the Assembly. The mob responded by marching on the Bastille, and forming the National Guard – commanded by Lafayette and loyal to the Assembly. The violence that would doom the limited monarchy had begun.

Meanwhile in the country, where eighty percent of Frenchmen lived and worked, word of the attack on the Bastille was accompanied by a belief that the aristocrats had hired brigands to destroy the crops in order to force the National Assembly to preserve the old regime. There was no such plot. However, in what came to be known as The Great Fear, mass hysteria spread throughout several districts of rural France where peasants went berserk and attacked the local nobility. “They attacked chateaux and broke into other buildings that might house a hoard of grain or the hated documents justifying collection of manorial dues. Some nobles voluntarily gave the peasants what they wanted; others saw their barns and archives burnt; a few were lynched... The Great Fear prompted the National assembly to abolish in law what the peasants were destroying in fact. On the evening of August 4, 1789, the deputies voted that taxation would be paid by all inhabitants of the kingdom in proportion to their revenues, and that public expenses would be borne equally by all. The clergy also gave up tithes <Manorial dues and courts were abolished>... The Assembly abolished the remnants of serfdom, forbade the sale of justice or of judicial office, and decreed that ‘all citizens, without distinction of birth, can be admitted to all ecclesiastical, civil, and military posts and dignities.’ The Old Regime was dead.” (6/382f.).

In the autumn of 1789, there were severe shortages of bread in Paris where workers were facing starvation while the queen and her pampered aristocrats were banqueting at Versailles. There is no evidence that Marie Antoinette actually said, “Let them eat cake,” but the story was widely reported in the Paris newspapers that enthusiastically denounced the queen. Finally, a mob of woman “marched from Paris to Versailles in the rain to demand bread. They disrupted the National Assembly and penetrated the palace where they might have lynched Marie Antoinette if she had not taken refuge with the king. The next day the women marched back to Paris, escorting the royal family, who took up residence in the Tuileries Palace. More important, the National Assembly also moved to Paris.” (6/383) where it composed the Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen. It also attempted to address the government’s financial crisis, as there were still no funds with which to run a government.

At the suggestion of the Bishop of Autun, better known today as Charles-Maurice Talleyrand, the Assembly ordered the confiscation of Church lands. They were to be sold to raise revenue and paper notes were

issued against this collateral. In this way, the financial crisis was temporarily solved. Of course, the clergy still needed to be paid, and so they were made salaried employees of the state. While the Vatican was hardly enthusiastic about this arrangement, the lesser clergy actually benefited because the state paid better than their former employers, the higher clergy who had been exploiting them mercilessly. Even the Pope didn't raise serious problems until the Assembly, in an excess of secularizing zeal, required an oath of allegiance from all members of the clergy. This was one of the great blunders of the Revolution – characteristic, in that it sprang from the Revolution's growing intolerance for divided loyalties: for anyone with less than fanatical devotion to the cause. The Pope forbade the taking of the oath and this forced the clergy to choose between Catholicism and France. In rural France, many sided with the Church, fermenting a bitter and totally unnecessary rural opposition to the cause of reform.

The Assembly completed its work in 1791 with the writing of a constitution for France that provided for a constitutional monarchy not fundamentally different from that enjoyed by England. More to the point, it was not very different from what would be the constitution of 1815 – imposed after the bloodbath of the Terror, the Europe-wide wars of the Revolution and the Napoleonic military dictatorship. If Louis had sincerely embraced the new regime, he could have been its leading figure – especially if he championed the rights of the Paris working class against the middle-class members of the Assembly whose interests were by no means identical. If he had done this, there would have been no European intervention, no Terror, and no Napoleon. As it turned out, while the peasants benefited from the permanent destruction of the feudal order, the two big losers would be the urban workers and, of course, Louis himself. But Louis gave reform only a half-hearted support that no one trusted, while foreign powers felt more and more threatened by Revolutionary France – and thus became more and more threatening to it. By failing to support the moderates in the Assembly, Louis played into the hands of radical republicans known as Jacobins who rapidly organized a nationwide network of political clubs. These were largely middle class professionals who joined with Paris workers to press for a total overthrow of the government and the creation of a republic. In the meantime, their aristocratic opponents fled to various countries of Europe where, as émigrés, they agitated for foreign military intervention to restore them to power.

In June 1791, Louis and Marie Antoinette attempted to flee France and join the émigrés in Austria. The couple was captured, understandably regarded as potential traitors, and placed under virtual house arrest in the Tuileries Palace. Their flight had doomed the prospects of constitutional monarchy and made a European war all but inevitable. The center had

failed to hold.

The failure of constitutional monarchy in France, would lead directly to two decades of European war, widespread persecution at home, the deaths of the king and queen and many others, and then to the military dictatorship of Napoleon. All this would have to be endured before the country finally settled down, in 1815, to the constitutional monarchy that the royal family had refused to accept.

Sensing the hostility of the European monarchies, the Assembly decided to declare war on Austria on April 20, 1792. Curiously, this decision was favored both by the Assembly moderates and by the king because each mistakenly believed that a war would advance their own political position. It was opposed by Robespierre because he feared that it would end in a military dictatorship. He was correct; this war would launch the military career of an obscure junior officer named Napoleon Bonaparte. In any event, as the war was going badly for France – Paris itself seemed threatened with foreign occupation – the radical Jacobins, the party of Robespierre, ousted the Paris municipal government by force and set up the Paris commune in its place. The next day they attacked the Tuileries, killed the King's Swiss guards while the king and his family took refuge with the National Assembly. An interim national government was setup under Georges Danton and the royal family was imprisoned to await their fate. Their prospects were not improved by the discovery of documents in the king's possession proving that he was in league with the enemies of the Republic.

The period of Danton's interim government was extremely tense. France was faced with the advance of Prussian troops toward Paris, escalating inflation at home, good reason to suspect that the king was betraying military secrets to the enemy and a barrage of inflammatory rhetoric from the pen of Jean-Paul Marat. Danton was urging French patriots to exercise ever more boldness. "In Paris, boldness took the form of the September Massacres, mass killings of supposed traitors and enemy agents made possible by the collapse of normal police authority. For five days...mobs moved from prison to prison...held impromptu courts and summary executions...The number of victims exceeded a thousand...The September Massacres foreshadowed the Terror to come." (6/386). Under the circumstances, it is not surprising that the new government was to be dominated by the radical Jacobins led by Maximilien Robespierre and his Committee of Public Safety.

The king was tried, found guilty of treason and executed. In July, Marat was murdered in his bath by Charlotte Corday who saw herself as a later-day Joan of Arc delivering France from Jacobin radicalism. However, by then an armed Parisian mob had already forced the Legislature to arrest its moderate members and send them to the guillotine. The Reign of Terror had begun. Robespierre's Committee of Public Safety would administer

what he described as “swift, severe and inflexible justice” that would claim the lives of nearly twenty thousand men and women. Proof of disloyalty was not required. People were denounced and condemned on mere suspicion of dissent, defeatism – or even a lack of fervor called “moderatism.” The rule of the incorruptible and his Paris mob would tolerate nothing but the intense patriotism of the one hundred percent French Republican. Anything less was punishable by death. The Terror raged out of control for about a year from mid-1793 to mid-1794. The various examples of mob violence culminating in The Terror are just one manifestation of the sheer intense emotionality of the Revolutionary decade as exemplified by a catchy marching tune that first became popular in Marseilles and from there became the Ave Maria of the religion of republican nationalism. It perfectly embodies the sort of masochistic eroticism of the fervent patriot willing to live and, above all, die for his country:

Allons enfants de la Patrie
Le jour de gloire est arrivé !
Contre nous de la tyrannie
L'étendard sanglant est levé
Entendez-vous dans nos campagnes
Mugir ces féroces soldats?
Ils viennent jusque dans vos bras.
Égorger vos fils, vos compagnes!
Aux armes citoyens
Formez vos bataillons
Marchons, marchons
Qu'un sang impur
Abreuve nos sillons

One day, Bertrand Russell was out walking with a friend when, passing a church, they heard the beautiful music of its choir. The friend suggested that they go in and listen. Russell refused explaining that religious music aroused in him emotions that his mind could not approve. I feel much the same way hearing the [La Marseillaise](#) – especially in that famous scene in *Casablanca*. Whose blood is so cold as not to be stirred by that evocation of love of and sacrifice for the fatherland? Who is not persuaded to believe that war waged by a free citizenry in arms is not more noble and idealistic than a mercenary army killing for pay? It is a value that we dare not question – and yet it must be questioned because it has motivated immense human suffering and strife.

This was the marching anthem not of the mercenary troops of the day but of a nation in arms – a time when men would fight not for honor and loot, but for love of country. In 1793, the Republic, to counter the

overwhelming military superiority of the multinational forces arrayed against it, instituted the levee en masse – a military conscription of all bachelors and widowers between the ages of eighteen and twenty-five. In addition, the entire civilian population was mobilized: “The young men shall go to battle; the married men shall forge arms and transport provisions; the women shall make tents and clothes, and shall serve in the hospitals; the children shall turn old linens into lint; the old men shall repair to the public places, to stimulate the courage of the warriors and preach the unity of the Republic and hatred of kings.” (7/40).

The era of total war had arrived in Europe. Alas, when wars were fought by mercenaries, there were fewer casualties – because mercenaries were expensive, and one couldn’t afford to waste them. By contrast, wars of idealistic nationalism, galvanizing the entire nation-in-arms, exhibit the mass destruction of total war. This endemic horror began with the French Revolution and continued with the American Civil War culminating in the total wars of the twentieth century.

However, this complete commitment, aided by divisions among the Republic’s opponents, succeeded in neutralizing the military threat. One might imagine that The Terror would be relaxed as the military situation eased. However, Robespierre was a sincere idealist. Rather than relaxing the Terror, he intensified it.

An idealist is a person who really believes that it is a compliment to be described as “uncompromising.” Most of the time, idealism is either ignored or merely serves as a cloak for pragmatic motives. However, sometimes idealists genuinely prevail – and multitudes die. And so, the France of Robespierre was to be an idealistic utopia – a Republic of Virtue that demanded “superhuman devotion to duty... During the first half of 1794, Robespierre pressed the Terror so relentlessly that even members of the Committee of Public Safety... began to fear that they would be the next victims” (6/389). Clearly anyone could be executed at whim.

Finally, his colleagues, fearing for their own safety, executed Robespierre and his followers allowing a final utilization of the guillotine to end the Reign of Terror and the Jacobin tyranny. In what is known as the Thermidorean Reaction, the moderate men of property took control of the government and turned its governance over to a five-man committee known as the Directorate which would rule until 1799. It was corrupt and self-serving and generally unpopular; and no one was all that upset when it was overthrown by the realization of one of Robespierre’s saner fears – the military dictatorship of Napoleon Bonaparte.

1799 to 1815 – Napoleon

In 1848, Marx and Engels famously proclaimed that a “specter is haunting Europe.” They were correct, except that it was not the specter of communism, but the ghost of Napoleon Bonaparte. Two years before

Napoleon's death, Archbishop Richard Whately had responded to David Hume's essay on miracles with an essay entitled "Historical doubts relative to Napoleon Bonaparte." The good bishop argued, with his tongue only somewhat lodged in his cheek, that if one were to apply Hume's criteria for credibility to the career of Napoleon Bonaparte, one could only conclude that it provided a narrative far too improbable for belief. Thus, it was only reasonable to doubt that such an apparition had ever existed. Hegel found in Napoleon his model for the "world historic individual" toward whom the limits of ordinary morality were inapplicable. Well, in the life of the emperor, there was certainly much that was improbable – and certainly more that violated the maxims of morality, not to speak of civility. However, alas, Napoleon really did exist – and what a nuisance he proved to be.

Meteoric Rise

Napoleon was always ambitious. As a boy, he once imagined that he would make his name as a writer of fiction. Less surprising was his youthful hero-worship of Alexander the Great, Julius Caesar and Charlemagne. He was born on the tiny, provincial and impoverished island of Corsica just after Corsica was defeated in its bid for independence from France. His parents were Corsican freedom fighters and minor nobles. After defeat, some Corsican rebels went into the mountains to wage a romantic, hopeless, guerilla struggle against French rule. Napoleon's father chose instead to become a lawyer and a collaborator – gaining favor with the French regime and a place in the French Corsican legislature. On a visit to Versailles, he obtained a scholarship for his son that would provide Napoleon with the French education that would be the springboard for his military career. However, the young Napoleon remained an anti-French Corsican outsider who neither accepted nor was accepted by his French peers. Indeed, he never respected his father for accepting French rule in Corsica. It would appear that the elder Bonaparte was an accommodating realist who liked to live comfortably, rather than a seeker after greatness and glory – a man perhaps not unlike Charles-Maurice Talleyrand, whom we will meet later.

Napoleon emerged from his French military education as an artillery officer at age sixteen. He learned his trade and became an excellent company officer. However, in a society that valued birth over ability, his prospects for advancement were blocked by his humble origins. Then in 1789, when he was twenty years old, this world of privilege was toppled. Not only was advancement to be by merit, but, with Revolutionary France at war with all of Europe and aristocratic officers fleeing the country, there was an opportunity for rapid advancement that Napoleon could exploit.

His first opportunity came at the age of twenty-four when there was an insurrection in Toulon, supported by a British fleet. He devised the plan that defeated the insurrection and was promoted to Brigadier General. Two

years later, when there was a royalist uprising against the National Assembly in Paris, Napoleon was one of the few competent commanders on hand and he ruthlessly put down the uprising using cannon against the Paris mob. For this he was promoted to full General at the age of twenty-six. Within ten years, he would be Emperor of France.

While in Paris, Napoleon had obtained the patronage of the Director Paul Barras as well as the hand in marriage of the Director's former mistress, Josephine de Beauharnais. Barras arranged for Napoleon to command the army of Italy. In this, his first command, Napoleon took over a tattered and destitute force and rehabilitated it into a fighting machine that defeated the Austrian forces without losing a single battle. Upon his own authority, he dictated peace between France and Austria and returned to Paris in triumph in 1797. Two years later, he would overthrow the Directory.

In the meantime, he embarked on an invasion of Egypt hoping thereby to disrupt British trade routes to India. After an initial success, his fleet was destroyed by Admiral Nelson. The Egyptian campaign was a military disaster, but that isn't the way that Napoleon portrayed it in his reports to France. It will be recalled that as a young man Napoleon had aspired to the writing of fiction. Not for the last time would he create a fictitious hero named Napoleon – a sufficiently convincing portrait that he was then able to abandon his forces in Egypt and return to Paris to a hero's welcome in time to join a plot to topple the French government. In what was essentially a military coup d'état, Napoleon emerged at the head of what was called a Consulate – but was effectively a military dictatorship.

Domestic Reform

The old regime was a society in which the privileged few contributed little to the society, exploiting the vast majority who actually performed its tasks, and feeling justified by the accident of their aristocratic birth. Ultimately, the point was not inequality, as nothing like equality was ever achieved, but the fact that this aristocracy of birth contributed nothing to justify the rewards of its position. The system that would emerge would not be egalitarianism, but meritocracy. While the society as a whole was certainly exploitive, the monarchy was overthrown not because it was oppressive, but because it was incompetent. Its tax collection was so inefficient that it was lucky if it was able to realize sixty-five percent of the total collected by its tax farmers. It was totally unable to control its bureaucracy and didn't even possess a comprehensive or intelligible budget. Its military was commanded by incompetents chosen by aristocratic rank, while its public offices were sold to raise revenue. Its legal system was a hodgepodge of conflicting and arbitrary rules that were administered by judges who delivered value for money. Remember that the original calling of the Estates-General was provoked by insolvency. What was needed was

not a liberator, but an administrator – and Napoleon was nothing if not a superb and diligent administrator.

While some progress had been made, the government that Napoleon took over in 1799, was still a mess. Much effort would be needed in the area of domestic reform. However, this could not be attempted without at least a temporary pacification of Europe – and France was still at war with Austria and England. So, like Hannibal of Carthage in ancient times, Napoleon crossed the Alps. Admittedly, he rode a prosaically sure-footed mule rather than the white charger depicted in the iconic portrait by David. [\(Plate A\)](#) Nonetheless, this was a most impressive achievement which enabled him to attack and utterly defeat the Austrians at Marengo in Northern Italy. As a result of this victory, both the English and the Austrians stopped fighting – and Europe knew peace for the first time since the overthrow of the French monarchy.

Napoleon could now attend to French domestic concerns. He further consolidated his power becoming First Consul for life and then initiated a vast program of domestic reform. He instituted an impressive program of public works in Paris, provided the country with a centralized governmental bureaucracy, a new system of public education, a national bank, a revived economy and, of course, the Napoleonic Code, reformulating French law in a way that still survives. He believed firmly in meritocracy in both military and civilian life. However, he didn't particularly value political freedom – especially the freedom to oppose his policies. His was an efficient autocratic police state notable for the effectiveness of its secret police spy system, administered by Fouché. He gave France the ultimate enlightened despotism – and enjoyed immense popularity in doing so.

Imperial Overreach

Britain has always opposed the rise of any hegemonic power on the European continent. As Sir Humphrey puts it in *Yes Minister*, “Britain has had the same foreign policy objective for at least the last five hundred years: to create a disunited Europe. In that cause, we have fought with the Dutch against the Spaniards, with the Germans against the French, with the French and Italians against the Germans and with the French against the Germans and Italians.” I would only add that they also fought in the cold war with the Americans, Germans, French and others against the Russians. What is suggested is that any attempt to establish a stable hegemony in Europe entails war with Great Britain. Thus it was in 1803. Napoleon had either to negotiate a peace with the European powers and Britain – forging something like the concert of Europe that would emerge after his defeat in 1815 – or he had to conquer Britain. Knowing our man as we do, it is easy to predict his choice – a choice that would cause hundreds of thousands of lives to be sacrificed in a totally pointless endeavor.

By 1803, Europe was at peace and Napoleon was uncontested ruler of France. The French army dominated the continent as the British navy ruled the seas. France was, at this time, an agricultural economy, while England was an industrial and commercial giant. Talleyrand sought peace with England and opposed French expansionism. Napoleon rejected his Foreign Minister's advice, opting instead for a war of conquest. He envisioned an invasion of England and what he called the "Continental System" – a diplomatic blockade of England designed to crush her economy while stimulating French manufactures.

In May, 1803, England declared war. Two years later, Napoleon was planning to cross the channel and invade England with 2,000 ships and 200,000 troops. Nevertheless, the French fleet was just no match for the royal navy. By August, he realized that the power of the royal navy would frustrate any attempt to cross the Chanel. Well before Trafalgar, he ordered the troops who had been massed on the coast for the invasion to reverse course and march against Austria and Russia. Napoleon first attacked the Austrians at Ulm on the Danube and destroyed half the Austrian army opening the road to Vienna which he occupied in November 1805. However, a month earlier, his nemesis from the Egyptian campaign, Admiral Lord Nelson, caught and destroyed the French fleet at Trafalgar. England would never be invaded by the French. In November, the Russian and Austrian forces finally united in a fighting force that outnumbered the French. Napoleon chose to make his stand at Austerlitz where he defeated the combined forces in a battle in which the Russians were personally commanded by Czar Alexander I. The Austrians sued for peace. Six months later he decisively defeated the Prussians and triumphantly marched through Berlin. However, he was still opposed by England and Russia.

Against England, he erected an economic blockade, the so-called Continental System, by which nations ruled by or allied with France were forbidden to trade with England. England retaliated in kind with measures that violated the rights of neutral nations and involved it in the War of 1812 with the United States. Meanwhile, Napoleon moved against Russia whose forces he defeated with massive casualties on both sides. In June 1807, Tsar Alexander traveled to Tilsit, met with Napoleon (now himself an emperor) and formed an alliance.

A few years earlier, in December 1804, in the Notre Dame Cathedral in Paris, in the presence of the Pope, Napoleon had placed an imperial crown on his own head and crowned Josephine as empress. He also wanted to secure the succession, but Josephine was not able to give him a son. Accordingly, five years later, he would divorce Josephine and marry the Arch-Duchess Marie-Louise, daughter of the Hapsburg Emperor of Austria, who promptly gave him a male infant whom Napoleon dubbed King of Rome.

So much for love – or at least marriage. Let us return to war. After Tilsit, Napoleon thought that he had in Alexander a reliable friend and ally. He forgot the old proverb of Russia's neighbors that after one shakes hands with the Russian bear, one must be sure to count one's fingers. Alexander had no intention of complying with the restrictions of the Continental System.

Napoleon had now reached his zenith with an empire stretching from the Atlantic Ocean to the Russian steppes; from the North Sea to the Mediterranean. The Corsican scholarship boy had come a very long way indeed by age thirty-eight. It was the greatest empire since Rome. Dreaming of uniting all of Europe under French rule, he invaded Spain – attempting to enforce the economic blockade against England that the Spaniards were violating. He thus involved himself in the Iberian Peninsula War that would begin his downfall, triggering a nationalistic uprising and guerilla action against French troops, as captured in the paintings of Goya. [\(Plate B\)](#) Indeed, the term 'guerilla war' dates from this conflict which raged indecisively for five years. At the same time, negotiations with Russia over trade with England broke down and, in Spring, 1812, the French Grand Army, some six hundred thousand strong, invaded Russia. First the Russian summer, then the costly Battle of Borodino and the burning of Moscow, and finally the Russian winter totally destroyed the French forces. The retreat from Moscow was horrible beyond words as soldiers fought a losing battle against bitter cold, hunger and disease while the Russians harassed them, tearing at the scattered remnants of the French forces like a predator mauling the remains of a wounded animal. Fewer than one in five soldiers returned safely to France. A half million men had been lost.

Astonishingly, Napoleon's reaction was not to sue for peace, but to raise another army to fight on. Like an addicted gambler, Napoleon went for one more roll of the dice to turn his luck around. However, this time he was opposed by an alliance of all of the European powers whose newfound unity of purpose guaranteed defeat. Napoleon was hopelessly outnumbered, lost another four hundred thousand men, but still fought on. Finally, the allies invaded France itself and entered Paris on March 31, 1814. Napoleon's marshals had finally had enough – and refused to fight on. Napoleon abdicated and attempted suicide. He was exiled to Elba where the victorious allies, perhaps in mockery, granted him the title of Emperor of the Isle of Elba which was within sight of Corsica.

Now the victorious allies were faced with the task of pacifying Europe. They had restored the Bourbon monarchy in France in the person of Louis XVIII. When the ineptitude of the royal family made it unpopular, Napoleon escaped from Elba and returned to France to popular acclaim. This act interrupted the Congress of Vienna and the European powers formed an overwhelming coalition led by the Duke of Wellington that

decisively defeated Napoleon at Waterloo. This time Napoleon was imprisoned for the remainder of his life on Saint Helena where he fulfilled a youthful ambition to write fiction. The resulting *Memoirs Of The History Of France During The Reign Of Napoleon* – gave birth to the Napoleonic legend that would haunt Europe throughout the nineteenth century.

A World Restored

After the collapse of the vast Napoleonic Empire, it was necessary to re-organize a European political system, re-draw national boundaries, distribute the spoils of victory, decide who would govern countries, and, above all, establish peace in Europe after more than a generation of warfare. This was the task of the Congress of Vienna that ended in 1815. Its pacification of Europe was an exercise of real-politic so successful that the major powers avoided any war between themselves until the Crimean War during the 1850s and postponed another European-wide conflict until 1914.

France entered the conference as the defeated power and was represented by Charles-Maurice Talleyrand. The conference was hosted by Austrian Foreign Secretary Klemens von Metternich. Great Britain was represented first by Foreign Minister Castlereagh and subsequently by the Duke of Wellington. Tsar Alexander I personally led the Russian delegation. At first France was excluded from the consultations of the four victorious powers (Britain, Austria, Russia and Prussia.) Talleyrand's first challenge was to get France a seat at the table of major powers where all of the decision-making would take place. He achieved this by exploiting a dispute over Tsar Alexander's plan for Russian domination of Poland and Prussian possession of Saxony. This issue became so heated that there seemed the real possibility that a new European war would break out between Britain and Austria against Russia and Prussia. Talleyrand proposed a response that would seem likely to inflame the crisis, but actually provided the incentive for compromise. At his instigation Austria and England signed a secret alliance against Russia and Prussia. They then leaked the secret agreement – which was largely a bluff. The Tsar backed down, and a reasonable compromise was achieved. What else was achieved was that Talleyrand was now a full member of the inner circle of the great powers even though he represented the defeated nation whose fate was to be decided by the victorious forces.

The primary objective of the Congress was to make peace – specifically, to prevent a repetition of French aggression. It did this by redrawing the map of Europe in such a way that France was surrounded by states with defensible borders, and also by treating France generously. It thus avoided the poison of national humiliation and grievance that would be inflicted on France after the Franco-Prussian War and on Germany after World War I. France would have no motivation for a politics of resentment

and revenge. Further, what emerged out of the Congress was a system that came to be regarded as the “Concert of Europe,” by which international disputes were to be resolved with negotiated arrangements acceptable to the five great powers and guaranteed by them as the status quo powers. In short, an attitude of internationalism and an aspiration for stability replaced that of international hooliganism – and Europe was to know a prolonged peace during which it reached a level of prosperity mankind had never known.

It was once fashionable to criticize the Congress of Vienna as the work of reactionary cynics. That changed as we absorbed the lessons of the next great international peace conference – the one at Versailles at which the idealistic Woodrow Wilson represented the United States and which ended the “war to end all wars” in a way that guaranteed the total horror of World War II and the success of the Third Reich in Germany. Let’s offer at least two cheers for the intelligent conduct of real-politic.

Meanwhile in America

In 1789, America acquired a constitution but was yet not a nation so much as a national aspiration. It was still a collection of thirteen un-united sovereignties clinging precariously to a narrow strip of seaboard in a vast continental territory under the control of hostile forces. Its survival was by no means guaranteed.

The “primary problems of Washington’s first administration were fiscal <and it will be remembered that it was precisely financial insolvency that had doomed the French monarchy and precipitated the French Revolution. From the government of the Confederation, Washington inherited> nothing but a dozen clerks with their pay in arrears, an empty treasury, and a burden of debt... There were no new taxes or requisitions coming in, and no machinery for collecting taxes. <What he did have was Alexander Hamilton as Secretary of the Treasury. Hamilton recommended that the> foreign debt and floating domestic debt should be funded at par, and due provision should be made by import duties and excise taxes to pay the interest and gradually repay the principal. The war debts of the states should be assumed by the federal government ...<and> a Bank of the United States on the model of the Bank of England <should be created. The foreign debt was entirely paid off by the end of 1795; the domestic debt, despite the War of 1812, was liquidated in 1835. Hamilton> had turned dead paper into marketable securities <selling above par on European markets at a remarkable interest rate of 6%> and provided for their redemption by taxes that the nation was well able to bear... His youthful country, so lately on the verge of bankruptcy, acquired a credit such as few nations of Europe enjoyed.” (4/317ff.).

Though Hamilton’s policies were incredibly successful, they

disproportionately benefited the Northern urban ‘money men,’ as opposed to the Southern agriculturalists. This intensified a conflict that would provoke Jefferson to lead a new political party, thus bringing to America the very spirit of faction that the founders of the nation had hoped to avoid. The conflict about the fundamental nature of the republic – whether agricultural, decentralized and rural as opposed to commercial, centralized and urban – would ultimately culminate in the Civil War and in the current Tea Party movement – another case of history repeating itself first as tragedy and then as farce.

Fiscal stability was the positive achievement of the Federalist administrations of Washington and John Adams. Not unrelated, and perhaps more difficult, was the negative accomplishment of a couple of decades of peace. Washington and Adams had the moral fortitude to resist the clamor of the mob for war with either France or England – both of whom offered sufficient provocation for a military conflict that would have been catastrophic for America. The foreign policy crisis was caused by the French Revolution and the subsequent hostility between France and most of Europe described above. It will be remembered that during the American Revolution, we entered into a military alliance with France that allowed our revolution to be successful. France was, as it were, “present at the creation.” And so, Secretary of State Jefferson argued that we were obligated to support republican France against England. Instead, President Washington accepted the Hamiltonian position that our treaty obligation, which had been to the defunct monarchy, was no longer in force.

Washington prudently decided that we would remain neutral. However, as both belligerents attempted to destroy the commerce of the other with clashing trade embargoes, the rights of neutral nations were flagrantly violated. Ships were seized and, in the case of the British, American merchantmen were impressed under a claim, not without foundation, that they were deserters from the British navy. When President Adams, first attempted to negotiate with the French government, Talleyrand’s representatives (later identified in a message to Congress as X, Y and Z) demanded a bribe – a very familiar European diplomatic practice and one at which Talleyrand excelled. The American refusal of the bribe was embellished in our patriotic lore as “Millions for defense, but not one cent for tribute.” – a reply that, if it had been made, would have caused hilarity in France as both the Washington and Adams administrations were paying regular tributes to the Barbary pirates as the price for commercial safety. It would seem that our founding fathers were quite willing to negotiate with terrorists. The bribes were refused because there was no guarantee that they would in fact achieve a diplomatic solution to the conflict. Later, with war fever in America at its peak, Adams received word that Napoleon, who was now ruling France, was open to negotiation. Adams successfully avoided a war that would have been a disaster for the United States. Since, in a

democracy, no good deed goes unpunished, preserving the peace contributed to Adams' defeat by Jefferson in 1800. Well, to be fair, the Alien and Sedition Acts weren't much of a help either.

Jefferson entered office as the original small government man – a strict constructionist with a very narrow view of the “necessary and proper” clause of the Constitution. Fortunately, for the country, while his principles called for rigid limitations on executive power, he had a very flexible stance toward the application of his own principles when circumstances made them inexpedient. In short, Jefferson was not a fool. Not only did he leave Federalist policies, including Hamilton's financial program, largely as he found them. He also totally discarded all notions of strict construction in what was the greatest achievement of his presidency.

It was vital to the economy of the Western states to have commercial access to New Orleans. However, New Orleans was controlled by France – and thus American trade was subject to disruption. Jefferson was attempting to negotiate with France for trading rights, when Napoleon suddenly offered to sell him all of Louisiana. Napoleon was willing to do this because he needed money and also because his grandiose plan for an imperial presence in the Americas had foundered on successful slave uprisings in Haiti where French troops were being decimated by Haitian guns and yellow fever. He also realized that Louisiana was really indefensible and that the Americans could simply march in and take it anytime they wished. Of course, there was absolutely nothing in any strict reading of the text of the Constitution that gave the President the right to purchase new territory. So the Republicans blithely adopted the Federalist doctrine of implied powers, and promptly sealed the bargain before Napoleon changed his mind, thus doubling the size of the country.

In the term of the second Republican president, James Madison, the war to assert American rights as a non-belligerent finally broke out. The most famous battle in that conflict was the Battle of New Orleans which made Andrew Jackson a national hero, and ultimately a President. Ironically, that battle took place several weeks after John Quincy Adams had concluded peace in Ghent – an unnecessary battle in an unnecessary war. In fact, the American justification for hostilities was a series of British Orders in Council that authorized such outrages as the impressment of American seamen. On June 16, 1812. Foreign Minister Castlereagh announced that the orders would be suspended. Unfortunately, there was no trans-Atlantic cable at the time. Ignorant of what had occurred in England, Congress declared for war two days later.

As indicated above, the war was ostensibly fought to defend the rights of American merchant shipping. Thus, one might expect that support for the war would come from the maritime interests of New England. Actually, they were opposed to the war. Although they faced great risks, they were also making handsome profits. No, the war fever emanated from the South

and the West where maritime trade was unknown. There, it was motivated by a lust for land – specifically for Florida and Canada. The Westerners really seemed to believe that they would be able to conquer Canada and add it to the United States. As it turned out, England viewed the American war as a side show to its conflict with Napoleonic France. Having handily bested America militarily, England defeated Napoleon, and generously settled with the Americans on the basis of status quo ante bellum. Out of the war, we got the presidency of Andrew Jackson and we put new lyrics to an old drinking song to get a national anthem. It isn't stirring; it isn't singable – but it is ours, and we are stuck with it.

In the 1820s, a revolution that had broken out in Spain was put down by France, Austria and Russia. George Canning, the British foreign Secretary was concerned that the re-installed Spanish government would also attempt to recover the Latin American republics that had successfully shaken off the Spanish yoke. Britain was solicitous of the independence of these states because they were sources of a lucrative British trade with the Americas. Accordingly, Canning approached the United States proposing a joint declaration that no attempt to re-capture the break-away republics would be tolerated. His proposal was supported by two former presidents – Jefferson and Madison – but opposed by Secretary of State, John Quincy Adams. On Adams' advice, President Monroe rejected Canning's proposal and instead issued his own declaration that the Western Hemisphere was now closed to further colonization. Thus, the Monroe Doctrine, became the centerpiece of American policy in the Western Hemisphere.

Of course, while Adams was willing to bravely go it alone in issuing the declaration, he was well aware that it would have been an empty gesture had it not been backed by the awesome power of the British navy. Still, it was an apt symbol of the fact that the new nation, which in 1789 had been precariously clinging to the Eastern seaboard of a vast continent, was now a durable polity ready to exert its influence on the world's stage. Far from clinging to the seaboard, the nation now occupied a land mass that was larger than many of the countries of Europe – with what it viewed as a manifest destiny to dominate not just the continent, but a hemisphere.

A Cultural Note

The revolutionary changes of our period were reflected in the art, music and, with one notable exception, the literature of the time. In fine art, the decorative sensuousness of Boucher ([Plate C](#)) yielded to the heroic austerity of David. ([Plate D](#)) We were no longer to enjoy luscious bosoms and delicate skin, but were to be stirred to virtuous zeal by depictions of the noble heroes of the Roman Republic. “The strumpet Color gave place to Line and Form, always ladies of virtue.” (9/145). In music, the rococo delicacy and restraint of Mozart would yield to the bold, and sometimes

bombastic heroism of Beethoven. Here Mozart's Don Giovanni, in his heroic refusal to recant, is something of a transitional figure – combining the heroism of the era of Beethoven and Napoleon in his refusal to repent with the unapologetic Rococo hedonism of Boucher.

In literature, the great Romantic is Goethe. It seems to me fitting that in an early work that might well qualify him for a dubious achievement award, he practically single-handedly invented adolescence as a stage of life in the character of young Werther. Literary history records that the author came to regret this work which inspired a wave of suicides all over Europe. I confess an anti-Romantic bias here: I tend to be very skeptical of Romantic idealism with its temptation to transcendence, declaimed in what Bernard Shaw once mocked as “the noble attitude and the thrilling voice.” (10) In fact, I am reminded of my college days many years long ago. The long walk across campus between classes caused me to be frequently late for one of my classes. At one point, I explained this to my professor who assured me that he hadn't taken offence – and that, indeed, he had experienced my chronic lateness as “romantic.” His remark confused me until I recalled a recent class in which he had asserted that “romantic” is a synonym for “self-defeating.”

Goethe's masterpiece represents the central article of faith of the entire Romantic movement of the nineteenth century – reflecting the relentless and insatiable ambition of its greatest hero, Napoleon Bonaparte. Its depiction of the struggle for the soul of Faust is a celebration of the agonistic view of human life. “If Mephistopheles can satisfy Faust's desires and ambitions to the point that Faust can say to that fulfillment, ‘Linger awhile – thou art so fair,’ then Mephistopheles will have won his wager both with Faust and God, and will win Faust's soul...Goethe's emphasis is on that aspect of man that makes him never content – it is man's nature never to be satisfied but to feel a compulsion to strive on and on...any man is lost at the point when he becomes entirely satisfied...At the age of 100...<Faust> dies of natural causes...Faust's never-ceasing striving and endeavor have saved him...and he is born off to Heaven...He who strives is never lost. That is Goethe's central message in this monumental work which represents the best thought of sixty years of his life.” (11/191ff.).

By contrast, the leading British novelist of the time didn't deign to notice the antics of the Emperor Napoleon and the other boisterous Frenchmen. Jane Austen concentrated instead on the pride of Darcy and the caddishness of Wickham in their courtship of Elizabeth Bennet. Because she confined her attention to the lowly domesticity of her own neighborhood, she failed to write classic fiction as Goethe did. (Here, I am defining a ‘classic’ as a book that we all want to have read, but really have no desire to read. Jane Austen can still be read for pleasure. By contrast, has anyone ever read Faust except as an academic reading assignment?)

Actually, very few of us really lose much sleep over the great moral and political questions of our day. The issues that cause genuine discomfort are those that affect our immediate well being, or personal slights that hurt our feelings and puncture our affectations. In response to the public issues of the day, most of us take them as seriously as we take religion. We read a newspaper or watch a newscast just as we go to church. We pay it a decent obeisance and then go on with our lives. It is true that some of us indulge in often vituperative contention over social issues. To some extent, politics serves the educated in the same way that sports serve working class males. They give us something to opine and argue about – sometimes very energetically. Indeed, I have been struck by the similarity in the tenor of arguments about sports and politics. In both cases we tend to be more confidently opinionated than is justified by our knowledge and more strident than is warranted by our personal investment in the outcome – as well as more self-important than seems appropriate given that very few people really care what we think.

Of course, the fact that our political discussions tend not to be serious does not mean that public questions are unimportant. No one with the slightest historical memory could sanely make such a claim. One only needs to think of the victims of war, oppression and mass violence – as well as the beneficiaries of governmental social programs. Nevertheless, there is a radical disconnect between the infantile tone of our political discourse and the very important consequences involved. I can think of two reasons for this. First, there is the fact that most of us doubt that we are the ones who really decide political questions. Further, the “leading questions of the day” are almost never those that will turn out to be most significant – and the significant questions are devilishly difficult to identify, monstrously complicated and thus almost never widely discussed. So what are our discussions all about? They are acts of community. Like the Greek chorus, we comment on the action being performed on the stage by actors who are themselves puppets of the gods carrying out the roles assigned to them by the sweep of history.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I am reminded of Anna Russell’s observation at the end her narration of Wagner’s Ring Cycle: “And we are right back to where we started more than twenty hours ago!” Well, we began this exploration in 1763 when England was the hegemonic power and France was a monarchy. We conclude in 1815 with England as the hegemonic power and France as a monarchy. So are we right back to where we started half a century ago? Not quite. For one thing, by 1815, France has become a limited monarchy – as it was in 1791 before all of the slaughter – and the United States is a viable independent nation. More fundamentally, in Europe a permanent paradigm shift, which had been evolving for centuries, has finally

solidified. Advancement and power would now be based on merit (however uneven the playing field) rather than on birth and hereditary privilege. In America, this was not the issue as meritocracy had been reasonably established in the British colonies long before independence was declared. Thus, class remains the lingering issue in Europe to this day, while in America we are struggling with federalism.

Both Maximillien Robespierre and Napoleon Bonaparte were idealistic dreamers driven by sincere desires to make the world a better place than mankind had ever known – incorruptible men who dreamed impossible dreams. By contrast, Charles-Maurice Talleyrand was a corrupt and cynical realist. Between them, Napoleon and Robespierre brought untold death, destruction and disorder to Europe; while Talleyrand, along with that other cynical realist, Klemens von Metternich, imposed at Vienna in 1815 a European pacification that would last until the twentieth century – a time when political idealism and military adventurism came back into vogue.

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- A. [David; Napoleon Crossing the Alps](#)
- B. [Goya; The Third of May 1808](#)
- C. [Boucher; The Toilet of Venus \(1751\)](#)
- D. [David; Oath of the Horatii](#)