

## Revolutionary Diplomacy and the Franco-American Treaties of 1778

Tadashi ARUGA

IT IS an irony of history that the independence of the liberal democratic United States was greatly facilitated by financial and military aid from the ancien régime of France. But such a course of events was exactly what the advocates of American independence had anticipated. Indeed, a major motive in their decision to declare independence was their desire to secure foreign assistance. The diplomacy of the American Revolution was neither revolutionary nor idealistic.

James H. Hutson, author of a recent monograph, aptly criticized Felix Gilbert's characterization of the American revolutionary diplomacy as a "new diplomacy in the 18th century."<sup>1</sup> Although revolutionary diplomacy contained new and liberal elements both in symbols and ideas, such as Franklin's simple clothes and the principle of liberal trade relations, these elements were shrewd diplomatic gestures or products of a realistic calculation of American interests. Besides, Gilbert overlooked the most significant fact about the diplomacy of the American Revolution: the paradox that what he considered "new diplomacy" was actually effective upon practitioners of mercantilist power politics, but not at all upon those who believed in the coming of a new international order.

Emphasizing that revolutionary Americans were well versed in European power politics, Hutson, too, failed to note a paradox in their

<sup>1</sup> Hutson, *John Adams and the Diplomacy of the American Revolution* (Lexington, Ky., 1980); also see his article, "Intellectual Foundations of Early American Diplomacy," *Diplomatic History*, Vol. 1 (1977), pp. 1-19. Gilbert, *To the Farewell Address: Ideas of Early American Foreign Policy* (Princeton, N. J., 1961); also see his article, "The 'New Diplomacy' of the Eighteenth Century," *World Politics*, Vol. 4 (1951), pp. 1-38.

diplomatic strategy: they wanted, so to speak, "to call in the Old World to liberate the New World from the Old World." Although their diplomatic strategy was based on the assumed impact of American independence upon the European balance of power, they had no intention of permitting their nation to remain as a balancing factor in the European system of international politics. It was the purpose of independence to get out of the European system.

We should also pay due attention to specifically American characteristics which helped define their concept of power. One American quality, a sense of givenness, is an important element that contributed to the shaping of the American tradition of foreign relations.

Discussing the diplomacy of the American Revolution, both Gilbert and Hutson tended to focus on John Adams and his model treaty. If Adams and his model treaty represented one strand in revolutionary diplomatic thought, which I might name the unilateralist posture, there was in the diplomatic thought of the American Revolution another strand that might be called the collaborationist posture. The latter's spokesmen were more willing than the former to establish closer relations with France under certain conditions. Revolutionary diplomacy evolved as advocates of these two strands bargained and compromised with each other.

Beginning with Gilbert's *To the Farewell Address*, much has been written about the diplomacy of the American Revolution since the early 1960s to supplement such classic works as those of Edward S. Corwin and Samuel Flagg Bemis.<sup>2</sup> It seems, however, that there remains room for new interpretations and syntheses. Based on several articles published by the author in the past decade, the present paper analyzes the characteristics of American diplomacy which led to the conclusion of the Franco-American treaties of 1778.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Corwin, *French Policy and the American Alliance of 1778* (Princeton, N. J., 1919); Bemis, *The Diplomacy of the American Revolution* (1935, Bloomington, Ind., 1957).

<sup>3</sup> "The American Revolution and the Origin of American Foreign Policy," *American Studies International*, Vol. 15 (Winter 1976), pp. 35-42; "The Diplomatic Thought of the American Revolution," *Hitotsubashi Journal of Law and Politics*, Vol. 9 (1981), pp. 26-41; "The French-American Treaties of 1778: The Diplomacy of the American Revolution and the French and Spanish Response," *ibid.*, Vol. 10 (1981), pp. 28-50; "The Debates in the Continental Congress on Acceptable Peace Term: 1779-1782," *ibid.*, Vol. 11 (1983), pp. 1-24; "America as *Imperium in Imperio*: The Growth of Nascent American Nationalism in the Late Colonial Period," *ibid.*, Vol. 12 (1984), pp. 17-34. Part of each article listed above is incorporated into this one. Basic research for this and other articles of mine relating to the diplomacy of the American Revolution was done during my tenures as an ACLS fellow and as a Huntington Library fellow from

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By the middle of the 18th century, the colonists of British North America had become aware of the economic importance of their colonies to the mother country. The colonies as a whole were a very important and rapidly growing market for English manufactures; the colonies produced such strategic products as naval stores, lumber, iron and ships, and such valuable staples as tobacco, rice and indigo. In addition, they provided the British West Indies, an important producer of staples, with foods and lumber.<sup>4</sup> Americans began to claim that the power and prosperity of Great Britain depended considerably upon her possessions in North America and would become even more so in the future. At the threshold of the French and Indian War, several American publicists contended that these colonies were of such consequence to British trade that, if Britain lost them to France, she would lose her status as a first-class power. British efforts to conquer Canada and her decision to retain it for the security of the continental colonies enhanced their self-importance.<sup>5</sup>

Victorious battles in Canada and the Peace of Paris were celebrated by the colonists. They praised the new glory of the British Empire and took pride in their contributions to victory.<sup>6</sup> This colonial self-identification with the British Empire may be considered as an evidence of underdeveloped American self-consciousness. Actually, however, the term British Empire was a vehicle for the colonists to satisfy their self-pride and self-importance. Within the framework of the Empire, the colonists tended to glorify British America. Enchanted by the vision opened by the annexation of Canada and East Louisiana, they envisaged an ever greater future for America.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> For statistical data relating to colonial trade, see Merrill Jensen, ed., *American Colonial Documents to 1776* (*English Historical Document*, Vol. 9) (London, 1955).

<sup>5</sup> Max Savelle, *The Origins of American Diplomacy* (New York, Macmillan, 1967), p. 553; Paul A. Varg, "The Advent of Nationalism," *American Quarterly*, Vol. 16 (1964), pp. 169-81.

<sup>6</sup> *loc. cit.*

<sup>7</sup> Richard Koebner, *Empire* (New York, 1961), pp. 86, 105-30. Koebner's book which presents a history of the term, "Empire," traces the development of the idea of

By the end of the Seven Years War, the colonists had "discovered America" as a region which they could proudly identify themselves with. Thus it may be said that the colonists began to view America as a kind of imperium in imperio, a great sub-empire within the British Empire. This discovery of America was an essential pre-condition for independence and a major factor which sustained the union after the Revolutionary War.<sup>8</sup> In fact, Americans liked to call their new nation "a rising empire."<sup>9</sup>

The colonists viewed the importance of the colonies in imperial trade as the key to their bargaining power vis-à-vis the mother country. When Britain began to adopt new colonial policies, therefore, spokesmen for the colonies emphasized the great value of American trade to the mother country in their continual attempts to force policy changes. Thus John Dickinson remarked: "Her prosperity depends on her commerce, her commerce on her manufactures, her manufactures on the markets for them; and the most constant and advantageous markets are offered by the colonies." Therefore, he observed, "the foundation of the power and glory of Great Britain are laid in America." This feeling was shared by all the colonial spokesmen. George Mason, to quote another example, wrote that "Great Britain owes the increase of her wealth, the trade, the shipping and maritime power to her American colonies."<sup>10</sup> Because of this increasing self-confidence, they could be expected to strongly resist the introduction of the less lenient colonial policy. Britain had twice retreated before the concerted colonial opposition in 1766 and 1770, and American patriots were confident in the emerging crisis of 1774 that Britain would back down once again. Should Britain persist in her policy, however, they would willingly risk a military demarche. If American trade was so important to Britain, they reasoned, it would provide them with

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the British Empire. Richard Van Alstyne's *The Genesis of American Nationalism* (Waltham, Mass., 1970) also traces the growth of imperial ideas in both Britain and the colonies. It is my impression that the term British Empire was more often used by the American colonists than by the Britons themselves in the 1760s.

<sup>8</sup>Max Savelle says, "this sort of self-consciousness must also have prepared feelings that, as valuable and useful as the colonies and their resources and men were, they might possibly have been able to exist independently of their European masters." Savelle, *Origins of American Diplomacy*, p. 553.

<sup>9</sup>Van Alstyne, *Genesis of American Nationalism*.

<sup>10</sup> John Dickinson, *The late Regulation . . .* (1765), in Bernard Bailyn, ed., *The Pamphlets of the American Revolution* (Cambridge, Mass., 1965), Vol. 1, p. 687; Robert A. Rutland, ed., *The Papers of George Mason* (3 vols., Chapel Hill, N. C., 1970), Vol. 1, pp. 106-07. See also Bailyn, *Pamphlets*, Vol. 1, p. 622, for Daniel Dulany's statement in the famous *Considerations on the Propriety of Imposing Taxes . . .* (1765).

diplomatic bargaining power to achieve and maintain independence. Because of the value of American trade, they expected, Britain's rivals could be induced to help the American cause to alter the power balance in their favor.

It was a common belief among American patriots that rivalry between Britain and other maritime powers, especially France, was an advantage for America in her dealings with Britain.

Benjamin Franklin always viewed America's dispute with Britain in the context of international relations. As early as 1767, he noticed the extreme curiosity shown by the French ambassador to Britain about the affairs of America. Two years later he wrote after his return from France that "all Europe [except Britain] appears to be on our side of the question. But Europe has its reasons. It fancies itself in some danger from the growth of British power, and would be glad to see it divided against itself."<sup>11</sup>

Patrick Henry spoke of American independence to his friends in 1773 and discussed it in an international context. "Where is France? Where is Spain? Where is Holland?" he asked, "the natural enemies of Great Britain—where will they be all this while? Do you suppose they will stand by, idle and indifferent spectators to this contest? Will Louis the XVI be asleep all this time? Believe me, no!"<sup>12</sup>

American patriots continually attempted to remind the British of these international rivalries in order to induce them to make concessions to the colonies. They also mentioned it to convince fellow Americans that they could expect success in their struggle against Britain. Thus the young Alexander Hamilton defended the strong stance taken by the First Continental Congress in one of his earliest published articles. Britain would not dare, he argued, to drive the colonies into an open rebellion; but if she should decide to subdue the colonies by force, the colonies would not be defeated. The current international situation would not allow her to send the whole of her army to America, because "the ancient rivals and enemies of Great Britain would never be idle." Likewise John Adams wrote in a Novanglus letter: "How many ships can Britain spare . . . Let her send all the ships she has round her island. What if her ill-natured

<sup>11</sup> Albert H. Smyth, ed., *Writings of Benjamin Franklin* (10 vols., New York, 1905–07), Vol. 5, pp. 47, 231, Vol. 6, pp. 45–48. See also Gerald Stourzh, *Benjamin Franklin and American Foreign Policy* (2nd ed., Chicago, 1969), pp. 92–93.

<sup>12</sup> William Wirt, *Sketches of the Life and Character of Patrick Henry* (Hartford, Conn., 1854), pp. 111–12.

neighbors, France and Spain, should strike a blow in their absence?"<sup>13</sup>

The Second Continental Congress mentioned the possibility of foreign aid in a well-known passage in the Declaration of the Causes of Taking up Arms: "Our cause is just. Our union is perfect. Our internal resources are great, and, if necessary, foreign assistance is undoubtedly attainable."<sup>14</sup>

Although the foregoing description has amply shown that American patriots were familiar with the European world of power politics, there was also an American quality in their concept of American power. To borrow a term used by Daniel Boorstin in another context, it may be called a sense of "givenness."<sup>15</sup> American products were valuable trade items; they could therefore be a source of power. Power would naturally come into the possession of the Americans as a result of their productive activities. America's geographical location and territorial space reinforced this sense of givenness. This givenness was at the root of American optimism. Of course, American patriots did not overlook military power as an element of power. But they tended to consider it important only in an emergency such as the Revolutionary War. In ordinary times, America would need only potential military power, such as arms in the possession of the citizenry, extensive fisheries and an adequate merchant marine. In addition to a standing army and a navy, a centralized government figured large in the contemporary European definition of the concept of a state. Americans, however, would proceed to organize their empire as a decentralized confederation. The Articles of Confederation reflected the sense of givenness in their concept of American power.

As the war continued without any evidence of a change of heart in British attitudes, independence and foreign alliances became matters of immediate concern for Americans. Thus the Continental Congress began to consider the possibility of contacting European courts to sound out their attitude before the end of 1775.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>13</sup> Harold C. Syrett and Jacob E. Cooke, eds., *The Papers of Alexander Hamilton* (26 vols., New York, 1961-79), Vol. 1, pp. 159-60; Bernard Mason, ed., *The American Colonial Crisis: The Daniel Leonard-John Adams Letters* (New York, 1972), p. 130.

<sup>14</sup> W. C. Ford, ed., *Journal of Continental Congress* (34 vols., Washington, D. C., 1904-37) [cited hereafter as *JCC*], Vol. 2, pp. 128-57.

<sup>15</sup> Daniel J. Boorstin, *The Genius of American Politics* (Chicago, 1953), pp. 8-10. Boorstin used the term "givenness" to convey the American belief that "an explicit political theory is superfluous precisely because [the Americans] already somehow possess a satisfactory equivalent."

<sup>16</sup> According to John Adams' recollection, Samuel Chase proposed in Congress sometime in the fall of 1775, the dispatch of American ambassadors to France and Adams

On February 16, 1776, George Wythe proposed in Congress to seek alliances with foreign powers. Congress took up his proposal for consideration, although no decision was made on the matter.<sup>17</sup> Meanwhile, however, the Secret Committee and the Committee of Secret Correspondence decided in early March to send Silas Deane, a Connecticut merchant and delegate to Congress, to France as an agent for the two committees. He was directed to serve not only as a procuring agent, but also as an informal diplomat. The Committee of Secret Correspondence instructed Deane to seek an audience with the Comte de Vergennes, French foreign minister, and to sound out his attitude toward American affairs.<sup>18</sup>

The subject of overtures to France was debated repeatedly throughout March and April.<sup>19</sup> John Adams recorded his thoughts in his diary.

How is the interest of France and Spain affected, by the dispute between B [ritain] and C [olonies]? Is it the interest of France [to] stand neuter, to join with B, or to join with the C? Is it not her interest, to dismember the B. Empire? Will her Dominions be safe, if B. and A[merica] remain connected? Can she preserve her possession in the W.I.? She has in the W.I., Martinico, Guadeloupe, and one half of Hispaniola. In case a reconciliation should take place, between B. and A., and a war should break out between B. and France, would not all her islands be taken from her in 6 months?<sup>20</sup>

Thus he felt it certain that France would take sides with America. What kind of alliance with France would be best for America? He was very sensitive to the danger inherent in a close connection with France. "1st. No political connection, submit to none of her authority—receive no

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himself seconded the motion. Adams to Benjamin Rush, 30 September 1805, Charles Francis Adams, ed., *Works of John Adams* (10 vols., Boston, 1850–56) [hereafter cited as *WJA*], Vol. 9, p. 243, Vol. 2, p. 505. See Adams to Chase, 9 July 1776, in Edmund C. Burnett, ed., *Letters of Members of the Continental Congress* (8 vols., Washington, 1921–36) [cited hereafter as *LMCC*], Vol. 2, p. 5. Anyway, it appeared that Chase's proposal developed into the decision by Congress in late November to establish the Committee of Secret Correspondence for the purpose of "corresponding with our friends in Great Britain, Ireland, and other parts of the world." The Committee, made up of Benjamin Franklin, Benjamin Harrison, Thomas Johnson, John Dickinson, and John Jay, soon began to gather information on the attitude of European courts toward the American war. (Francis Wharton, ed., *The Revolutionary Diplomatic Correspondence of the United States* (6 vols., Washington, 1889) [cited hereafter as *RDC*], Vol. 2, pp. 61–65.

<sup>17</sup> Richard Smith, *Diary*, 16 Feb. 1776, *LMCC*, Vol. 1, p. 350.

<sup>18</sup> Franklin, *et al.* to Deane, 3 March 1776, *RDC*, Vol. 2, p. 79.

<sup>19</sup> L. H. Butterfield, ed., *The Adams Papers: Diary and Autobiography of John Adams* (4 vols., Cambridge, Mass., 1961) [cited hereafter as *DAJA*], Vol. 2, p. 236.

<sup>20</sup> *Diary*, 1 March 1776, *ibid.*, p. 235.

governors, or officers from her. 2nd. No military connection. Receive no troops from her. 3rd. Only a commercial connection, i.e., make a treaty to receive her ships into our ports.”<sup>21</sup> Even when he used the term “alliance,” what he meant was only a commercial treaty and carefully limited political entente. In the contemporary usage, the term was used rather loosely. He was willing and eager to receive French assistance. But he was basically an isolationist.<sup>22</sup>

John Adams was so confident of the possibility of a French alliance and so optimistic about America’s ability to continue the war that he did not take the threat of a rumored partition treaty among European powers seriously.<sup>23</sup> The possibility of partition of America began to be mentioned in the American press as independence became a public issue.<sup>24</sup>

Samuel Adams, writing under the signature of “Candidus” in early March, urged fellow Americans to declare independence promptly and apply to France for assistance, assuring his readers that France would find it in her interest to grant it. If Americans delayed declaring independence and application for an alliance, however, France would be tempted to accept an offer of Canada by Britain,” he warned, “then we may indeed become provinces!”<sup>25</sup> Possibly he made use of the specter of a partition treaty in order to force the hand of reluctant patriots. However, such advocates of independence as Richard Henry Lee and Patrick Henry were apparently genuinely alarmed by this possibility. When Lee wrote Henry that “whilst we are hesitating about forming alliance, Great Britain may . . . seal our ruin by signing a treaty of par-

<sup>21</sup> Diary, March-April 1776, *ibid.*, p. 236.

<sup>22</sup> For the meaning of the term “alliance,” see Gilbert, *To the Farewell Address*, pp. 45–48.

<sup>23</sup> Adams to James Warren, 16 April 1776, *Warren-Adams Letters I (Massachusetts Historical Collections, Vols. 62, 1919)*, p. 228.

<sup>24</sup> James H. Hutson, “The Partition Treaty and the Declaration of American Independence,” *Journal of American History*, Vol. 58 (1972), pp. 878–85, gives an analysis of the background of the rumor. It is the thesis of his article that “the primary reason Congress acted when it did is that it was driven by a fear that Great Britain was offering to partition North America with France and Spain in return for their military assistance in suppressing the rebellion.” (*ibid.*, p. 877.) That fear is certainly one factor which drove Congress to declare independence, but it is not clear whether it was the most decisive factor. John Adams, the leading advocate of independence, was not alarmed. Such an opponent of declaring independence as John Dickinson used the possibility of partition to argue for a more cautious policy. In his book, *John Adams*, Hutson seems to emphasize simply the fact that “the Whigs gave full credence to the possibility of a partition treaty.” (pp. 20–27.)

<sup>25</sup> Cited and commented on by Hutson, “Partition Treaty,” p. 890.



tition with two or three ambitious powers," Henry echoed back the same apprehension: "May not France, ignorant of the great advantages to her commerce we intend to offer, and of the permanency of that separation which is to take place, be allured by the partition you mention?" Therefore he thought it was "absolutely necessary" to anticipate "the efforts of the enemy by sending instantly American ambassadors to France."<sup>26</sup> Since the two issues of independence and foreign alliance were closely related in the thinking of Richard Henry Lee, it was natural for him to combine his famous resolution of June 7, 1776, for independence with a resolution for foreign alliance.

Lee's resolutions were opposed by such moderates as James Wilson, Robert R. Livingston, Edward Rutledge and John Dickinson. They conceded that it would be impossible for the colonies to be united with Britain again. Yet they felt it was still too early to take any such measures. They pleaded for a delay for the sake of unity. A premature declaration of independence would produce disunity in the united front and might thereby make the securing of a satisfactory foreign alliance impossible. As for foreign alliances, they expressed doubt that France and Spain would be very willing to be American allies. Those countries, they pointed out, had reason to be jealous of that rising power which might one day strip them of their American possessions. They mentioned that these countries might instead try to cooperate with Britain for some territorial compensation. Thus it would be safer for Congress, they insisted, to act after it had heard of French disposition from its agent. They also argued that it would be more effective to declare independence after the victory of the next campaign.

These arguments were answered by leading advocates of independence, such as John Adams, Richard Henry Lee, and George Wythe. Supporters of the resolutions did not agree that serious disunity would develop as a result of an immediate declaration of independence. They argued that France and Spain could not fail to help American independence because of their interest. Those powers might be aware of America's rising power, but they would certainly prefer an independent America to a more formidable Anglo-American combination. An immediate declaration might bring forth prompt French assistance, putting America in a better posi-

<sup>26</sup> Lee to Henry, 20 April 1776, J. C. Ballagh, ed., *Letters of Richard Henry Lee* (2 vols., 1911-14), Vol. 1, pp. 177-78; Henry to Lee, 20 May 1776, William H. Henry, *Patrick Henry: Life, Correspondence and Speeches* (3 vols., 1891), Vol. 1, p. 410.

tion to fight the enemy. The next campaign would not be necessarily won. It was unwise to wait for its outcome.<sup>27</sup>

The militants, however, did not force the issue immediately. They compromised with the moderates, agreeing to postpone the decision on independence until July. On the other hand, the moderates agreed to set up three committees immediately to begin drafting a declaration of independence, a plan for foreign alliances and articles of confederation.<sup>28</sup>

When Congress took up the issue again on July 2, the mood of Congress was decidedly in favor of independence. Although John Dickinson made a long speech pleading for further delay, he was arguing for a lost cause and his speech received little attention. But his speech is of interest to the historian, since it discussed the issue of independence largely within the context of external affairs. To declare independence now, he argued, was not the best method to gain foreign alliances. To win on the battlefield would be the best way to impress foreign powers. If the Americans began the empire by a loudly proclaimed declaration of independence, France and Spain would immediately perceive the potential threats to their own colonies in the hemisphere. Furthermore, to declare independence single-handedly would be tantamount to treating France with contempt, especially after application had been made to France for assistance. Such an action on the part of America would inevitably alter French attitudes toward America. France would then certainly be attracted by a British offer to partition her American possessions with Paris. Thus an immediate declaration of independence was like "destroying a house before we have yet another; and then asking a neighbour to take us in when he is unprepared."

Dickinson offered his own version of the best American strategy to win foreign support—he proposed to act on the matter of independence only after gaining a firm understanding from France. "Let us in the most solemn manner inform the House of Bourbons, at least France, that we wait only for her determination to declare our independence. We must not talk generally of foreign powers but only of those that we expect to favor us. Let us assure Spain that we never will give any assistance to a rebellion in her colonies. Let France become a guarantor for us in

<sup>27</sup> See Jefferson's notes of the debate, Julian P. Boyd, ed., *Papers of Thomas Jefferson* (multi-volume, Princeton, N. J., 1950- ) [cited hereafter as *PTJ*], Vol. 1, pp. 299-313.

<sup>28</sup> *JCC*, Vol. 5, pp. 425, 431.

arrangements of the kind."<sup>29</sup> Thus Dickinson proposed a policy of collaboration with France to win its support for independence, whereas Adams advocated a policy of unilateral action even while soliciting French aid. Although Dickinson advocated the need for a prior political understanding with France, this does not mean that he trusted French assurances of goodwill. On the contrary, he regarded the French as self-interested. It was his opinion that Americans had to be calculating, too, in dealing with such a nation, taking full note of their psychology.

It is interesting to observe that Dickinson revealed in the same speech his tenacious Anglophilic and Francophobic sentiments. "Suppose we shall ruin her (Britain). France must rise on her ruins. Her ambition. Her religion. Our [dangers from thence]. We shall weep at our misfortune brought by our rashness." Possibly, Dickinson, desperate to delay independence, tried rather contradictorily to play up traditional Francophobia in the minds of his colleagues.<sup>30</sup> Anyway, it may be said that Dickinson, too, was aware of the danger of excessively close ties with France, although he emphasized the need to act on the independence issue with the prior understanding of France. He, like John Adams, wanted a strong France to be counterbalanced by a strong Britain.<sup>31</sup>

It would appear then that the issue of independence was closely related to the issue of foreign alliances in public and private discussions among the patriots in 1776. Proponents of independence argued sometimes as

<sup>29</sup> J. H. Powell reconstructed Dickinson's speech from his memo which was mostly in abbreviated form. "Speech of John Dickinson Opposing the Declaration of Independence, July 1, 1776," *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography*, Vol. 65 (1941), pp. 458-81. The words in parenthesis in the quotation are either Powell's or mine. Dickinson later defended his action in "To my Opponents in the late Elections of Councillor for the County of Philadelphia . . .," giving the reason why he opposed the declaration. C. J. Still, *Life and Times of John Dickinson, 1732-1808* (Philadelphia, 1891), appendix, pp. 368-73.

<sup>30</sup> This Francophobia among the Americans did not disappear completely even after the conclusion of the French-American alliance and influenced American attitudes toward foreign affairs. American attitudes toward France are discussed in detail by William C. Stinchcombe, *The American Revolution and the French Alliance* (Syracuse, N. Y., 1969) and briefly by Ralph L. Ketcham, "France and American Politics, 1763-1793," *Political Science Quarterly*, Vol. 78 (1963), pp. 198-223.

<sup>31</sup> According to his autobiography, John Adams spoke in Congress "that it never could be our interest to unite with France, in the destruction of England, or in any measure to break her spirit or reduce her to a situation in which she could not support her independence. On the other hand, it could never be our duty to unite with Britain in too great a humiliation of France." *DAJA*, Vol. 3, p. 329.

if they were advocating it as a means to obtain foreign assistance.<sup>32</sup> Because patriot leaders believed in the international importance of American trade, which they considered could substantially affect the balance of power, they were confident of the support of other maritime powers, especially France, to American independence. They interpreted the international implications of the revolution and predicted foreign responses primarily from the viewpoint of power politics in a mercantilist world.

However, there was among them—among the militants as well as the moderates—an awareness that France and Spain, especially the latter, might not welcome American independence because of the possible impact of this precedent on their own American colonies and also of the potential threat of this rising empire to the security of their colonies.<sup>33</sup> There was, however, no apparent awareness that absolutist France and Spain might regard the victory of republicanism in America as a potential menace to their own political system. Even passionately anti-monarchical Thomas Paine took for granted the willingness of absolute monarchies, such as France and Spain, to help the independence of a republican America.<sup>34</sup>

It is ironical that American patriots, while enunciating a revolutionary political doctrine in the Declaration of Independence, made this declaration to procure assistance from despotic monarchs. As the first sentence of the declaration indicated, however, it was a document which explained to the community of nations the reasons they had been compelled to renounce their allegiance to the British king. As such, it was never meant to denounce monarchism itself. Neither was it meant to be a call for a universal revolution.

American patriots no longer expected that their brethren in Britain who shared a similar political heritage would respond to the declaration and take sides with the American cause. They had earlier hoped that English public opinion would topple the ministry hostile to the American

<sup>32</sup> For example, Richard Henry Lee wrote Landon Carter, a Virginia moderate patriot, "It is not choice then but necessity that calls for Independence, as the only means by which foreign alliance can be obtained." 2 June 1776, *LMCC*, Vol. 1, p. 469.

<sup>33</sup> John Adams to James Warren, 7 Oct. 1775, *LMCC*, Vol. 1, p. 220; Jefferson's memo, *PTJ*, Vol. 1, pp. 299–313; J. H. Powell, "Speech of John Dickinson," pp. 471, 474; Cato's letter "To the people of Pennsylvania," Peter Force, ed., *American Archives*, 4th Series (6 vols., Washington, 1837–46), Vol. 5, p. 515.

<sup>34</sup> Moncure D. Conway, ed., *Writings of Thomas Paine* (4 vols., New York, 1894–96), Vol. 1, pp. 110–11.

cause. The declaration of independence can be seen, in part, as the result of this disillusion with the British public. Near the end of the declaration, they expressed their bitter disappointment with their "British brethren." When their hope for an Anglo-American revolution had failed to materialize, they decided to seek assistance from sympathetic foreign powers to carry out an American revolution.

## II

Having declared independence, the Continental Congress prepared to negotiate treaties with the European powers. John Adams, who played the leading role in the committee, was appointed to draft a model treaty with France.<sup>35</sup>

Adams's thinking on the nature of the treaty to be negotiated has already been mentioned. Although he wanted French help, he was opposed to any political and military connections with France. He thought simply of opening American trade to France as well as other nations on a liberal reciprocal basis. The opening of American trade to France, Adams considered, would be an ample compensation to her for all the aid she would provide. France's share in American trade would be an immense resource for her commerce and naval power, and a great assistance to her in protecting her East and West Indian possessions as well as her fisheries. If the benefit of American trade were set aside, Adams reasoned, "the dismemberment of the British empire alone would be worth for France more than all the exertions America should require of her even if it should draw her into an eight or ten years war."<sup>36</sup>

According to his treaty plan, France and the United States should mutually grant the nationals of the other party the same commercial privileges as their own nationals. Since Adams wanted French naval protection for American shipping against British attacks, his plan provided for mutual naval protection of the other party's merchant marine. This was a mutual obligation, but it would certainly be a one-sided one in reality. Furthermore, Adams' plan required the French king to protect American shipping from the pirate princes of the Barbary coast in the same manner as the British Crown had done. Such a provision would appear to establish a protector-client relationship. But Adams never thought of it this way. He was quite prepared to make similar requests

<sup>35</sup> *JCC*, Vol. V, pp. 431, 433; *DAJA*, Vol. 3, pp. 337-38.

<sup>36</sup> *DAJA*, Vol. 3, p. 329.

to any other maritime power in return for the privilege of trading with the United States.

Adams never considered giving the French king any special privileges in return. He was even unwilling to include a "no separate peace" clause in his draft treaty. His treaty plan did not provide any political commitment on the part of the United States except the pledge of no military assistance to Britain in case of French involvement in the Anglo-American War. As soon as the United States forced Britain to recognize its independence, the United States should be free to detach itself from European international rivalries and thereafter keep itself uninvolved in a European war.<sup>37</sup>

During such a war, it would be in the best interest of the United States to obtain the maximum freedom in trading with belligerent nations. Therefore he took the trouble to define neutral rights of the contracting parties in detail, giving each of them extensive freedom to engage in foreign commerce without interference from the other party at war. The principle of "free ships make free goods" was of course adopted; and contraband was defined very narrowly.

Adams thought it wise to include an article of political understanding to preclude French territorial claims in North America.<sup>38</sup> Adams did not want either a British or French presence in North America. He felt that not only the western lands lying between the Appalachians and the Mississippi but also Canada should become territories of the new nation. Since the previous year, Congress had been trying to make Canada the fourteenth member of the Union. Congress had tried to capture strategic cities in Canada by military force and also to induce Canadians to join the union by sending Commissioners to negotiate with them. But both the military campaign and the diplomatic offensive were unsuccessful. Nevertheless, Americans continued to hope to incorporate Canada and other British North American possessions into their new nation. Canada seemed to them to be important for both their expansionist aspiration as well as for their security. Thus Adams in his treaty plan had the French king disavow any territorial claims in North America and

<sup>37</sup> James H. Hutson argues that "the purpose of the treaty plan was to provide for American security by using American commerce to maintain the European balance of power." (Hutson, *John Adams*, p. 28.) This is, I suggest, an overstatement. It would be more accurate to say that Adams simply wanted to remove America from the European political system as quickly as possible. Adams's remarks quoted by Hutson in this connection seem to support my view rather than Hutson's. (*Ibid.*, p. 29.)

<sup>38</sup> For the text of his model treaty, see *JCC*, Vol. 5, pp. 576-89.

recognize the United States as the sole inheritor of the British North American possessions. In return for these generous and self-denying pledges by the French king, Adams did not consider offering him any commitment on the part of the United States.

His draft treaty, approved by the committee, was submitted to Congress on July 18. A number of delegates felt that the plan might not be so attractive to France as to induce her to risk a war against Britain. When Congress, meeting as the committee of the whole, discussed it on August 22 and 27, as John Adams later recalled, "many motions were made to insert "articles of entangling alliance, of exclusive privileges, and of warrantees of possessions" into the treaty plan."<sup>39</sup> No record exists of the debate. Probably, James Wilson, who wrote some critical comments on the margin of his copy, offered several amendments. He probably suggested the addition of a "no separate peace" clause and articles which promised to supply French forces with provisions when they undertook to recover lost territories in the Caribbean and not to make peace with Britain on commercial terms more favorable than those granted to France. He might also have argued that the United States should be prepared to offer such an inducement as an exclusive contract of limited duration with France for the supply of masts. Wilson, who supported the independence resolution with great reluctance, was much less optimistic about the strength of America than Adams and felt it quite urgent to have a powerful partner. Therefore he was willing to offer more favorable terms to France. However, such militants as Samuel Adams and Richard Henry Lee were also disturbed that the terms of Adams's plan were not sufficient to induce France to take sides with America.<sup>40</sup>

John Adams defended his plan, and succeeded in getting it approved with minor revisions. Congress added a new article that reaffirmed French rights in the Newfoundland fisheries.<sup>41</sup> Congress then proceeded to appoint a committee to draft instructions to be given the American Commissioners to France. There was a considerable amount of discussion in both the drafting committee and the committee of the whole. Some members, including James Wilson and Richard Henry Lee, wanted to allow the Commissioners to retreat considerably from the line of the treaty

<sup>39</sup> *DAJA*, Vol. 3, p. 338.

<sup>40</sup> His comments are printed in *JCC*, Vol. 5, pp. 576n-85n. Adams to John M. Jackson, 30 Dec. 1817, *WJA*, Vol. 10, p. 269.

<sup>41</sup> For the text of the model treaty as approved by Congress, see *JCC*, Vol. 5, pp. 768-79.

plan in their negotiations. However, the adopted instructions kept the extent of such retreat to the minimum.

If France were unwilling to grant the Americans commercial rights equal to those of the Frenchmen, the negotiators should propose that most-favored nation status be mutually granted. As for the eighth article, the instruction admitted that it "will probably be attended with some difficulty." Therefore the document empowered the negotiators to propose to add "that the United States will never be subject, or acknowledge allegiance, or obedience" to Britain "nor grant to that nation any exclusive trade, or any advantage in trade, more than to his most Christian Majesty." They were also empowered to offer that any separate peace treaty would be effective six months after notification to the other party. The instructions also permitted the negotiators to omit several articles regarding American commercial privileges in France and neutral rights. The Commissioners were instructed to solicit for an immediate supply of arms and ammunitions, to be sent under convoy by France. The instructions expected that France would not let the United States sink in the present contest. But the document directed the negotiators to put pressure on the French court with a suggestion that "a reunion with Great Britain may be the consequence of a delay," if the court should be slow in taking action.<sup>42</sup>

Congress chose Franklin, Silas Deane and Thomas Jefferson as the Commissioners of the United States to be sent to France. As Jefferson could not accept the assignment, Arthur Lee, another Virginian, was appointed in his place.<sup>43</sup> The choice of Franklin was logical. He was the best-known American in France. Besides, he had been active in nascent diplomatic affairs as a member of the Committee of Secret Correspondence. Deane was in France as a purchasing agent and quasi-diplomat. Arthur Lee was in London, serving as a correspondent for Congress.

The model treaty can be regarded as the first crystallization of American ideas of national interest. Maximum freedom in foreign trade, no long-term political ties with any European power, and acquisition of as much of British North America as possible to forestall British or French power—such were the main pillars of the American concept of national interest. To what extent they could realize these objectives depended on

<sup>42</sup> For the various amendments proposed and the text of the adopted instruction, see *JCC*, Vol. 5, pp. 813–17.

<sup>43</sup> *JCC*, Vol. 5, pp. 827, 897.



their military fortune and diplomatic skill. The model treaty represented, so to speak, the maximum of American national interest. As such, no patriots disagreed, although some of them feared that something more should be promised to induce France to help them.

With the adoption of the model treaty and the appointment of the Commissioners to France, Congress was ready to start its diplomacy in Europe. The basic assumption of its diplomacy was that, because of America's importance in the international balance of power, such British rivals as France and Spain would support the American cause. Seeking their aid, however, Congress did not want to commit America to involvement within the European political system. In short, it attempted to invoke the Old World to liberate the New World from it. The model treaty was the purest embodiment of such an aim. But it was a difficult task to be completely outside the European structure while making use of it. Thus Congress and its Commissioners gradually accepted the necessity of closer ties with the Bourbon powers to secure independence and an imperial domain for America.

When the three American Commissioners contacted Vergennes in late December 1776, they immediately sensed the French court's reluctance to risk a war. They thought that they had better offer something more than a treaty of commerce as an inducement. On February 2, 1777, they mutually agreed to take responsibility to go beyond their instructions and offer France and Spain a pledge of no separate peace in the case of their participation in the war with Britain in return for a similar pledge on their part.<sup>44</sup>

Their shift in diplomatic strategy ran parallel to the current sense of Congress. By the end of 1776, most of the patriot leaders at home, confronted with an adverse military situation which forced Congress to evacuate Philadelphia, became exceedingly anxious to secure speedy military intervention by France and Spain.

For example, Robert Morris, depicting a gloomy picture of the state of affairs in America, told the Commissioners in a letter that the American situation was so critical that probably only a decision by France to join the hostilities could save the American cause.<sup>45</sup> The official dispatch of

<sup>44</sup> Franklin, Deane, and Lee to Vergennes, 23 Dec. 1776; Franklin to Committee of Secret Correspondence, 4 Jan. 1777; Franklin, Deane, and Lee to Vergennes, 5 Jan. 1777; Franklin, Deane, Lee to Committee of Correspondence, 17 Jan. 1777, 2 Feb. 1777; *RDC*, Vol. 2, pp. 239, 244-45, 248, 260; Corwin, *French Policy*, pp. 95-96.

<sup>45</sup> Morris to Commissioners, 21 Dec. 1776, *RDC*, Vol. 2, pp. 231-38.

the Committee of Secret Correspondence explained the situation more optimistically. But they too were emphatic about the extreme importance of French intervention.<sup>46</sup>

On December 24, Congress appointed an ad hoc committee of five, composed of Richard Henry Lee, Samuel Adams, Elbridge Gerry, John Witherspoon and Abraham Clark, and entrusted them with the task of making a plan for obtaining foreign assistance. On December 30, Congress adopted the committee's recommendation with a few amendments. Congress resolved to send its commissioners to the courts of Vienna, Spain, Prussia and Tuscany for the purpose of concluding a treaty of amity and commerce and procuring assistance from these courts to prevent Britain from obtaining mercenaries in Europe. The Commissioners in Paris were directed to try to induce the French king to attack the electorate of Hanover, or any part of the dominions of Great Britain in Europe, the East or West Indies.<sup>47</sup>

In order to induce the French to join the war, the Commissioners were instructed to offer to make trade between the United States and the West Indies a monopoly of French and American vessels. They were likewise instructed to assure the French king that, if French forces in conjunction with American forces should reduce Newfoundland and Cape Breton, and if the French fleet should help the United States reduce Nova Scotia, the United States would be willing to make fisheries in those regions a French and American monopoly and a half of Newfoundland a French territory, provided that Nova Scotia, Cape Breton and the remaining half of Newfoundland be annexed to the United States. Congress authorized them to make another proposal in case the two concessions above should prove insufficient: that the United States would assist French forces to reduce the British West Indies and agree to make these conquered islands French possessions.

Congress also decided to authorize the Commissioners to offer the Spanish king assistance in the conquest of Pensacola, provided, however, that he should be willing to grant the Americans free navigation of the Mississippi and use of the harbor of Pensacola. They were also authorized to promise that the United States would declare war against Portugal if desired by France and Spain.<sup>48</sup>

<sup>46</sup> Committee of Secret Correspondence to Commissioners, 21 Dec. 1776, *ibid.*, pp. 226-31.

<sup>47</sup> *JCC*, Vol. 6, pp. 1039, 1050, 1055, 1957-58.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 1055-56, 1057.

“Upon mature deliberation of all circumstances,” the Committee of Secret Correspondence advised the Commissioners, “Congress deems the speedy declaration of French and European assistance so indispensably necessary to secure the independence of these states, that they have authorized you to make such tenders to France and Spain as they hope will prevent any longer delay of an event that is judged so essential to the well-being of North America.” However, the Committee cautioned that the object was to get the assistance “on terms as much short of the concessions now offered as possible,” although not “at the risk of a delay that may prove dangerous to the end in view.”<sup>49</sup>

Had John Adams been in Congress, he would possibly have opposed deviation from the approach Congress had adopted under his leadership. His absence and the unfavorable military situation helped Congress move away from the principles of the model treaty. The collaborationist approach was now shaping the diplomacy of Congress.

It is remarkable, however, how little American leaders were willing to concede even when they felt it urgent to secure armed intervention. Those so-called concessions revealed their desire to obtain an extensive empire for their new nation with military assistance from the Bourbon powers. It may be said that, by offering France to make U.S.-West Indian trade and Newfoundland fisheries joint monopolies, Congress indicated its willingness to perpetuate a political alliance with France. However, Congress did not regard such an offer the best policy, since the instructions called it a “concession.”

Encouraged by the deviation from the line of the original instructions on the part of Congress, the Commissioners proposed to Vergennes and Count d’Aranda, Spanish Ambassador to France, a plan of a triple alliance between France, Spain and the United States against Britain and Portugal. According to this plan, hostilities were to continue until Spain had conquered Portugal, until the United States had established their independence, and until France and the United States had expelled Britain from North America and the West Indies. Peace was to be concluded only by the joint consent of the allies.<sup>50</sup>

This proposal did not bring forth any immediate response. But the

<sup>49</sup> Committee of Secret Correspondence to Commissioners, 30 Dec. 1776, *RDC*, Vol. 2, p. 240.

<sup>50</sup> Henri Doniol, *Histoire de la participation de la France à l’établissement des Etats-Unis d’Amérique* (5 vols., Paris, 1886), Vol. 2, pp. 319–25. The French text of Deane’s proposal was printed on pp. 319–21.

Commissioners wrote encouraging reports to Congress, emphasizing the French and Spanish disposition to continue secret aid, the general attitude of European nations friendly to the American cause, the progress of military preparation in France and Spain, and the increasing strain in Franco-British relations.<sup>51</sup>

Meanwhile, the atmosphere of crisis had faded in America after the success of Washington's surprise attacks in New Jersey in January 1777. American leaders, especially those known as militant patriots, regained self-confidence and became less desperate for foreign alliances. Samuel Adams contended in April 1777, "I have been always of opinion that we must depend upon our own efforts under God for the establishment of our liberties." Later he remarked that it would increase the future safety and honor of the United States if "we would establish our liberty and independence, with as little aid as possible."<sup>52</sup> John Adams, who had returned to Congress, reiterated his preference for simple commercial relations with no political and military obligations to European nations. He questioned the wisdom of trying to drag France or Spain into the war. The result of such an attempt might be America's entanglement in the quarrels of Europe.<sup>53</sup>

Although Congress continued to desire eagerly formal recognition and overt extensive assistance by France and Spain, it did not fall into such a state of alarm as had been the case toward the end of 1776.<sup>54</sup> Most of the American patriots continued to expect that France, because of her own interest, would sooner or later come to take sides with the United States. Those who thought that monarchical France would not welcome the emergence of Republican America were a very small minority.<sup>55</sup>

### III

It was the Comte de Vergennes who directed French foreign policy during the American Revolution. This experienced diplomat made it his

<sup>51</sup> Franklin and Deane to Committee of Secret Correspondence, 9 April 1777, *RDC*, Vol. 2, pp. 285-90.

<sup>52</sup> See, for example, Samuel Adams to James Warren, 17 April 1777, H. A. Cushing, ed., *Writings of Samuel Adams* (4 vols., Boston, 1904-08) [cited hereafter as *WSA*], Vol. 3, p. 400.

<sup>53</sup> Adams to George Washington, 3 May 1777, *LMCC*, Vol. 2, p. 354.

<sup>54</sup> Committee for Foreign Affairs to Commissioners, 2 May 1777, 2 Dec. 1777, *RDC*, Vol. 2, pp. 313-15, 438-41.

<sup>55</sup> Stinchcombe, *American Revolution and French Alliance*, p. 12.

task as the foreign minister to restore France to the position of the premier state in Europe.<sup>56</sup> It did not take long for Vergennes to recognize potential opportunities for French policy in the armed rebellion in America. In 1775, he directed the Ambassador to Britain to send a secret agent named Bonvouloir to British America. His first report, which emphasized the American desire for French aid and optimistically estimated American military strength, reached Vergennes by early March 1776.

Encouraged by this report, Vergennes decided to recommend that the king give secret aid to the Americans. He was aware of the king's reluctance for such a policy and Turgot's opposition to it. Louis XVI did not think it right for a respectable monarch to help a rebellion against a legitimate ruler. Turgot, the Controller-General, aware of the urgent need for budgetary economies and internal reform, was opposed to foreign adventures.<sup>57</sup> Anticipating the king's reluctance and Turgot's opposition, Vergennes argued in his memorandum for secret aid to the Americans as a policy of self-defense. His "Mémoire de Considérations," maintained that Britain would attack the French possessions in America regardless of the result of the American rebellion. Since an inactive policy would not guarantee peace, it was the best policy for France and Spain to prolong the war in the British colonies by giving secret aid to the rebels and gain time to prepare for a war with Britain.<sup>58</sup>

Another memorandum, "Réflexions," discussed the same problem more analytically. Drafted by Joseph-Mathias Gérard de Rayneval,<sup>59</sup> one

<sup>56</sup> Corwin, *French Policy*, pp. 54–58; Albert Sorel, *L'Europe et la Revolution française: Les moeurs et les traditions politiques* (3 vols., Paris, 1885–1904), Vol. 1. English edition, *Europe and the French Revolution* (London, 1969), pp. 330–36; Orville T. Murphy, "Charles Gravier de Vergennes: Portrait of an Old Regime Diplomat," *Political Science Quarterly*, Vol. 83, (1968), pp. 400–18; Murphy, "The View from Versailles: Charles Gravier comte de Vergennes's Perceptions of the American Revolution," Ronald Hoffman and Peter J. Albert, eds., *Diplomacy and Revolution: The Franco-American Alliance of 1778* (Charlottesville, N. C., 1981), pp. 108–18. Alexander DeConde discusses the various interpretations of the French motives for the alliance in his essay: "The French Alliance in Historical Speculation," *ibid*, pp. 1–37.

<sup>57</sup> Doniol, *Histoire*, Vol. 1, pp. 270–71.

<sup>58</sup> For the text of the "Considérations," 12 March 1776, see B. F. Stevens, ed., *Facsimiles of Manuscripts in European Archives Relating to America* (25 vols., 1889–1895), Vol. 13, no. 1316.

<sup>59</sup> Conrad Alexandre Gérard and Joseph Mathias Gérard de Rayneval were brothers and both worked under Vergennes. This often caused confusion among historians. Conrad Alexandre, the elder brother, having served as premier commis in the Foreign Office for Vergennes, became the first French minister plenipotentiary to the U.S. in 1778. Joseph Mathias took his brother's place as premier commis after the latter's appointment to the American post. For their identification, I rely on John J. Meng, "Historical

of Vergennes' secretaries, in April 1776, the document was probably a policy paper to be used within the foreign office.<sup>60</sup> The colonies, the memorandum observed, appear to be resolved to throw off the yoke of the mother country altogether. If the colonies achieved their independence with French assistance, the advantage for France would be enormous. The power of Britain would shrink and this itself would improve France's position vis-à-vis Britain. British trade would suffer greatly and French trade would increase considerably. Besides, France might be able to recover some of her lost possessions, such as Newfoundland fisheries and former French islands in the Caribbean. Canada was expressly excluded from the former possessions to be recovered.<sup>61</sup>

Like the "Considérations," this document noted that Britain would likely attack France no matter what the result of her war with the colonies. But the policy of secret aid was presented here as a means of promoting French power rather than that of self-defense. Thus by April, 1776, the French program of secret aid to the Americans had been solidified in the French foreign ministry.

Turgot submitted his own memorandum in opposition to Vergennes' program. Stressing the precarious financial condition and the need of internal reform, Turgot maintained that it was no time for a war-provoking policy. He doubted if Britain would really attack French possessions at the end of her troubles in the colonies. Being a Physiocrat, moreover, Turgot did not subscribe to Vergennes' logic of mercantilist power politics. It was his opinion that the mercantilist practice of

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Introduction," Meng, ed., *Despatches and Instructions of Conrad Alexandre Gérard: 1778-1780* (Paris, 1939). In this paper, I shall refer to Conrad Alexandre as Gérard and Joseph Mathias as Rayneval.

<sup>60</sup> For the text of "Réflexions," see Stevens, *Facsimiles*, Vol. 13, no. 1310. The date of this document had been uncertain until Meng discovered the original document endorsed with the date of "avril 1776." Doniol and B. F. Stevens dated the document at the end of 1775. The appropriateness of Meng's dating can be inferred from the content of the document. For example, it mentions the determination of the colonists to be independent. A responsible policy paper could not have made such a judgment without the benefit of firsthand reporting. Bonvouloir's report did not reach France until the end of February. If the memorandum had been written in 1775, such a judgment would have been highly speculative. Meng, ed., *Despatches and Instructions*, pp. 57-58.

<sup>61</sup> To regain Canada was never part of Vergennes' program. He had directed Bonvouloir to inform Americans that France had no designs on Canada. (*RDC*, Vol. 1, p. 333.) He once appeared to think of making Canada and Nova Scotia French client states separated from the United States, but abandoned such an idea as impracticable and unwise. (Corwin, *French Policy*, pp. 201-02.) He considered it best to leave Canada and Nova Scotia in English hands.

monopolizing colonial trade was already outmoded. However, he was in a minority in the king's council. With majority support from the king's ministers, Vergennes could persuade Louis to adopt his recommendation.<sup>62</sup>

Vergennes and other statesmen of the ancien régime did not regard American republicanism as a potential ideological threat. There were several republics in Europe and they were never considered as an ideological threat. If French leaders were aware of American inclination toward republicanism, it did not disturb them. As Albert Sorel pointed out, Vergennes intervened in Geneva against democracy while defending it in America. "The insurgents I am expelling from Geneva are British agents," wrote Vergennes later, "whilst the American rebels will be our lasting friends. I have treated both, not in the light of their political system, but in the light of their attitudes towards France. That is my *raison d'État*."<sup>63</sup>

However, Vergennes was not entirely unaware of ideological implications inherent in a colonial rebellion. In a letter to the Ambassador to Britain, written in June 1775, when he was not as yet inclined to favor an interventionist policy, Vergennes made this comment: "The spirit of revolt, wherever it appears, is always a dangerous example. Moral maladies, just as physical maladies, can prove contagious. Because of this consideration, we should prevent the spirit of independence . . . from spreading over that hemisphere."<sup>64</sup>

Neither was Vergennes entirely unaware of the possibility that independent America might become a powerful nation and threaten European possessions in the Americas. When he assured Lord Stormont, British Ambassador to France, of French nonintervention in late October 1775, he mentioned that possibility. If the Americans became independent, he reportedly told Stormont, "they would immediately set about forming a great marine, and as they have every possible advantage for ship-building . . . in the end they would not leave a foot of that hemisphere in the possession of any European power."<sup>65</sup> But he actually did not take such a possibility seriously. The "Réflexions" noted it, but maintained that such a possibility would be small. Their republicanism and

<sup>62</sup> For a summary of Turgot's memorandum, see Doniol, *Histoire*, Vol. 1, pp. 280-83.

<sup>63</sup> Cited by Sorel, *Europe and the French Revolution*, p. 92.

<sup>64</sup> Vergennes to Guines, 23 June 1775, Doniol, *Histoire*, Vol. 1, p. 82.

<sup>65</sup> Stormont to Rockford, 31 Oct. 1775, Stevens, *Facsimiles*, Vol. 13, no. 1306.

their loose union as a confederacy, it argued, would prevent them from growing into an aggressive, formidable power. It was common in Europe of the 18th century to regard the republican form of government suitable only to a small state and a republican confederacy as a weak military power.<sup>66</sup>

When the news of the American declaration of independence reached France in August, Vergennes was ready to risk a war against Britain. "Between the advantages and inconveniences of a war against Britain in the present juncture," Vergennes advised the king and his other ministers, "the former outweighs the latter so unmistakably that no comparison can be made."<sup>67</sup> However, the news of the American defeat on Long Island cooled Vergennes' enthusiasm for immediate military intervention. When the American commissioners arrived in Paris, he was not inclined to go beyond the policy of secret aid.<sup>68</sup>

Throughout 1777, the American Commissioners continued to press the French and Spanish courts for formal recognition and assistance. They reported to the Committee of Secret Correspondence in early October that they had presented an earnest memorial to those courts, "stating the difficulties of our situation, and requesting that if they cannot immediately make a diversion in our favor, they should give a subsidy sufficient to enable us to continue the war without them, or offer the states their advice and influence in making a good peace."<sup>69</sup> Silas Deane, impatient of French reluctance, proposed to his colleagues in November to confront the French court with an ultimatum demanding "a categorical answer to the proposition of an alliance, or satisfy them that without an immediate interposition, we must accommodate with Great Britain." Supported by Arthur Lee, Franklin dissuaded him from taking such a crude tactic.<sup>70</sup>

As a matter of fact, the French government, unknown to the American Commissioners, had been willing to risk a war with Britain since the summer of 1777. By July Vergennes was again ready to advocate a warlike policy. The Americans had endured two years of fighting; the French navy had been substantially strengthened. It was now the time for deci-

<sup>66</sup> Doniol, *Histoire*, Vol. 1, p. 245; Sorel, *Europe and the French Revolution*, p. 41.

<sup>67</sup> Doniol, *Histoire*, Vol. 1, pp. 567-72.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 613.

<sup>69</sup> Franklin, Deane, and Lee to Committee for Foreign Affairs, 7 Oct. 1777, *RDC*, Vol. 2, p. 404.

<sup>70</sup> Lee's Diary, 27 Nov. 1777, Richard Henry Lee, *Life of Arthur Lee* (2 vols., Boston, 1829), Vol. 2, p. 354.



sion, he thought.<sup>71</sup> In a memoir submitted to the king on July 23, Vergennes argued for immediate alliance with the Americans. Louis approved Vergennes' recommendation with the condition that full understanding must be reached with the Spanish court first.<sup>72</sup>

Vergennes was well aware of the necessity of cooperation with Spain. The "pacte de famille," renewed in August 1761, tied the two Bourbon monarchs together. Diplomatic cooperation of the Bourbon powers—under French leadership, of course, —had been regarded by Vergennes as an important cornerstone for French diplomacy to re-establish French power and influence in international affairs.<sup>73</sup>

At the beginning of the American Revolutionary War, Madrid had been eager to form a common front with Paris. One year later, however, Madrid was no longer willing to cooperate with Paris in such a policy. The peaceful settlement of a Spanish-Portuguese dispute had eliminated a major cause for the Spanish desire for a joint anti-British policy. Also important was a change in Spanish diplomatic leadership. The Conde de Floridablanca, who became the First Minister in February 1777, was inclined to maintain Spanish diplomatic independence from her partner in the Family Compact far more than his pro-French predecessor.<sup>74</sup>

Admittedly, Britain was Spain's traditional enemy. But Spain took an attitude toward the American Revolution quite different from that of France. Unlike France, weaker Spain was not seeking hegemony in Europe as its premier power. Therefore, she did not have much interest in changing the scale of balance of power by separating the united colonies from Britain. With a less developed economy and a smaller merchant marine, Spain could not hope to gain much herself by breaking the British monopoly of American trade. Unlike France, moreover, Spain possessed a vast colonial empire in the New World. The rebellion of the British colonies might provide the Spanish colonists with an unfortunate precedent. Besides, independent Anglo-Americans might be more aggressive expansionists than they had been under British control. They

<sup>71</sup> The state of French naval preparedness was emphasized by Jonathan R. Dull as the key factor in the change in French policy. See his *The French Navy and American Independence: A Study of Arms and Diplomacy, 1774-1787* (Princeton, N. J., 1976), pp. 84-94.

<sup>72</sup> Doniol, *Histoire*, Vol. 2, pp. 460-69; Corwin, *French Policy*, pp. 101-04.

<sup>73</sup> Corwin, *French Policy*, pp. 36, 40, 59.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 79, 82-86, 103-06; Richard B. Morris, *The Peacemakers: The Great Powers and American Independence* (New York, 1965), pp. 48-49; Bemis, *Diplomacy of the American Revolution*, pp. 55-56.

might encroach upon Spanish possessions in North America. Floridablanca saw the implications of the American Revolution in such a light. He did not subscribe to Vergennes' idea that American independence itself would be a blessing both to France and Spain.<sup>75</sup> Floridablanca was glad to see Britain in trouble. Since it would give Spain an opportunity to strike a good bargain, he was not averse to giving a limited amount of aid to the American rebels in order to prolong British troubles. Meanwhile he wanted to have time to explore various diplomatic options. Negative response by Spain delayed any French decision.

Theoretically speaking, the Americans had two diplomatic alternatives. One was to negotiate with France to secure her open support for the American cause and the other was to negotiate with Britain a peace based on the granting of independence. If only Britain would be willing to recognize their independence, many Americans still thought, the two countries could restore intimate relations on a new basis. For example, General Horatio Gates expressed this sentiment in a letter to Rockingham soon after his victory at Saratoga. A similar sentiment was later expressed by John Jay whose Huguenot ancestors had fled to England. If Britain granted independence, he wrote, he would rather have an alliance with her than with any other power on earth.<sup>76</sup>

In Britain, meanwhile, a segment of the vocal public called for ending the war by granting the thirteen colonies outright independence.<sup>77</sup> Therefore the British might soften their stand considerably and offer the Americans political independence in order to retain economic privileges in America. The Americans, if they became exceedingly war-weary, might also be inclined to settle for something less than independence. An economic union with complete home rule, if offered, might satisfy them. Such possibilities of Anglo-American rapprochement haunted Vergennes' mind. It would be all right if the United States secured total independence from Britain, in commercial as well as political relations. If Britain formed an economic union with the United States while renouncing political control, it would not weaken British power and American independence would prove to be a nominal one from the French

<sup>75</sup> Corwin, *French Policy*, pp. 109–12; Paul C. Phillips, *The West in the Diplomacy of the American Revolution* (Urbana, Ill., 1913), pp. 47–51.

<sup>76</sup> Gates to Rockingham, 26 Oct. 1777, cited by Richard W. Van Alstyne, *Empire and Independence: The International History of the American Revolution* (New York, 1967), p. 141; Jay to Gouverneur Morris, 29 April 1778, Henry P. Johnston, ed., *The Correspondence and Public Papers of John Jay* (4 vols., New York, 1970), Vol. 1, p. 180.

<sup>77</sup> Van Alstyne, *Empire and Independence*, pp. 141–42.

viewpoint. His apprehension was deepened by the news of Saratoga. Expecting Britain's change of heart, he felt that France must go ahead of her in offering independence to America. Otherwise, he feared, French opportunities to capitalize on the Anglo-American war would be lost. Franklin worked on this weak spot of Vergennes with skill.<sup>78</sup> Therefore, Vergennes decided to communicate the French intention to recognize American independence to the American Commissioners. On December 6, 1777, Vergennes dispatched Conrad Alexandre Gérard, his first secretary, to Passy, where the American Commissioners had been staying. Gérard informed the American Commissioners of the king's intention to acknowledge the independence of the United States and told them that the French government was now willing to discuss an alliance with America on the basis of their former proposals or any new ones.<sup>79</sup> After one year of waiting, negotiations for a Franco-American treaty were about to begin.

In order to forestall British peace overtures which might offer quasi-independence to the Americans, the French court decided to inform the American Commissioners of its intention to acknowledge American independence and take sides with the United States. A week after Gérard's visit to Passy, Vergennes invited the American Commissioners to discuss with him the main features of their latest treaty proposal. Several days later, Gérard again visited Passy to inform them of the decision of the French court to conclude a treaty of amity and commerce with the United States on a reciprocal basis and to help the Americans to achieve genuine independence from Britain.<sup>80</sup>

The French, however, were still restrained by the lack of Spanish concurrence. While assuring the Americans of the French decision to acknowledge American independence, Gérard had to add that France must wait for Spanish concurrence for this policy. A Spanish answer arrived toward the end of the year, but it was a negative one.<sup>81</sup> This put the French in a dilemma. To maintain the facade of the united front of the Bourbon powers in risking a war with Britain was very important to France. But an opportunity to weaken Britain by detaching America from her might be lost if France waited too long. Vergennes felt that

<sup>78</sup> Corwin, *French Policy*, pp. 121-22; Van Alstyne, *Empire and Independence*, pp. 132-33.

<sup>79</sup> Lee's Diary, 6 Dec. 1777, *Arthur Lee*, Vol. 2, p. 357.

<sup>80</sup> Lee's Diary, 11, 18 Dec. 1777, *ibid.*, pp. 356-58, 360, 362, 364.

<sup>81</sup> Montmorin to Vergennes, 23 Dec. 1777, Stevens, *Facsimiles*, Vol. 20, no. 1792.

he could not wait because he knew British agents were active in Paris with peace overtures to the Americans. He was now determined to go ahead to conclude two treaties with the United States without Spanish concurrence: a treaty of amity and commerce to be effective upon ratification and a treaty of eventual alliance to be effective with the outbreak of a Franco-British war.<sup>82</sup> By making the latter treaty eventual, Vergennes hoped to have more time to persuade Spain to join this alliance before it became effective.

On January 7, 1778, a meeting of the king's council agreed to Vergennes' plan. The council decided to conclude the two treaties with the United States without Spanish concurrence. The outline of the treaty of amity and commerce having been decided previously, the basic nature of the treaty of alliance was now agreed on by the council. The treaty should embody the following features: first, it should become operative only upon the outbreak of war between France and Britain; secondly, it should make its end to secure the absolute and unlimited independence of the United States; thirdly, it should stipulate a reciprocal postwar guarantee of the possessions of the two powers in North America and the West Indies; fourthly, it should allow either party a truce with the common enemy only upon the consent of the other; lastly, it should provide in a separate and secret article, for the right of Spain to join the alliance.<sup>83</sup>

The next day, Gérard visited the American Commissioners and disclosed the French decision. Gérard explained that France did not intend to go to war at once but would wait for British reaction to the French announcement of the treaty of amity and commerce. But he predicted an eventual war and cautioned them against accepting any peace offer from Britain which did not promise complete American independence. The American Commissioners wanted the immediate entry of France in the war, but had to abide by French policy.<sup>84</sup>

The French draft of the treaties was handed to the Americans ten days later. As Gérard had intimated before,<sup>85</sup> France did not request any

<sup>82</sup> Vergennes' thinking is summarized in a memorandum, "Considerations upon the necessity of France declaring at once for the American Colonies, even without the concurrence of Spain," translated into English as Appendix III, in Corwin, *French Policy*, pp. 398-403. The original document is copied in Stevens, *Facsimiles*, Vol. 21, no. 1835.

<sup>83</sup> Doniol, *Histoire*, Vol. 2, pp. 712-30; Corwin, *French Policy*, pp. 151-52.

<sup>84</sup> Gérard's memo., 9 Jan. 1778, Stevens, *Facsimiles*, Vol. 21, no. 1831, a summary translation in Corwin, *French Policy*, pp. 152-53; Lee's Diary, 8 Jan. 1778, *Arthur Lee*, Vol. 2, pp. 374-78.

<sup>85</sup> Franklin, Deane, and Lee to Committee for Foreign Affairs, 18 Dec. 1777, *RDC*, Vol. 2, pp. 452-53.

special commercial privilege in the treaty of amity and commerce. She requested simply the most favored nation status for the French in return for the same to the Americans.<sup>86</sup> But France was content in this case with destroying the British monopoly of American trade, expecting that this breakdown itself would turn the scale of the power balance between Britain and France in the latter's favor.<sup>87</sup> It seemed to be wiser for France to refrain from seeking any special commercial concessions for the sake of long-term Franco-American friendship. Moreover, she could assert that she was acting for the common benefit of European nations in breaking down the British monopoly on American trade. This way France would be in a firmer position in the diplomatic battle with Britain.

As for the articles regarding the commercial and navigation rights of a contracting party as a belligerent or a neutral, the French draft was almost exactly the same as the American treaty plan.<sup>88</sup> Being a maritime nation with a navy usually weaker than that of Britain, France had her own interest in defining the rights of a neutral party including the adoption of the principle of "free ships make free goods." By championing the interest of weaker maritime nations, moreover, France might expect to obtain the diplomatic support of other European nations.

The only provisions in the treaty which became the subject of considerable discussion in the negotiations were Articles XI and XII. France was willing to permit, as desired by the Americans, the export of molasses from the French West Indies to the United States free from export duties. But France wanted the United States to reciprocate with the duty-free export of American tobaccos to France and her colonies. Although Franklin and Deane agreed with this, Arthur Lee, a Virginian, was opposed to depriving Virginia of the right to impose export duties on its major cash crop in the interest of the Northern commercial states. Regard-

<sup>86</sup> The French draft of the treaties is not included in Doniol or *RDC*. But it is apparent from the process of negotiation that it was the same as the agreed texts with minor changes. The agreed texts, French and English, are printed in David Hunter Miller, ed., *Treaties and Other International Acts of the United States of America* (8 vols., Washington, 1921-48), Vol. 1, pp. 13-46. The texts of the two treaties in both languages are also printed in *JCC*, Vol. 12, pp. 419-55.

<sup>87</sup> "What ought to lead," said Vergennes, "and indeed has led France to join with America is the great enfeeblement of England to be effected by the subtraction of a third of her empire." Vergennes to Montmorin, 20 June 1778, Doniol, *Histoire*, Vol. 3, p. 140.

<sup>88</sup> Compare those articles of the treaty of amity and commerce with the corresponding articles of the American treaty plan (model treaty). The wording of the English text of the treaty was the same as that of the treaty plan.

ing this concession as “an enormous price,” he requested his colleagues to reconsider it. Franklin proposed to make this duty-free provision applicable to all the commodities exported from the United States, but to limit its application to the goods to be exported to the French sugar islands only. Lee once agreed, but still had misgivings. For the sake of unanimity, therefore, they decided to ask France to delete the two articles. The French government, intimating that it would delay the signing of the treaty to revise its text at that stage, proposed to leave the two articles as they were. But the French indicated verbally that they would not object to renouncing them if requested by Congress after ratification.<sup>89</sup>

Since the Commissioners understood French unwillingness to enter war immediately, they did not try to change the basic character of the treaty of eventual alliance.

Article II defined the purpose of the treaty as “to maintain effectually the liberty, sovereignty, and independence absolute and unlimited of the said United States, as well in matters of government as of commerce.” In Article XI, France guaranteed “forever” the liberty, sovereignty, and independence absolute and unlimited of the United States. This unequivocal commitment on the part of France to the independence of the United States was certainly a great advantage to the Americans who were struggling for independence. However, it was the French who wanted to write these stipulations into the treaty. It was the French who used in their draft treaty such strong phrases as “independence absolute and unlimited” and “as well in matters of government as of commerce,” although the word “sovereignty” was inserted at Lee’s request.<sup>90</sup> These phrases reflected the French desire to make America completely independent from Britain, to keep her detached from Britain forever, and to retain her as a political partner of France.

As for the mutual pledge of ‘no separate peace,’ the Commissioners had long ago agreed to make such a commitment. They accepted the perpetual guarantee clause in the treaty willingly.<sup>91</sup>

<sup>89</sup> Lee’s Diary, 25, 26, 30 Jan., 6 Feb. 1778, *Arthur Lee*, Vol. 2, pp. 383–85, 387, 391–92, 394; Lee to Ralph Izard, 28 Jan. 1778; Izard to Franklin, 28 Jan. 1778; Lee to Franklin and Deane, 30 Jan. 1778; Franklin and Deane to Gérard, 1 Feb. 1778; Gérard to Commissioners, 2 Feb. 1778; Izard to Henry Laurens, 16 Feb. 1778; *RDC*, Vol. 2, pp. 477–79, 481–83, 485, 498.

<sup>90</sup> Lee’s Diary, 21, 27 Jan. 1778, *Arthur Lee*, Vol. 2, pp. 373, 388.

<sup>91</sup> Arthur Lee wanted to limit the term of the treaty of commerce to twenty years, but his proposal was not accepted by his colleagues. As to the perpetuity of the treaty of alliance, he did not voice any criticism. Lee’s Diary, 26 Jan. 1778, *ibid.*, p. 386.

Knowing the great benefit of the alliance to the United States, the Commissioners did not try to avoid incurring such an obligation. It was certainly an advantage for the United States to have a French promise of perpetual guarantee of her independence and territories. Besides, the American obligation to guarantee the French possessions in America did not seem to be a heavy, inflexible one. It could be construed variously and the United States would choose an interpretation most suitable to her interests. In accepting this obligation, as well as the "no separate peace" clause, they did not need to think that they went beyond the instructions of Congress, since the additional instructions of December 30, 1776, had implicitly allowed them to accept such stipulations by authorizing them to offer a long-term joint monopoly of the Newfoundland fisheries and American-West Indian trade.

The treaty provided for territorial matters in Articles V and VI. Article V read: "If the United States should think fit to attempt the reduction of the British power remaining in the Northern parts of America, or the Islands of Bermuda, those countries of islands in case of success, shall be confederated with or dependent upon the said United States." In the next article the King of France renounced "forever the possessions of the Islands of Bermuda, as well as of any part of the Continent of North America which before the treaty of Paris in 1763 or in virtue of that treaty, were acknowledged to belong to the Crown of Great Britain, or to the United States heretofore called British Colonies. . . ." <sup>92</sup>

It was a great advantage for America to have obtained French approval of the right to conquer and acquire British possessions in the North American continent as well as French renouncement of her own territorial ambition in British possessions in the North American continent. These two articles drafted by France were similar to the territorial provisions stipulated in the original plan of Congress. However, there was one difference. These articles, unlike the corresponding ones in the original American plan, did not mention by name such islands as Newfoundland and Cape Breton. It is obvious that the French deliberately left it ambiguous. Having great interest in enlarging their own fishing rights, they certainly did not want to preclude entirely a possibility of obtaining territories in Newfoundland or nearby islands. <sup>93</sup>

<sup>92</sup> It seems that Bermuda was added later. Gérard to Commissioner, 2 Feb. 1778, *RDC*, Vol. 2, p. 485.

<sup>93</sup> The "Réflexions," a memorandum prepared by Rayneval in April 1776, it may be recalled, speaking of the possibility of recovering some lost possessions in the war,

Arthur Lee, the most suspicious and demanding of the three Americans, felt the French draft unsatisfactory and wanted to make clearer the French disavowal of territorial ambition by listing such maritime territories as Cape Breton and Newfoundland by name. Franklin suggested that Lee draft an amended article, although Franklin himself did not seem to be eager to press the French on this matter. Although an ardent expansionist, Franklin was aware of the limits of American bargaining power. The French did not accept Lee's revision. Lee had to acquiesce. But he continued to grumble, blaming this failure on the passive attitude of his colleagues.<sup>94</sup>

On February 6, 1778, Gérard and the American Commissioners signed the two treaties. This was the first success of American diplomacy. The United States gained the acknowledgement of her independence from a primary power in Europe. The terms were generous for those granted by a primary power to a new nation still struggling for its liberty.

The report of the progress of treaty negotiation in Paris prompted the British government to announce its desire for reconciliation with the rebellious colonies. On February 17, Lord North made a conciliatory speech in Parliament and submitted two bills to promote the reconciliation. One was a proposal to exempt the colonies from Parliamentary taxation and to grant virtual home rule to them while retaining the Parliamentary right to regulate colonial trade. The other was a proposal to send special Commissioners to America to negotiate peace with the rebellious colonies.<sup>95</sup> The news of North's proposals quickened the pace of Vergennes' policy. To forestall the British, the French government quickly took a series of actions in March. On March 13, the government announced the French acknowledgement of American independence and the French ambassador formally notified the British foreign minister of the conclusion of the treaty of amity and commerce. In order to force the British hands further, he was also instructed to hint at the existence of an alliance to the British.<sup>96</sup>

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mentioned specifically Newfoundland fisheries and islands in the Caribbean. Later in the Convention of Aranjuez, the acquisition of Newfoundland was listed among the French war aims. (Doniol, *Histoire*, Vol. 3, pp. 803–10.)

<sup>94</sup> Lee's Diary, 21, 24, 27 Jan., 6 Feb. 1778, *Arthur Lee*, Vol. 2, pp. 379, 383, 388, 393; Lee to Ralph Izard, *RDC*, Vol. 2, pp. 594–95.

<sup>95</sup> *Parliamentary History*, Vol. 12, pp. 762–67, 775; Weldon A. Brown, *Empire or Independence: A Study in the Failure of Reconciliation, 1774–1783* (Baton Rouge, La., 1941), pp. 214–15.

<sup>96</sup> Doniol, *Histoire*, Vol. 2, pp. 820–26; Corwin, *French Policy*, pp. 165–69.



Britain had not lacked pretexts if she wanted to declare a war against France long before: French de facto acceptance of the American Commissioners, substantial secret aid to the rebels, and lenient treatment of American privateers operating from French ports. The British had protested repeatedly, but preferred to avoid a definite rupture with France. The British had known the existence of the treaties before they were notified by the French ambassador. Now the government had no choice but to sever diplomatic relations with France immediately. The first Anglo-French naval encounter took place on June 17.<sup>97</sup>

#### IV

A messenger carrying the treaties landed at Boston on April 19 and hurried to York, Pennsylvania, where the Continental Congress had been meeting.<sup>98</sup> He arrived there late on Saturday, May 2. The members of Congress, hurriedly reconvened, were told of the conclusion of the two treaties and their terms. On the next Monday, Congress quickly ratified the two treaties unanimously.<sup>99</sup>

The arrival of the treaties in Congress was very timely. Because of the activities of the British secret service and the British navy, no report on the progress of treaty negotiation had reached Congress. As a matter of fact, Congress had not received any letter from the Commissioners written after the end of the previous May.<sup>100</sup> Intelligence which Congress had obtained regarding the treaty negotiations in Paris was meager.<sup>101</sup>

On the other hand, Congress had better information about North's conciliatory speech and the two proposed bills. The North ministry, apprehensive of the progress of treaty negotiations in Paris, lost no time in transmitting North's propositions to America. Lord Howe, the Commander of the British Army in America, distributed from Philadelphia copies of North's speech and the proposed bills. In Congress, a committee studied them and recommended in its report that Congress should not negotiate with the British Commissioners unless Britain withdrew troops and fleets or granted independence beforehand. Although Con-

<sup>97</sup> Bemis, *Diplomacy of Revolution*, pp. 66-67; Corwin, *French Policy*, p. 169.

<sup>98</sup> Stinchcombe, *American Revolution and French Alliance*, pp. 13-15.

<sup>99</sup> JCC, Vol. 9, pp. 417-18; 457-58.

<sup>100</sup> Committee for Foreign Affairs to Commissioners, 30 April 1778, *LMCC*. Vol. 3, p. 208.

<sup>101</sup> Edmund Cody Burnett, *The Continental Congress* (New York, 1941), p. 330.

gress approved the report, there were a number of delegates who wanted to soften the tone of the report, thinking that, unless the existence and the terms of a treaty with France were clearly known, Congress must keep its door wide open to British offers of reconciliation.<sup>102</sup>

Henry Laurens, the then President of Congress, feared that the British Commissioners might succeed in dividing the unity of the patriots by offering terms attractive enough to the moderates if the Americans remained uncertain about the result of the treaty negotiations in Paris.<sup>103</sup> Naturally, the American leaders were anxious for the arrival of new intelligence from their commissioners. The Committee of Foreign Affairs wrote to them: "the Enemy are entering upon a plan which must shortly perplex us much, unless we receive dispatches from you to enlighten us as to your situation and transactions of which we have had no information since the latter end of May . . . ."<sup>104</sup>

The terms of the two treaties seemed quite favorable to America. The "no separate peace" clause and the perpetual American guarantee of the French possessions in the Americas in the treaty of alliance did not appear to concern the jubilant Americans, although a few expressed some apprehension.<sup>105</sup> No complaint about the terms of the treaties was apparently raised in Congress except for Article XII of the treaty of amity and commerce, which had been a subject of considerable discussion among the Commissioners. Many members of Congress shared the same apprehension with Arthur Lee. If states decided to levy export duties, everything might be shipped to the French West Indies to avoid such export duties. Because of such a fear, Congress decided to ask France to delete both Articles XI and XII.<sup>106</sup>

Because of satisfaction with the treaty terms, American patriots in general were lavish in their gratitude for French generosity and in their

<sup>102</sup> *LMCC*, Vol. 3, pp. 207–08.

<sup>103</sup> Laurens to John Laurens, 28 April 1778, Laurens to President of South Carolina (Rawlins Lowdes), 1 May 1778, Laurens to George Washington, 27 April 1778, Laurens to Governor of New Jersey (William Livingston), 27 April 1778, *LMCC*, Vol. 3, pp. 191–92, 195, 211.

<sup>104</sup> James Lovell for Committee for Foreign Affairs to Commissioners, 30 April 1778, *RDC*, Vol. 2, p. 567.

<sup>105</sup> Andrew Adams to Oliver Wolcott, 22 July 1778, *LMCC*, Vol. 3, p. 347; S. Adams to Peter Thacher, 11 Aug. 1778, *ibid.*, p. 368.

<sup>106</sup> *JCC*, Vol. 11, pp. 459–60; R. H. Lee and Lovell for Committee for Foreign Affairs to Commissioners, 14, 15 May 1778, *RDC*, Vol. 2, pp. 575, 583. These two articles were annulled by an exchange of declarations between Vergennes and the Commissioners on September 1, 1778.

admiration of French statesmanship. Benjamin Franklin and Silas Deane, transmitting the text of the two treaties to Congress, emphasized French generosity and good will. "We only observe to you," they wrote, "that we have found throughout this business the greatest cordiality in this court; and that no advantage has been taken or attempted to be taken of our present difficulties to obtain hard terms from us; but such has been the king's magnanimity and goodness, that he has proposed none which we might not readily have agreed to in a state of full prosperity and established power."<sup>107</sup>

Congress responded to the treaties with a similar feeling. Having ratified them quickly, Congress adopted a resolution: "this Congress entertains the highest sense of the magnanimity and wisdom of his most Christian majesty, so strongly exemplified in the treaty of amity and commerce, and the treaty of alliance. . . ."<sup>108</sup> Speaking for the Virginia delegation to Congress in a letter to Governor Patrick Henry, Richard Henry Lee echoed this same feeling. "In general," he wrote, "we find that his most Christian Majesty has been governed by principles of magnanimity and true generosity, taking no advantage of our circumstances. . . ."<sup>109</sup> Possibly, the patriot leaders, remembering traditional American hostility toward France, deliberately emphasized French generosity and friendship in order to impress the Americans. But these expressions certainly reflected the genuine feeling of the men just relieved from tension. The patriot press echoed the same sentiment.<sup>110</sup>

To Americans, the French king, once regarded by them as a vicious despot, now became a hero, defender of American liberty, and protector of the rights of man. The role of despot was now played by the British king. "What a miraculous change in the political world!" exclaimed Elbridge Gerry, impressed by this ironical change of political roles.<sup>111</sup> There were, however, some patriots who were dissatisfied with the expression of gratitude lavished upon the French king. Henry Laurens had not entertained any trust in the faith of benevolence of monarchs. He

<sup>107</sup> Franklin and Deane to President of Congress (Henry Laurens), 8 Feb. 1778, *RDC*, Vol. 2, pp. 490-91.

<sup>108</sup> *JCC*, Vol. 11, pp. 457-58.

<sup>109</sup> Virginia Delegates to Governor of Virginia (Patrick Henry), 3 May 1778. *LMCC*, Vol. 3, pp. 216-17.

<sup>110</sup> See Oliver Wolcott to Mrs. Wolcott, 9 May 1778, *LMCC*, Vol. 3, pp. 224-25; William Ellery to William Vernon, 6 May 1778, *ibid.*, Vol. 3, p. 222; Stinchcombe, *American Revolution and French Alliance*, p. 16.

<sup>111</sup> Gerry to—, 26 May 1778, James T. Austin, *Life of Elbridge Gerry* (2 vols., Boston, 1828), Vol. 1, p. 276.

thought America could make use of France, but should not be unnecessarily dependent upon her. Retaining his distrust of French policy, Laurens was not optimistic about the blessings of the French alliance. Laurens was afraid that the alliance might restrict rather than increase American freedom of expansion, especially southward expansion toward East Florida and the Bahamas.<sup>112</sup>

However, most patriots tended to overestimate the blessing of the French alliance. Many expected that the alliance not only made American independence a certainty but also would realize an American dream of expansion toward Canada, Nova Scotia and even the Floridas. In a letter to William Lee, the Committee of Foreign Affairs wrote optimistically of the prospect of Nova Scotia and Canada being soon united with the United States.<sup>113</sup> Expecting that Spain as well as France would soon join the war against Britain, Richard Henry Lee wrote to Washington joyfully, "Should Great Britain be engaged in war with the Bourbon family, it will furnish us an opportunity of pushing the former quite off this Northern Continent, which will secure to us peace for a century. . . ." <sup>114</sup> "I hope," Samuel Adams wrote, "we shall secure to the U.S., Canada, Nova Scotia and the Fishery by our arms or by Treaty."<sup>115</sup> Invigorated by the French alliance, Congress reaffirmed the acquisition of Canada and Nova Scotia as a war purpose. As for the Floridas, many members of Congress were willing to renounce America's claim to Spain in return for a Spanish alliance.

Although Americans were disappointed by the performance of Admiral d'Estaing's fleet in the summer of 1778, they continued to hope to conquer Canada and Nova Scotia with French assistance. Gérard, knowing Vergennes' intentions in territorial matters, was lukewarm in supporting American ambitions.<sup>116</sup> Vergennes had stated in his instruction to Gérard, who became the first French Minister to the United States: "The envoys of Congress have proposed to the king to enter into an engagement to favor the conquest by the Americans of Canada, Nova

<sup>112</sup> Laurens to William Laurens, 27 Jan. 1778, cited by Stinchcombe, *American Revolution and French Alliance*, p. 12; Laurens to John Garvais, 5 Sept. 1777, *LMCC*, Vol. 2, p. 481; Laurens to George Washington, 31 July 1778, *LMCC*, Vol. 3, p. 356. Also see *ibid.*, pp. 273, 380, 383.

<sup>113</sup> Committee for Foreign Affairs to William Lee, 14 May 1778, *RDC*, Vol. 2, p. 579.

<sup>114</sup> R. H. Lee to George Washington, 24 June 1778, *LRHL*, Vol. I, p. 420.

<sup>115</sup> S. Adams to James Warren, 3 Nov. 1778, *WSA*, Vol. 4, p. 90.

<sup>116</sup> Gérard to Vergennes, 20–21 Oct. 1778, Meng, *Despatches and Instructions*, pp. 339–47.

Scotia, and the Floridas. . . . But the king has considered that the possessions of those three countries, or at least of Canada, by England, will be an element of disquiet and anxiety to the Americans, which will make them feel the more the need they have of the alliance and the friendship of the king. . . .”<sup>117</sup>

However, the young Marquis de Lafayette was enthusiastic about a joint Franco-American expedition to reduce Canada and Nova Scotia. With his cooperation, a committee of Congress drafted a joint expedition plan and attached it to the draft instructions to Franklin, who was now appointed to the sole minister plenipotentiary at the court of France. The committee submitted to Congress these drafts and Congress approved them with slight modifications on October 22.<sup>118</sup>

Franklin was instructed, among other things, that he should inculcate the certainty of ruining the British fisheries on the banks of Newfoundland, and consequently the British marine, by reducing Halifax and Quebec. For a concrete proposal, he was directed to refer to the attached plan of a joint expedition.<sup>119</sup> The plan envisaged large scale assaults on Canada and Nova Scotia to be carried out in the next summer. The plan of a joint expedition listed the political advantages to be derived from it for both the United States and France. France would be able to consolidate French rights in Newfoundland fisheries, and therefore would be able to strengthen her marine power; France would increase the security of her interests in the Americas; France could strengthen her American ally; and France could regain her share in the Canadian fur trade. American benefits would be the security of her frontiers; the improvement of her finances; the accession of two states to

<sup>117</sup> “Memoire pour servir d’Instruction au Sr. Gérard . . . ,” 29 March 1778, *ibid.*, p. 129. (English translation) *RDC*, Vol. 2, p. 526. It was probably Gérard himself who, having negotiated the treaties with the American Commissioners, informed Vergennes of the American hope to conquer Canada, with French assistance. Gérard told the Commissioners that the King could not be expected to aid the U.S. to conquer Canada. (Arthur Lee’s Diary, 8 Jan. 1778, *Arthur Lee*, Vol. 2, pp. 372, 377.) He was also informed by Deane that Franklin regarded the expulsion of the British from the whole continent the most definite reason for forming ties with France. Gérard’s memo, 9 Jan. 1778, Stevens, *Facsimiles*, no. 1831.

<sup>118</sup> The members of the committee were Gouverneur Morris, Samuel Chase, William Henry Drayton, Samuel Adams, Richard Henry Lee and John Witherspoon. (*JCC*, Vol. 12, pp. 908, 1005.) It is worth noting that both S. Adams and R. H. Lee, whom Gérard would soon regard as the leaders of the anti-French faction, were in the committee which recommended a joint Canadian expedition.

<sup>119</sup> 22 Oct. 1778, *JCC*, Vol. 12, p. 1041.

the union; stimulation for the development of an American marine; and joint monopolization of the fisheries with France.<sup>120</sup>

Congress was willing to agree to the acquisition of Newfoundland by France if the latter helped the United States to drive the British out of Canada and Nova Scotia. Congress would also grant France a share of the fur trade in Canada. The two countries should share fisheries in the Newfoundland banks and in the coast of Canada and Nova Scotia, excluding other nations. Thus, the collaborationist idea of an alliance with France to monopolize jointly mercantilist spoils prevailed in Congress again. Because of his idea of balancing the United States with British power in North America, Vergennes did not subscribe to the proposal for such a joint expedition. "While devoting our effort to humbling England," he explained tactfully, "we must carefully avoid giving any impression that we are seeking her destruction. She is necessary to the balance of Europe, wherein she occupies a considerable place."<sup>121</sup>

In appearance, Congress was proposing a long-term close alliance with France. Was it willing to involve America in the European international system permanently? Certainly not. Its primary motive was maximum security from Britain. Once such security was obtained, America would be able to be independent of the European system. A formal alliance could remain, but dependence would not. Vergennes knew it well. His America was an America fearful of Britain and therefore willing to serve as a French dummy in the balance of power system in the western hemisphere.

Meanwhile, enthusiasm in Congress for a joint campaign was dampened by Washington's opposition. Informed of the plan, Washington immediately gave Congress his opinion that such an expedition would be highly impracticable because of the lack of troops. In a private letter to Laurens, he also expressed his apprehension of possible political consequence of such an expedition. A Canadian expedition led by a Frenchman alarmed "all my feelings for the true and permanent interests of my country." French occupation of Canada, particularly Quebec, which was "attached to them by all the ties of blood, habits, manners, religion and former connection of government" would, he feared, "be too great a temptation to be resisted by any power actuated by the common maxims of national policy." He was not anti-French, but believed that "no

<sup>120</sup> See *JCC*, Vol. 12, pp. 1042–48 for the plan. As for American applications for French military assistance, see *RDC*, Vol. 3, pp. 3–6, 55–56.

<sup>121</sup> Quoted by Van Alstyne, *Empire and Independence*, p. 168.

nation can be trusted farther than it is bound by its interests.” Washington’s official letter was read in Congress. The committee which had recommended a joint expedition conferred with Washington and then submitted to Congress a report recommending the abandonment of the Canadian expedition. Congress formally abandoned the plan on January 1, 1779.<sup>122</sup>

As has been mentioned, France had her own reasons for her reluctance to support American territorial ambitions toward Canada and Nova Scotia. France also proved to be reluctant to support American claims for the Floridas and the Mississippi navigation, which were in conflict with Spanish interests. Gérard repeatedly advised members of Congress to formulate a moderate peace ultimatum in 1779 when Congress debated on the minimum conditions for an acceptable peace.<sup>123</sup>

As a result, some disappointed American leaders became distrustful of French policy. Disappointing, too, was the inability of their ally to improve the military situation.<sup>124</sup> But disappointment was mutual in this respect, for the French were dismayed to learn that they had badly overestimated the American Army. Most of the members of Congress themselves had to admit America’s military and diplomatic weakness in the darkest days of the Revolution, when the British occupied Georgia and South Carolina in addition to New York City. In this crisis of the Revolution, France was the only country America could ask for sizable financial and military aid. French support, however limited it might be, seemed to be America’s only asset in the peace negotiations which two neutral powers were planning to sponsor. Under such circumstances, those who favored closer collaboration with France gained the ascendancy in Congress.<sup>125</sup> In 1781, therefore, Congress complied with the French request to instruct its peace plenipotentiary not only to cooperate closely with the ministers of the French court but also to make his ultimate decisions in accordance with their advice.<sup>126</sup>

<sup>122</sup> Washington to President of Congress, 11 Nov. 1778, *Writings of George Washington* (the Ford edition), Vol. 7, p. 240, Washington to Henry Lee, 14 Nov. 1778, *Writings of George Washington* (the Fitzpatrick edition), Vol. 8, pp. 254–57, also 13 Dec. 1778, *Writings* (Ford edition), Vol. 7, p. 285.

<sup>123</sup> Sparks, *Life of Gouverneur Morris*, Vol. 1, pp. 194–95. See also *JCC*, Vol. 12, pp. 1140, 1227, 1230, 1250, Vol. 13, pp. 61–65.

<sup>124</sup> Murphy, “The View from Versailles,” pp. 133–42.

<sup>125</sup> Stinchcombe, *American Revolution and French Alliance*, pp. 62–76; Neil T. Storch, “Congressional Politics and Diplomacy,” *Diss.*, University of Wisconsin, 1969, *passim*.

<sup>126</sup> *JCC*, Vol. 20, pp. 619, 625–27.

Fortunately for the Americans, the battle of Yorktown completely transformed the American bargaining position. While the victory at Yorktown, an achievement of Franco-American military cooperation, renewed popular enthusiasm for the Franco-American alliance,<sup>127</sup> this victory also marked the end of the days of America's dependence upon France. Just as the conquest of Canada in the Seven Years War had freed the colonies from dependence upon Britain, the victory at Yorktown freed the United States from dependence upon France. Since the British became willing to grant independence and generous peace terms to their former colonies in 1782, the American peace commissioners no longer needed French support in peace negotiations. They were rather afraid of French interference in these negotiations. Thus they quietly ignored the instructions of the previous year.<sup>128</sup>

## v

When American patriots decided to declare independence, they expected favorable responses from the major European nations. Their calculation of foreign reactions was too optimistic because of their overconfidence in the international effect of the declaration of American independence and of the liberation of American trade from British control.

Even France did not promptly acknowledge American independence and come to their rescue. Spain did nothing to help the Americans except for a small amount of secret aid. Even after her entry in the war as a French ally, she continued to take an unsympathetic attitude toward the United States.

However, it may be said that American calculations of French response to the American Revolution proved to be basically correct. From the beginning France showed sympathy for the American cause. She allowed the presence of the American Commissioners in Paris and gave a considerable amount of secret aid to the Americans. Although she hesitated one and a half years, she finally recognized American independence and became an ally of the United States.

Americans had anticipated such a favorable French response by assessing French national interests in terms of mercantilist power politics. Vergennes, the French policymaker, largely calculated French national

<sup>127</sup> Stinchcombe, "Americans Celebrate the Birth of the Dauphin," in Hoffman and Albert, eds., *Diplomacy and Revolution*, p. 43.

<sup>128</sup> Morris, *Peacemakers*, pp. 344-46.



interests in a similar manner. Americans considered French interests almost exclusively within the framework of Atlantic affairs. Although Vergennes valued French hegemony in European affairs as the most important French purpose, he considered that to humble Britain in American affairs was the most effective way to establish French hegemony in Europe.<sup>129</sup> As Americans expected, therefore, Vergennes gave top priority to the policy of weakening Britain by detaching the thirteen colonies from her. A memorandum written by Vergennes or under his supervision stated: "The independence of the Colonies is so important a matter for France . . . that France must undertake the war for the maintenance of American independence, even if that war should be in other respects disadvantageous."<sup>130</sup> This statement resembles strikingly the following observation by John Adams: "That it is the unquestionable interest of France that the British continental colonies should be independent . . . worth more than all the exertions we should require of her even if it should draw her into another eight or ten years war."<sup>131</sup>

It is ironical that the American republican and the seasoned statesman of the old regime interpreted French interest in American independence in a similar way. If the liberal Turgot could have shaped French policy, the American patriots would have received from France little but moral support. Since he believed that colonial rule and trade monopolies were obsolete and destined to vanish sooner or later, the American patriots would have had little bargaining power with him. But Vergennes, a practitioner of mercantilist power politics, was willing to risk a war to weaken Britain by breaking down her trade monopoly of her American colonies and by detaching them politically from Britain. Ideological hostility to a colonial rebellion or republicanism never played a major role in his diplomacy.

All the parties, America, Britain and France, over-estimated the effect of American independence upon the international balance of power. As it turned out later, British power was by no means visibly diminished by American independence. Even without a treaty of commerce, Britain was able to regain the lion's share in American trade. History vin-

<sup>129</sup> "England is our first enemy, and the others never had any force or energy except from her." Vergennes to Noailles, 17 Jan. 1778, Doniol, *Histoire*, Vol. 2, pp. 745-46.

<sup>130</sup> A memorandum translated in Corwin, *French Policy*, appendix III, p. 402.

<sup>131</sup> *DAJA*, Vol. 3, pp. 328-29.

dicated Turgot's prophecy that Vergennes's American policy would risk too much for too little.<sup>132</sup>

While John Adams wanted to keep the United States as free as possible from political and military ties with France, a group of American patriots were willing to have closer ties with her. When Americans were confident of their ability to win independence, the advocates of unilateralism like John Adams dominated American diplomacy. When Americans became more pessimistic about their fortune in war and diplomacy, the advocates of collaboration increased their influence upon American diplomacy. Again, the collaborationist posture became dominant in Congress when many American leaders were attracted by expansionist dreams. If America could secure handsome territorial and mercantilist returns by forming a close relationship with France, they reasoned, it would be appropriate for her to develop such a relationship. Yet Vergennes had no intention of assisting them to realize their exorbitant expansionist ambitions; neither would France have been able to provide such help even if Vergennes had wanted to do so.

If the Americans were frustrated by the French inability or unwillingness to help them realize their expansionist goals, they had to depend upon France as long as they felt they were in a tense diplomatic and military situation. Once, however, Britain became willing to offer the Americans independence and very favorable peace terms, the posture of collaboration with France was destined to disappear from American diplomacy.

<sup>132</sup> The "tragic" character of Vergennes's policy was emphasized by Jonathan R. Dull in his article, "France and the American Revolution Seen as Tragedy," in Hoffman and Albert, eds., *Diplomacy and Revolution*, pp. 107-49.