
WILLIAM III, ENGLAND

AND THE BALANCE OF POWER IN EUROPE

J.L. Price

From the time of his assumption of power in the beleaguered Dutch Republic in the summer of 1672, foreign affairs were the central concern of William III's life. His military activities were undertaken to support his foreign policy, and the rest of his political actions both in the Republic and in England were primarily designed to gain and maintain support for it. It is not surprising, then, that studies of this not unenigmatic prince should have devoted considerable attention to the details of his diplomatic and military activities. Similarly, the degree of success which he can be said to have achieved has been the focus of much controversy. However, much less has been written about the motivations of the prince, or to the nature of his understanding of the European arena in which he operated. In part, the lack of concern for his motives seems to have arisen because they have been taken to be self-evident, but this is a very questionable assumption. Another matter which deserves rather more attention than it has received in the past is the question of how practical his policies were in the circumstances of the time, and of how realistic his view of the European situation was. For the wisdom of his policies was certainly questioned by contemporaries, particularly in the Dutch Republic, and it has to be admitted that they had a case, at least given their priorities and the information available to them. Particularly when considering the prince's career in a European perspective, his motives, the calculations behind his policies, and their ultimate effectiveness need to be re-examined. Finally, although this subject has perhaps already been overworked, it would seem an unnecessary austerity not to add a final comment on the extent to which the prince's aims were achieved, and how important William's own role was.

Very soon after William took over the effective leadership of the Dutch Republic, domestic opinion began to be sharply divided over the wisdom of his foreign and military policy. His critics were particularly concerned

about the health of the Dutch economy. Even before 1672 anxieties had begun to be expressed about signs that Dutch economic growth was beginning to falter, and prolonged warfare inevitably brought with it the burden of high taxes and damaged Dutch trade. A prosperous economy was an essential prerequisite for a vigorous foreign policy, and his critics feared that William, in his single-minded insistence on dealing with the French threat head-on, would weaken the economy to such an extent that the Dutch state would no longer have the financial power to defend itself in any case. Such general apprehensions were given more than a little credibility by the upsurge of English trade to the Baltic in the period 1674-78 when England was neutral but the Dutch were still embroiled in the war with France.¹ This was a vital sector of the Dutch trading system and, whereas in the earlier history of the Republic, war had coincided with economic growth (though it had probably not helped²), from at least the time of the First Anglo-Dutch War it had become clear to the mercantile community of Holland that this was highly unlikely to be the case in the future.

In addition to the high cost of William's wars, and the damage which constant warfare did to Dutch trade, his policies were thought to be rash, in that they exposed the Republic unnecessarily to French retaliation. After the French troops had been cleared from the territory of the Republic, the Dutch consensus over foreign policy was broken. It was felt, at least by the prince's critics, that the terms agreed with the French at Nijmegen could have been obtained years earlier³, and that nothing had been gained by the continuation of war except increased French resentment. The prince's general approach to the problem of dealing with France seemed lacking in subtlety, and to be particularly dangerous given the lack of reliable and powerful allies for the Dutch. As long as England, the emperor and other major and minor powers refused to recognise the danger posed by Louis XIV's France, perhaps it would have been wiser for the Dutch to keep a low profile as long as the French were willing to leave them alone.

A further aspect of William's government which raised apprehensions was his ruthless methods of gaining domestic support for his foreign policy. At least some of the methods the prince used to achieve and maintain support within the Republic seemed to threaten its cherished liberties. His *faux pas* over the ducal title of Gelderland should perhaps be allowed a symbolic significance, as in fact his powers as *stadhouder* were increased to a considerable extent in the *regeringsreglementen* which were promulgated to order the affairs of those provinces which had been occupied by the French. Subsequently, these provinces tended to follow the directions of the prince more or less without question. Perhaps even more disturbing to the more idealistic and tender-minded of the republicans was the patronage and support which he gave to corrupt political bosses, as they saw it, in a number of towns in Holland and Zeeland. He continued to

back these men almost irrespective of their misconduct as long as they remained ready and able to deliver the goods in the form of favourable votes from their towns in the provincial states. In the view of his most extreme critics, thus, William was not only endangering the Republic by his rashness and neglecting the interests of the economy, but he was also undermining the health of its political institutions.

Such criticisms have been generally dismissed by historians as short-sighted or narrow-minded, with the finger particularly pointed at Amsterdam with permanent concern for its trade⁴, but in fact they amount to a formidable charge-sheet and deserve serious consideration. On the other hand, William did, of course, have his supporters. Normally, he could rely on the land provinces, for, in addition to his enhanced powers as *stadhouder* in these areas, they had traditionally been rather more concerned with the protection of the Republic's frontiers than of its trade; on the Orangist interest, which looked to him for national leadership and inspiration; and to the paladins of the Reformed Church who were in the main⁵ enthusiastic and almost uncritical supporters of the house of Orange.

William began his period of power with a very strong basis of political support. The *wetsverzetten* in the towns of Holland and Zeeland in 1672 had brought their governments under the control of traditional and opportunist Orangists, while, after the retreat of the French armies, Utrecht, Gelderland and Overijssel could generally be relied upon to support their *stadhouder*. Moreover, the very real nature of the French threat hardly needed emphasising in the immediate aftermath of the invasion of 1672. Perhaps almost as important as these political factors in generating widespread support for William's anti-French policies, however, was religion. The Revocation of the Edict of Nantes in 1685 was only the culmination of a long period of steadily increasing persecution for the protestants of France, and almost from their beginnings Louis' religious policies had had a powerful impact on public opinion in the Dutch Republic. The presence of large numbers of Huguenot refugees in the Republic, including some of the most formidable polemicists of the time, kept the issue of the French king's illtreatment of his protestant subjects constantly before the minds of the educated Dutch public. Many who might otherwise have been inclined to doubt, on political or economic grounds, the wisdom of William's policies were convinced of the necessity of unremitting opposition to French power by their fears for the survival of protestantism in Europe as a whole. This fear was to become even more acute and immediate with the accession of the avowedly catholic James II to the English throne. Thus religious considerations came to the aid of an otherwise questionable strategy.

Historians have tended to accept without, it would seem, much serious analysis that William was right to pursue his single-mindedly anti-French policy, even though many have acknowledged that the heavy costs of the long wars with France were at the very least a contributory factor to

Dutch economic and political decline. Baxter, for example, takes as read the correctness of William's policies, so much so in fact that he neglects to give anything more than a superficial account of the broader European context of the measures. He presents William's Dutch opponents as simply ignorant or defeatist.⁶ However, Franken's study of Van Beuningen⁷ opens up more interesting perspectives on the question. In particular, he points out that, while Van Beuningen shared William's conviction of the necessity of opposing French expansionism, he differed from the prince in being prepared to be flexible, especially in order to avoid the danger of the Republic being left to face France alone or with insufficiently powerful allies. Moreover, as an Amsterdam regent, Van Beuningen had a more intimate and perhaps realistic view of the economic roots of Dutch power than the prince. From this perspective, the self-evident rightness of William's policies is less apparent.

English historians have been even less drawn to any serious consideration of the rationale of William's judgement about the situation in Europe. They have understandably tended to concentrate on his role in the Glorious Revolution and his performance as king of England, and their interest in his foreign policy has been largely concerned with the period after 1688, when it was less controversial.⁸ Moreover, the long period of hostilities with France which succeeded William's elevation marked the emergence of England as a great power. From this point on historians have tended to regard it as inevitable that the two countries should be permanently at loggerheads and frequently at war. It is a curious circumstance that historians of the later Stuarts have often seen fit to justify the foreign policy of Charles II and James II, even the former's attack on the Dutch in 1672, as promoting the national interest, but that historians of an only slightly later period have treated the wars against France after 1688 as equally obviously the embodiment of English interests. In any case, English scholarship has not done a great deal to increase our understanding of William's appreciation of the European situation, particularly before 1688, except in the rather restricted area of his relations with their own country.

Perhaps one reason why the roots of the prince's strategic vision have proved so elusive is that they have not been sought. William's have been taken as deriving simply and unambiguously from the situation in which he found himself and the country it was his duty to guide to safety. The central thrust of his policy from the point at which he took over the leadership of the Republic in the traumatic days of the summer of 1672 was resistance to Louis XIV and to threat of French hegemony in Europe. To this end he used his position at the head of the Dutch state to organise, animate and maintain coalitions against France. The only aspect of this policy that has appeared problematical to historians has been his frequent failures to sell it either to his compatriots or to the leaders of the other European powers. After the territory of the Republic had been

cleared of French troops, the proponents of a quick peace with France became increasingly vocal and influential, while externally it was never easy for a variety of reasons to maintain an effective set of alliances.

Certainly, the international situation in the last quarter of the seventeenth century was distinctly unfavourable for William's purposes. Spain, whose possessions in the Southern Netherlands were among those most directly threatened by the French, apparently lacked both the military power and the political will to provide the Dutch with any real support. Indeed, Carlos II's persistently poor health and his failure to produce an heir meant that the succession to his enfeebled but still-desirable empire was a source of disputes and expectations which helped to complicate the thinking of William's contemporaries and prevent them from sharing the stark simplicity of his vision.

Nor could the states of the Holy Roman Empire provide the prince with powerful or reliable allies. A French combination of bullying and bribery prevented the emergence of any significant anti-French grouping for much of this period. Even Brandenburg, beginning its emergence as a major power, was a far from reliable ally for the Dutch despite Frederick William I's personal and religious sympathies with them. The Swedish presence on Brandenburg's borders in Pomerania made the Great Elector cautious, particularly as long as the Swedes remained susceptible to French influence. Sweden, in its turn, although still capable of making a significant impact on the European scene, as the meteoric career of Charles XII was later to show, was kept quiet by a combination of French bribery at the Swedish court and the perceived fragility of its Baltic empire, and was more likely to support France than to oppose it.

In these circumstances, the emperor became a key figure. Yet the circumstances of the Austrian Habsburgs was not such as to allow Leopold easy or straightforward choices, even if he did recognise the seriousness of the threat posed by France. While he realised that Louis XIV was a danger both to the liberties of the Holy Roman Empire and to the power of the emperor within this peculiar institution, he was also faced a double problem in his Austrian lands which made it difficult for him to commit himself decisively against France. Firstly, his protestant subjects in Austria and Hungary were far from crushed as yet, and they could always look for help to their co-religionists in Transylvania. More importantly, the Ottoman threat to Habsburg power in Central Europe was far from being a thing of the past, indeed it came to a head again in 1684 with their final great assault on Vienna. Even after this date, Austrian strength and attention was constantly drawn into the effort of rolling back the Turks in Hungary. The tide may have turned against the Ottomans, but the continued imperial effort against them still made it difficult for the Austrians to commit themselves for any length of time to a major military effort in Western Europe.

Above all, England's equivocal foreign policy denied William the ally which he saw as an essential and natural part of his anti-French coalition. Like De Witt before him, the prince believed that England's interests were as much involved in checking French expansion as were those of the Dutch, even if the sea barriers meant that English territory was less immediately under threat. The problem was - and remained until the revolution of 1688 - that neither Charles II nor James II appeared to share this view of the fundamental interests of their country. England was forced in 1674 to end its shocking alliance with France, partly at least because of the skillful manipulation of English opinion by Dutch propaganda⁹, but the two Stuart kings and their ministers continued to give priority to internal politics and kept England on the side-lines of the European conflict.

To a considerable extent, the problems thus facing William were of the same general nature as those with which De Witt had had to deal - with the important exception that, at the same time as they became more acute, they also became somewhat clearer. In De Witt's time it was only slowly that it became clear that France was the Republic's chief danger, on the continent at least. Admittedly, apprehension at the rising power of France had been a major *motif* in Dutch foreign policy assessments on the republican side from at least the early 1640's, but only towards the end of De Witt's period did it become clear just how much of a threat France had become. Moreover, for much of the time an amicable settlement with France seemed not only desirable but possible. Only with the collapse of De Witt's strategy after 1668 did it become clear that not only was France unquestionably the most powerful European state, but that Louis XIV's ambitions for territory and glory were not going to be easily satisfied. Thus, although there was a continuity of purpose between the policies of De Witt and William, the latter had to operate in a much starker world where the options were fewer and the choices clearer. The suggestion that here was a similarity between the foreign policies of De Witt and William may seem a little forced, given that the former sought accommodation and the latter accepted the necessity of war, but both recognised the importance of the French threat and by 1688 De Witt had clearly decided that if France could not be held in check by means of an amicable settlement then other methods must be applied. The smooth transition made by men like Van Beuningen from the service of De Witt to that of William is an indication of the extent to which the last years of the *raadpensionaris* had been a preparation for those of the prince. Of course, De Witt had always shown much greater sensitivity to the needs of trade than William was ever to exhibit, though not always as much as the trading towns would have liked, and this comparative neglect of the economy under the prince marked a distinct shift in emphasis.

This element of continuity in the general policy-orientation of the *stadhouder* brings us back to the question of his motivation - was his policy simply Dutch, or were there elements in it more peculiar to the

prince. While at one level William can be represented as simply a patriotic Dutchman, he has also been represented as the champion of European 'liberties' (a term incidentally more usually associated with republics than with princes) and his acceptance of the English crown made at least some of his Dutch contemporaries wonder just where his basic loyalties lay. He can also be seen as a champion of the protestant cause in Europe: his major acts and characteristic projects fit pretty well with this interpretation, and he met with no little success in confronting the challenges to his religion which came from France and from James II in England.

Yet again, is his career consistent with the idea that he was a proponent of the balance of power in Europe, and what is meant by this phrase in any case?¹⁰ It might somewhat cynically be suggested that the balance of power has never really been an ideal, but has rather been the ideological resource of the weak. There can have been few cases in history where a powerful state felt that the world would be a safer place if it were weaker; threats to peace have more usually been regarded as coming from the other power or powers. The relationship between the U.S.A. and the U.S.S.R. today is a forceful reminder of the tendency of great powers to regard any preponderance they hold as natural and unthreatening, while any significant advantage held by their opposite number is seen as dangerous, destabilising and evidence of aggressive intent. On the other hand, pursuit of something like a balance of power in Europe - the colonial situation was a rather different matter - suited Dutch needs very well, even during their brief appearance as a major power in the seventeenth century. Certainly, after the Treaty of Münster in 1648 their claim that they were not aggressive rang rather more true than most such protestations in history. It was very much in the Dutch interest to preserve peace as far as possible: they had no territorial claims on their neighbours, which made them almost unique in Europe¹¹, and their economic interests were best served not only by being at peace themselves but by minimising disturbances in the areas with which they traded. In this sense, if he was a champion of the balance of power, was William simply pursuing traditional Dutch objectives?

For, to return to the comparison of the prince with De Witt, the latter can also be plausibly described as the supporter of a power-balance in Europe, though he attempted to achieve this end by rather different means. The practical imperatives of the political and economic needs of the Republic forced De Witt to attempt to play off France, Spain and England in order to minimise the threat to Dutch security and prosperity. In the end he failed, and it was left to William to deal with the consequences of that failure, but a theoretical justification of the balance of power would have come easily from the pens of the propagandists of the Wittian régime, though not without some hint of hypocrisy given the fact that the Dutch profitted, literally, so much from the *status quo*. It is, however, doubtful whether William held any such ideal. His aim was to defeat

France because it threatened the prosperity and survival of the Dutch Republic, and possibly also because it was a danger to protestantism. The balance of power was a means of checking French expansion, not an ideal in itself. A crushing defeat for France might well have disturbed the theoretical balance, but it is doubtful whether this prospect would have caused the prince too many sleepless nights.

One element of William's policies which has been treated rather cautiously by historians is religion. However, it is possible to argue that the religious dimension was important both to the formulation and to the success of his policies, without having to portray the prince as a fanatic, which he was clearly not. Religion certainly helped in rallying opposition to France. Firstly, even taking into consideration the perceived aggressive nature of Louis XIV's foreign policies¹², for contemporaries one of the most shocking aspects of his régime was his harsh and inhumane treatment of the huguenots. Quite why this proved so shocking, even before the Revocation of the Edict of Nantes, in an age when such persecution was rather the rule than the exception, is not entirely clear. Perhaps it was simply that the decline of Spain left open the role of bogey-man to Europe's protestants, and allowed the whole psychological complex of the black legend to be shifted onto the French. Perhaps the nature of the victims of Louis's persecutions was important: not poor Savoyard mountaineers or obscure Polish or Hungarian gentry, but Reformed Europe's social and intellectual centre, at least historically. Certainly, this community had the means to publicise its sufferings throughout protestant Europe, and to mount an impressive propaganda campaign, principally from bases in the Republic, against Louis XIV and all his works.

In some ways William does not fit easily into the role of the protestant champion; he was no bigot, and his entourage included catholics as well as jews. There can be little doubt, however, about the sincerity of his protestant faith and concern for its preservation. That he was not openly passionate on the issue is rather beside the point - he was passionate about very little, except perhaps hunting. This is not to suggest that he was primarily inspired by religious impulses, but that his commitment to protestantism played an important part in forming and maintaining his determination to try to block and roll back French expansion despite the risks involved, and however hopeless the task may have seemed at times.

Whatever the strenght and sincerity of William's own religious motivation, there can be no doubt about the importance of protestant support to the prince at critical moments in his career. His rise to power in the Dutch Republic in 1672 was at least in part a result of the enthusiasm of the supporters of the orthodox Reformed Church for his cause, combining in a sometimes dangerously intoxicating mixture orangism, calvinism and patriotism. Again in 1688, religious factors played a possibly crucial role in gaining support in the Republic for his policy with regard to England. The Revocation of the Edict of Nantes in 1685, together with the succession of

James II to the English throne in the same year, convinced many people in the Republic -and perhaps elsewhere also¹³ - that the very survival of protestantism in Europe was at stake. The degree of support which William was able to achieve for his risky English adventure, and even more perhaps the lack of effective Dutch opposition, is hardly comprehensible unless we assume that religious considerations had converted enough strategically placed regents in Holland at least temporarily to the prince's cause. Despite *raison d'état* and despite the easy generalisations of many historians, religion was still a very real force in both domestic and international politics in the late seventeenth century, though the task of assessing the precise weight of its influence is notoriously difficult.

In a perceptive study¹⁴ Roorda has argued that the prince was a practical man who responded pragmatically to the immediate problems facing him, rather than a visionary or a systematic thinker. This point of view has much to recommend it, but still leaves open the question of the nature of the general psychological orientation which determined the ends this practical intelligence would serve.

A central element in the whole political orientation of the prince is his Dutch patriotism. This is often taken for granted, but the question is not entirely straightforward. Although he often seemed to put the interests of the Republic at risk in the pursuit of his anti-French policies, he seemed always to have believed that he was serving the long-term interests of his country. Yet the question of the nature of his patriotism is not without its ambiguities. While the cruder anti-Orange arguments expressed by Geyl¹⁵ concerning the damage done to Dutch interests by the dynastic concerns of the princes of Orange are now beginning to look more than a little threadbare¹⁶, the question of how far the interests of the prince were identical with those of the Republic was raised in a more acute form than ever before when the *de facto* leader of the Dutch state became the king of England as well.

However, the Dutch Republic was the country of his birth, of his religion, and the land to which his house had inextricable historical ties. His primary loyalties were Dutch, and his central aim throughout his life was to protect the interests, as he saw them, of his native country. Contemporary criticism from the Dutch side partly sprang from doubts as to the wisdom of his policies, not their objectives, and partly from republican suspicions of his motives, which were largely unjustified. With regard to Europe, he certainly had a clearer view of the necessity of international cooperation than most contemporary statesmen, and there seems little reason to doubt that his concern for European 'liberties' was genuine, but from his point of view the most important liberties threatened by Louis XIV were those of the Dutch Republic. The protection of the Dutch state and the maintenance of its position in Europe were the fundamental principles underlying all that William did or tried to do.

Even with regard to England, his primary motivation throughout was to bring the English into the great European conflict on the Dutch side. He may well have also recognised a duty, as well as an opportunity, grounded in his family connections with the English royal house, to help to resolve that country's internal problems, but this was surely a secondary matter. In particular, his dramatic intervention in 1688 was a move in his struggle with France, though a crucial one, and intended to ensure the survival of the Dutch state and its religion.

The problem of England played a central role in William's policies and calculations from even before his assumption of power in the Republic in 1672. He was always inclined to see England as the key element in the European constellation of powers, and as the fragility and ineffectiveness of his systems of alliance without England became clear over time, this belief could only grow stronger. First the English had to be weaned away from their alliance with France, and out of the war against the Dutch. This was achieved by 1674, but the next step was much more difficult and, in fact, William failed to bring England into the conflict on his side before the revolution.

The reason for this neutrality, which suited French interests very well, was not just the incompetence of the last two Stuart kings or their indifference to the increase of French power, rather it reflected a more general English lack of interest or understanding of continental affairs. At this point in their history, the English had not been heavily involved on the continent of Europe for over two hundred years and their political culture had become fundamentally insular. Moreover, those internal political conflicts which kept England impotent in the international arena for the greater part of the seventeenth century had not been solved by the Restoration¹⁷, and politicians who expressed concern about developments in Europe were more likely to be using this as a weapon in the domestic political conflict than to be primarily interested in foreign affairs. Also these structural problems were exacerbated by outside interference: just as the Dutch sustained one party to the conflict by propaganda, money, and by providing a safe haven for exiles, so French subsidies supported the court.

The Revolution brought a decisive change in England's relationship to the rest of Europe; 1688 marked the beginning of a long period of intense English political and military involvement on the continent of Europe, and William's intervention was the immediate cause of this drastic realignment. Yet, in retrospect, it is more than a little surprising that England was capable of sustaining the role of a major power, certainly in terms of military effort. With the possible exception of the Cromwellian period, nothing in the previous century and a half had suggested that England was capable of raising, supplying and paying an army large enough to match those of the chief continental powers. In the event, military intervention

in Europe, even on the relatively modest scale initially involved, required major financial innovations¹⁸, and possibly also a transformation of English political and administrative institutions. William clearly believed that England had sufficient strength to redress the power imbalance in Europe, and we can possibly attribute this belief to a quite remarkable prescience. However, it seems much more likely that this belief stemmed from an overestimation of English strength which was widespread in the seventeenth century. That, in the end, England was able to live up to these ill-founded expectations was fortunate for the new king, not a tribute to his good judgement.

From the point of view, not of Dutch nor of English, but of European history, what was William III's contribution? Any Dutch leader would have done much of what he did in opposing French ambitions, for there was a great deal of common ground between William and his critics (and it was, of course, a republican régime which continued the war resolutely after the prince's death). However, it is possible to doubt whether France could have been held in check without full-scale intervention from England on the allied side, and perhaps only William could have achieved this. His success in winning the English crown (together with his wife) and thus bringing England into the European conflict must stand as his great achievement, and in itself justify regarding his career as a success, despite his failure to make much of an impression on the carapace of French power during his lifetime. Yet it is possible to doubt whether this made a great deal of difference in the long term. Even without William's dramatic intervention, it seems unlikely that England would or could have ignored the French threat indefinitely, and the growing strength of the English economy in the last decades of the seventeenth century meant that it at last had the potential to do something effective about it. Whichever side had triumphed in its domestic troubles, England would surely have been forced to move against France, though it might have been later rather than sooner, given that the birth of an heir to James II in 1688 had disappointed the general hope that these problems, and the unfortunate house of Stuart, would end with the king's death.

Yet, whatever may have happened in the long run in any case - and it may be doubted whether France was the threat to the balance of power in Europe that it appeared to be at the time - the fact remains that William brought together the forces that were to call a halt to French expansion in the decade after his death. Whether any other Dutch leader could have done as much must be doubted.

Noten

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4. S.B. Baxter, *William III* (Londen, 1966) is particularly dismissive of William's critics, at best he considers them well-meaning but ignorant.
5. Not, however, exclusively, M.Th. Uit de Bogaard, *De gereformeerden en Oranje tijdens het eerste stadhouderloze tijdperk* (Groningen/Djakarta, 1954).
6. S.B. Baxter, *op. cit.*, 180 for example.
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