

Carl Cavanagh Hodge

## 'Would to Heaven that the Comparison Were Just'

### The French Revolution in America

The French Revolution broke out during the formative years of the American republic. Hence, its impact on the United States was profound, both in terms of American perceptions of the legitimate authority and limits of democratic government and also in terms of the appropriate attitude that American diplomacy should adopt toward upheaval and conflict in Europe. On the one hand, French interference in American domestic affairs provoked the repressive legislation of Alien and Sedition Acts; on the other, the Quasi War with France nurtured the earliest sentiments of American isolationism.

It is hardly surprising to read that the outbreak of revolution in France was greeted with a mixture of relief and jubilation in the United States. The convening of the Estates General, the meeting of a National Assembly, the storming of the Bastille, and the Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen – all between May and August of 1789 – meant that the little American republic, clinging to the eastern seaboard of a still largely unknown continent, was no longer alone in a hostile Atlantic world of imperial monarchies.<sup>1</sup> The greatest absolutist regime in Europe had fallen to an upheaval that proceeded quickly to the abolition of feudal privilege, the seizure of the property of the Church of Rome, and the crafting of a constitutional monarchy.

1 Walter A McDougall, *Promised Land, Crusader State: The American Encounter with the World since 1776*, (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1997), p.28; Gordon S. Wood, *Empire of Liberty: A History of the Early Republic, 1789-1815*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 174.2 Jean-Paul Bertaud, *Valmy: La démocratie en*

The sense of ideological fraternity nonetheless only went so far. When Austria and Prussia jointly issued the Declaration of Pillnitz, condemning the revolution in France, the question of America's diplomatic position, as France took to arms against Europe, divided the founding generation of the republic. While most Americans welcomed President Washington's policy of official neutrality in the interest of elementary prudence, a debate was joined between one faction of opinion, whose leading spokesmen were Thomas Jefferson and James Madison, and another, represented predominantly by Alexander Hamilton and John Jay; the former favored the French cause, the latter was sympathetic specifically to Great Britain when in 1793 it joined the coalition against France along with the Netherlands and Spain. Although differences over domestic issues also divided them – southern agrarians versus New England merchants – the heated feud over France was critical in creating the first American two-party system, dividing Democratic Republicans against Federalists.

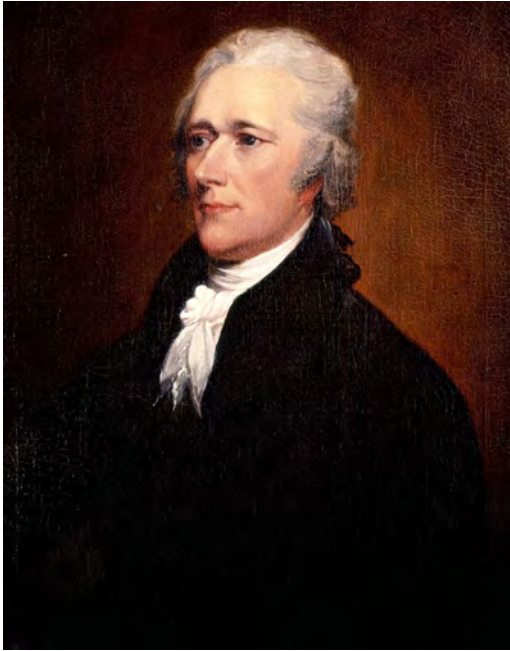
In the meantime, on September 20, 1792 the Battle of Valmy proved that the French revolution's rag-tag army of volunteers and recruits could defeat a combined professional force of Austrians and Prussians come to France to hack down the tree of liberty, in part by virtue of a revolutionary zeal that echoed Lexington and Concord. Americans rightly celebrated the triumph with illuminations and parades. But the *levée en masse* that first drafted free citizens to the defence of revolution and the *patrie* was in fact a first step toward a militarization, first of France and then of her enemies the likes of which Europe had not witnessed since the Roman Empire.<sup>2</sup> Goethe declared Valmy the beginning of a new epoch in human history and could scarcely have guessed at the full implications of that fact, for Valmy sustained revolutionary France in its hour of maximum peril and for Europe it marked the beginning of the Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars in which ever larger

French armies fixed the ideas of 1789 to their bayonets and carried the Revolution's violence to the four corners of Europe.<sup>3</sup>

That violence was constitutive and contagious. In September 1792, the National Convention, the most durable of the revolutionary assemblies,

*armes*, (Paris; Julliard, 1970).

- 3 J. Holland Rose, *The Revolutionary and Napoleonic Era, 1792-1815*, (London: Cambridge University Press, 1935), p. 69; Arno J. Mayer, *The Furies: Violence and Terror in the French and Russian Revolutions*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 11.



Alexander Hamilton by John Trumbull, 1805.

abolished the monarchy and declared a republic; in December it tried Louis XVI and sentenced him to death. Before his execution in January the Convention established new institutions, partly in fearful response to the Austrian defeat of a French army in the Netherlands, among them the Committee for Public Safety whose original nine members included Georges Danton, Louis Antoine de Saint-Just, and Maximilien Isadore de Robespierre. In 1793-74 they presided over The Terror, ostensibly to save the revolution from its real and imagined enemies,

which, by the time it claimed the lives of its architects, had sacrificed some 35-40,000 victims to summary execution.<sup>4</sup>

Jefferson was unruffled by the execution of Louis, while Madison deemed it merely incidental to a great cause. Yet where many of their fellow Republicans assumed an inherent fraternity between America's recently won liberty and the unfolding struggle in France – at times seeming to equate survival of the former with the success of the latter – Federalists were increasingly horrified. 'Would to heaven that the comparison were just,' protested Hamilton, 'would to heaven that we could discern in the Mirror of French affairs, the same humanity, the same decorum, the same gravity, the same order, the same dignity, the same solemnity, which distinguished the American Revolution.'<sup>5</sup> To the multiple virtues ascribed to his own

4 D.M.G. Sutherland, *The French Revolution and Empire: The Quest for a Civic Order*, (Oxford: Blackwell, 2003), 175-262.

5 Quoted in Wood, 177.

republic Hamilton might have added that the most particular contrast of his generation to their ideological brethren in France was pragmatic dispassion. Both equally children of the Enlightenment, America's revolutionaries were above all other things precocious and confident about self-government while France's were obsessed with justice.

*The Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen* had as its philosophical mainspring assumptions about the nature of humankind developed in Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Contrat Social* that were universalist in diagnosis and prescription. Alexis de Tocqueville, the most astute observer of the project of republicanism and democracy on both sides of the Atlantic, was among the first to remark that the course upon which the revolution in France had embarked was 'not merely a change in the French social system but nothing short of a regeneration of the whole human race.'<sup>6</sup> *The American Declaration of Independence* was a far more businesslike document.

Notwithstanding Jefferson's elegance of expression worthy of Bach, the *Declaration* moved quickly beyond its self-evident truths and unalienable rights to a list of indictments brought against George III, and by extension British dominion over America, among them the refusal of 'his Assent to Laws, the most wholesome and necessary for the public good'. There is something to the observation that, having been inspired in part by the American example, France's revolutionaries attempted more than they could manage and that the more modest ambitions of the American *Constitution* and its *Bill of Rights* were therefore more durable. It is worth stressing that though the American Founders held the truths upon which their republic was established to be timeless and universal, they did not strive for perfection in the *Constitution*, far from it. They appreciated the contract of their own liberty had a great hypocrisy at its heart, that the displacement of native Americans had been the precondition of the settlement of the contracting states and that the institution of slavery was an offense to the *Declaration* and a crime, rather a sin, against the *Constitution* – a sin, because of the much greater influence of religion in the American than in the French context. Whereas the French *philosophes* had expected that religious zeal would be extinguished as freedom and enlightenment increased, in America De Tocqueville found quite the opposite. The country where Christianity was more influential was also the most enlightened and free.<sup>7</sup>

6 Quoted in Gertrude Himmelfarb, *The Roads to Modernity: The British, French, and American Enlightenments* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2004), 185-186.

Hard as it may be for observers today to accept that a nation as powerful as the United States was at its founding leavened in its considerable ambition by a spirit of humility, it was indisputably there in the word and spirit of the documents. A ‘decent respect to the opinions of mankind’ prompted the listing of a ‘long train of abuses and usurpations’ that the reluctantly rebellious colonists brought against their king in the *Declaration*; for its part, the *Constitution* sought a ‘more perfect’ rather than a perfect union.<sup>8</sup> The first generation of American leadership had created a republic based on a mixed constitution in which democracy was subordinated to liberty; indeed, John Adams, whom Jefferson once praised as ‘the Colossus of Independence,’ argued in correspondence that ‘there never was a democracy yet that did not commit suicide.’<sup>9</sup>

The French Revolution was a vastly more idealistic, and naïve, undertaking. It defined *le peuple* in highly abstract terms and pursued their interest with such cleansing zeal – in the sense of correcting here-and-now all past iniquities – that in the process it bound up the urgent needs of the people with the survival and indivisible authority of the regime. Absolutist France had been a unitary state; the republic never second-guessed this arrangement but instead built upon it a unitary nation. Such a body as the Committee for Public Safety would have been impossible in the American context, as the early republic was clearly not indivisible but a compact for independence among the united colonies of America to become the United States of America. The issue of indivisibility of the United States was to remain unsettled until 1860, when the provisional nature of the republic had to be addressed and the letter of the *Constitution* brought into line with its spirit. Because President Lincoln prosecuted a war in the name of preserving the Union while abolishing slavery, the American Revolution was in a sense unresolved until the secessionist states surrendered in 1865. American liberal assumptions concerning a just political order were no less universalist, but the prescription of government was limited to the needs of

7 Henry Steele Commager, *The Empire of Reason: How Europe Imagined and America Realized the Enlightenment* (Garden City: Anchor Press, 1977), 227; Himmelfarb, 205.

8 Himmelfarb, 225; Alan Heimert, *Religion in the American Mind from the Great Awakening to the Revolution* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1966).

9 Letters to John Taylor of Caroline, Virginia, in: Charles Francis Adams (ed.), *The Works of John Adams, Second President of the United States*, Vol. VI (Boston: Charles C. Little and James Brown, 1851), 484.

the New England colonists for self-government rather than the regeneration of the human species.<sup>10</sup>

Added to these critical differences in the constitutive spirit between the achievement of American self-government and the decapitation of the Bourbon dynasty in France, there is the fact that French Revolution quickly wore out its welcome in the United States. Specifically, France's war with Britain brought with it a naval struggle over control of the Atlantic Ocean, a conflict entailing danger to the freedom of American overseas commerce. After an internal debate, again pitting Hamilton against Jefferson, President Washington decided in favor of a policy of American neutrality, yet avoided actual use of the word 'neutrality' for fear of causing unnecessary offence to France. Edmond Charles Genêt, was the official representative to the United States of a government in Paris in no mood to make this easy. Immediately upon his arrival in the United States Genêt began to cultivate, in any audience that would listen, popular support for France. To his rhetorical attack against Washington's 'Anglophilic' policy he added the more substantive injury of authorizing French prize courts to rule on the status of British ships captured by French privateers, while commissioning additional privateers to be manned by American crews and purchasing ammunition to be shipped to France. Federalist attacks against Genêt's demagoguery and abuse of his office were countered by Republican defenses of it – at their worst toasting the Jacobin regime and its sanguinary egalitarianism – until the record of the French envoy's excesses alone began to tilt American sentiment against him. On August 1, 1793 the United States demanded the recall of Citizen Genêt. In the meantime, however, the Committee for Public Safety itself sought the envoy's arrest and return, a request Washington declined on the grounds of its wholly justified fear of what awaited the envoy in Paris. Genêt remained in the United States and ultimately became an American citizen. His story troubled even Jefferson's sense of fraternity with revolutionary France, now 'fiery, imperious, uncontrollable, domineering, and potentially destructive, beyond all calculation.'<sup>11</sup>

The gradual alienation of opinion favoring France did not of itself engender warmer relations with Britain, especially as British policy was,

10 S.E. Finer, *The History of Government from the Earliest Times*, 3 Vols. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), III, 1485-1566. Conor Cruise O'Brien, *The Long Affair: Thomas Jefferson and the French Revolution, 1785-1800* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 288; Wood, 185-189.

in American minds, arrogant in the best of times but through 1790s increasingly belligerent as the struggle with France intensified. Anti-British sentiment in Congress rose in response to British boarding of American vessels on the high seas in search of contraband, seizure of vessels under neutral flags sailing to or from French possessions in the West Indies, and the pressed service of men taken from American vessels by the Royal Navy. Yet while these grievances moved Congress to propose the construction of a navy and ponder an economic embargo against Britain, Washington's awareness of the immense risk of outright conflict with Britain prompted him to seek a treaty. The resulting Jay Treaty, which became law in 1795, reflected the imbalance of bargaining power between Britain and the United States, as Britain now accepted American commerce with the French West Indies but otherwise made few concessions. Republicans howled in protest, defaced public buildings, burned Jay in effigy, and called for his head.

Thus, when Washington retired from office in the spring of 1797 he had acquired enormous prestige and moral authority but had left to his successor deep partisan divisions. The French Revolutionary Wars seemed animated by a wrath determined to draw the United States into conflict, repeatedly imposing difficult choices between principle and interest; indeed, after Washington's departure the choices became literally impossible, and the republic was driven toward an open conflict with France. Keenly aware that the great international issue of his age had not been resolved – and that the United States was in large part the international issue – Washington therefore left office with a Farewell Address to his countrymen that became the first article of the American foreign policy tradition known ever since, quite inaccurately, as isolationism. 'Europe,' he warned, 'has a set of primary interests which to us have none or a very remote relation,' and is 'engaged in frequent controversies, the causes of which are essentially foreign to our concerns,' from which it followed that it would be folly to 'entangle our peace and prosperity in the toils of European ambition' and prudent to 'steer clear of permanent alliances with any part of the foreign world.'<sup>12</sup>

When Adams sought to succeed Washington in the presidency he therefore advocated a policy of strength through peace and neutrality, based on the belief that commerce would ultimately provide a foundation

11 Conor Cruise O'Brien, *The Long Affair: Thomas Jefferson and the French Revolution, 1785-1800* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 288; Wood, 185-189.

12 James Flexner, *George Washington: Anguish and Farewell* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1969).



for national power that neither France nor Britain could challenge. The Directory, the executive body governing France following The Terror and the reaction of *Thermidor* in 1794, did its level best to scupper American neutrality by supporting Jefferson's competing candidacy, instructing its representative in the United States, Pierre Adet, to support Republicans and attack Federalists as the instrument of Britain. The Directory's more pressing problems, however, were at home where it attempted to steer a course between anarchy and tyranny by instituting a policy of annual elections for the parliament, local authorities, and the Directory itself, one of whose five members were to be replaced each year. When elections produced a royalist majority in one instance and Jacobin majority in the next, the Directory's response was to annul the election results. Cynicism toward France's electorate, in other words, hardly bred respect for America's. Adet's activity tended to have the reverse of its intended effect, affording Federalists the opportunity to denounce French interference in American affairs and deride Republicans as stooges for the Directory. This, indeed, is how Adet perceived Jefferson, whom he described in a less than fraternal mood to his foreign minister as 'a friend of liberty and fairness' but nevertheless an American and the 'enemy of all the European peoples.'<sup>13</sup> Beyond Adet's counterproductive meddling, the Directory reacted to the Senate's consent to the Jay Treaty by announcing a policy of treating all neutral vessels, including American vessels, in the same manner as the Royal Navy.

The ensuing unpleasantness, which began with the French seizure of American merchantmen, became known as the Quasi-War. Adams instinct was to come to some understanding with France while preparing the United States for the consequences of failure in the effort. He therefore dispatched Charles Pinckney to negotiate with the Directory and subsequently pressed Congress to provide funds for a provisional army, not to be mustered until the outbreak of full-scale war, while signing a bill authorizing the creation of the Department of the Navy. Certain details here matter, both for what they relate about political conditions in France and America and for what they reveal of human nature. Initially, the Directory's internal turmoil only deepened the crisis. In the 1797 coup of *Fructidor* two members with American sympathies were replaced by hardliners; the Directory rejected Pinckney and treated the subsequent mission – Pinckney joined by

13 Quoted in O'Brien, 240-241; Martyn Lyons, *France under the Directory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975).



Federalist John Marshall and Republican Elbridge Gerry – with ostentatious contempt. The Directory’s foreign minister, Charles Maurice de Talleyrand-Périgord was not particularly anti-American but considered the United States an English nation subject to English influence. Such influence as he was prepared to venture himself consisted of three agents sent to the American delegation to offer negotiations at a price of two hundred and fifty thousand dollars along with an apology and a loan of one hundred million dollars to France.<sup>14</sup> The impact of Talleyrand’s offer, its own kind of audacious insult from a diplomat capable of anything, was incendiary. Adams withheld details about the encounter with Talleyrand’s messengers – referred to in secret dispatches as X, Y, and Z – but was charged by the Republican minority of concealing information in order to discredit the Directory and advance a policy of belligerence toward France. When a coalition of Federalist and Republicans passed a resolution demanding the release of uncensored dispatches and learned the whole truth, bellicose sentiment inside Congress and beyond exploded. On the one hand, Adams undertook prudent and rational measures, resisting Hamilton’s pressure for the creation of a standing army and pressing ahead with naval expenditures to meet the most direct and potent French threat; on the other he permitted national hysteria to push the American republic a step in the direction in which France had leapt with creation of the Committee for Public Safety.

As Republicans had opposed Adams’s war measures, Federalists now countered with the charge that Republicans represented a Jacobin Trojan horse bent on imposing a radically egalitarian French democracy on the United States. In June 1798 they passed the Alien and Sedition Acts through Congress.<sup>15</sup> Whereas the Alien Friends Act dealt with the problem of French agents in the United States and the Alien Enemies Act authorized the president to arrest and deport persons from a country at war with the United States, the Sedition Act targeted journalists and editors for seditious libel and was clearly a violation of the First Amendment of the Constitution used to target leading Republican newspapers. Kentucky and Virginia attempted to rally other states in declaring the Alien and Sedition Acts unconstitutional; Jefferson held that, if the national government could not restrain itself, the two states ought perhaps to sever their ties with it ‘rather

14 Alexander De Conde, *The Quasi-War: The Politics and Diplomacy of the Undeclared War with France, 1797-1801* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1966), 36-73.

15 Wood, 249-270.

than give up the rights of self government which we have reserved, and in which alone we see liberty.<sup>16</sup> Among Federalists John Marshall, later to become Chief Justice of the Supreme Court of the United States, harbored serious regrets about the Alien and Sedition Acts, and it is instructive that as Chief Justice Marshall became the father of judicial review in the United States, the doctrine that neither the President nor the Congress, but rather the Court, determines the meaning of the law.<sup>17</sup>

As a foreign policy crisis threatened to consume the energies of his administration and roil domestic politics beyond repair, Adams got relief of sorts from an unexpected quarter: Horatio Nelson's victory over the French fleet in the Battle of the Nile in October 1798 eliminated at a stroke the chances of a French invasion either of Britain or America. In the near term France's setback increased the odds of a favorable outcome from a new American peace mission to Paris. Over the long-term Nelson's victory propelled France's revolutionary wars toward a new phase. In December 1798 a new coalition of Austria, Britain, Naples, Portugal, the Ottoman Empire, and Russia formed against France,<sup>18</sup> thereby putting the regime in new state of peril. This peril was deepened, although the Directory only guessed at how profoundly, when Napoleon returned to France following Nelson's check to his continued campaigning in Egypt. Upon arrival in Paris he found the Directory widely perceived as corrupt and indecisive; above all, it was unpopular in sharp contrast to his own status of national hero now only beginning to acquire its mythic proportions. Still, Adams's decision to take advantage of the Directory's sobered perspective on war with the United States by submitting the name of William Van Murray to Congress as minister plenipotentiary to seek peace with France, met with furious opposition from his own Federalist Party. Continuing to seek partisan advantage from the war with France, many Federalists overreached in their opposition to a peace mission – Hamilton's less than loyal communications to other Federalists behind the president's back were eventually made public and humiliated all concerned – initially attempting to thwart it, then demanding additional envoys for the proposed delegation. After a twenty-four day Atlantic passage through stormy seas the peace envoys,

16 Quoted in *Ibid.*, 270.

17 *Ibid.*, 435-468; James MacGregor Burns, *The Vineyard of Liberty* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1991), 125-133, 183-193.

18 Rose, 112.

Oliver Ellsworth and William Davie arrived in Lisbon on November 27, 1799. They had deemed it prudent to approach France through Portugal, the better to learn something about Europe's state of affairs before arriving on Paris. What they learned was that during their voyage the Directory had fallen to the bayonets of the *coup d'état* of the 18 *Brumaire* and that a Consulate now governed France with Napoleon as First Consul. The French Revolution was over.

The great irony was that, although the United States had not been able to secure peace with a sister republic, it was now able to have exactly that from a French dictatorship. While he nurtured no tender sentiments for the United States, Napoleon's view of France's interest and his plans for Europe's future did not include war with the American republic. He retained Talleyrand as his foreign minister, initially to the dismay of the Americans, but a wholly new force now commanded France's foreign policy for which Talleyrand was negotiator and spokesman. Napoleon sought American friendship, possibly to make use of the United States as a rival to Britain on the seas, but also because he sought to uphold neutral rights of navigation to cultivate European unity against Britain's abuse of them. Aside from his customary enjoyment of cruel sarcasms, Talleyrand now urged the Consulate to treat the envoys 'with a friendly dignity'.<sup>19</sup> Subject to the shifting priorities of the new master of Europe negotiations progressed, not always steadily, toward the signing of a convention at the Chateau Môtrefontaine in October 1800. Although Ellsworth and his colleagues did not achieve all they had sought, they were generally pleased with the outcome and confident that 'the reign of Jacobinism is over in France, and appearances are strong in favor of a general peace.'<sup>20</sup>

Unfortunately for Adams, the treaty was not concluded in time to shore up his failing political fortunes, so that he lost his reelection bid to Jefferson in a bitterly fought campaign in which the deep divisions within the Federalist helped Republicans not only to a presidential victory but also to majorities in both houses of Congress. Yet despite the Treaty of Môtrefontaine, Jefferson's victory, and Napoleon's accommodating diplomacy, France and the United States were not drawn closer, for the most fundamental reason that the two countries were now on radically divergent

19 DeConde, 226.

20 Quoted in *Ibid.*, 258.

paths. In 1800 most of Napoleon's career of conquest was still ahead him, and it was the career of the first great tyrant of modern history. The First French Republic was dead while the First American Republic lived on, troubled indeed by the incompleteness of its liberty but nonetheless capable of governing itself an increasingly democratic fashion. Although Jefferson was loath to admit it, the experience of the past decade had been a sobering lesson for all who drew ideological succor from France's great upheaval, now becoming Europe's nightmare. Jefferson's era at the apex of American public affairs was destined to leave a lasting imprint on American ideals of liberty and democracy, to the extent that he remains for many the supreme reference for the republic's noblest aspirations. But although Jefferson's hatred of Britain never abated, the insistence of him and other Republicans that France was America's true mother country, whose cause was the cause of man, carried little genuine conviction; the association with the French revolution had by 1800 become a heavy embarrassment and Napoleon's coup a form of deliverance from it. The political cost paid by John Adams set his successor 'serenely free,' as it often does in democratic politics, to announce a new policy of 'peace, commerce, and honest friendship with all nations, entangling alliances with none.'<sup>21</sup>

In the twentieth century this distance from Europe was overcome by two world wars, the second indeed ending in a permanent alliance. But the American conviction, dating to 1793, that Europeans are not genuine lovers of liberty has never been fully retired.

21 Quoted in O'Brien, 252; Wood, 181-183, 276-314; Christopher Hitchens, *Thomas Jefferson: Author of America* (New York: Harper Collins, 2005).