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Envoy to the Terror

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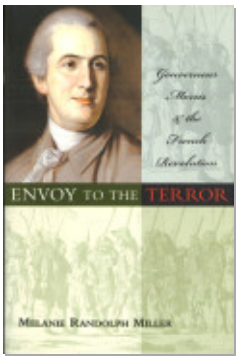

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INTRODUCTION

The Revolutionary from New York

AMERICANS OF THE LATE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY had a keen sense of comradeship with the French nation, born from alliance in war. Profound gratitude strengthened the bond, for Americans were well aware that the success of their struggle against England had hinged on French assistance. In their desperate need for French succor, it was inconvenient to dwell on the fact that the French form of government was actually much farther removed from their ideals than was the English. Probably few Americans were aware that France's sophisticated society masked an ingrown, corrupt, and corrupting government that, despite the country's wealth and enormous resources, was on the verge of financial collapse. Naturally, Americans focused instead on the generosity and bravery of the individual French who came to fight the English with them; those Frenchmen were in their turn infected by the slogans, creed, and enthusiasm of the rebels.

As a result, when news of the French Revolution reached American shores in 1789, the initial reaction was jubilation. Americans were elated that their comrades in arms were embracing the same principles that had driven their own successful uprising. But as events in France began to veer off the expected track, and the government dissolved and violence beyond American experience convulsed the country, America's relationship with France and with its Revolution became a much more complex and troubling issue.

Many Americans, including Americans actually on the scene, chose to continue to support the Revolution. Others had to struggle to reconcile continued belief in the American Revolution with the atrocities being committed in the name of liberty in France. The French Revolution, although a foreign event, resounded throughout America, clarifying a previously unacknowledged schism in how Americans viewed their own country and its ideals. Over the next decade, the problems of foreign relations, particularly relations with Britain and France, helped deepen the Federalist-Republican party split.

When France declared war on Britain, the situation became a diplomatic tangle for the new nation. America had ties of gratitude and loyalty to France, but her cultural and economic attachments to Britain were much stronger. The war forced America to clearly define an independent foreign policy, and her efforts to stay genuinely neutral inevitably angered the French. During much of the 1790s, America walked a diplomatic tightrope.

The delays in communication across the Atlantic, which could extend to several months, meant that the American government was always a step behind in learning of critical events in Europe, and that its strategies were necessarily always conceived in an atmosphere of uncertainty and contingency planning. As a result, much reliance had to be placed on the representative actually in Europe, whose knowledge was immediate. Unlike today, when so much is centrally regulated by the Department of State, the pretelegraph American diplomat was much more than just a mouthpiece; he had to use his own judgment about what America's best interests required, and take action, with no means of timely instruction or assistance from his government. As such, the diplomat functioned as a sort of satellite cabinet.

In this position, an American minister might have enormous influence—good or bad—on the course of American foreign relations, particularly in a situation in which the foreign country was violently transforming itself and presenting new and exigent issues of foreign policy on a daily basis. Such was the situation of France as the Revolution caught fire and spun out of the hands of its creators. And such was the corresponding significance of the American minister to France.

When Americans today think of the French Revolution and American diplomats, they invariably think of Thomas Jefferson. Yet Jefferson was not America's diplomat during the Revolution: he left for America only a few months after it began and long before it careened out of control. Instead, America was represented by another Founding Father, a man whose name is not widely recognized, and whose experiences are not well known: Gouverneur Morris.

Morris was one of the most articulate Americans to appreciate the dilemma presented to his countrymen by the French Revolution. He had played active roles during the American Revolution and in the constitutional debates and was thus well-qualified to take the measure of events in France from an American perspective. He arrived in Paris on business in the spring of 1789, at the age of thirty-seven. He could not have chosen a more fateful time: Louis XVI had issued orders the preceding summer to convoke the Estates General that May. Morris, witness and contributor to the creation of the world's first modern republic, was now in a singular

position to observe the bloodier birth pains of a different kind of republic from a much older mother, the country of France.

Fortunately for historians, he began keeping a diary. Morris did not intend the diaries to be seen by anyone else, and he wrote with utter candor; the only falsehoods in them are the ones he told himself, and they are few. They are a great gift from Morris to posterity, not only as a chronicle of his observations of the French Revolution, but because the diaries contain the essence of his remarkable personality, emotionally immediate and effervescent with his intelligence and humor, expressed by the eloquent and evocative language that was his greatest talent. His is a remarkably modern voice, and his writings deserve a place in the pantheon of America's political thinkers. He has not held that regard, although recent work on his contributions to the Constitutional Convention, as well as two new biographies of Morris, may change that.[1]

Morris was quickly introduced into the inner circle of revolutionary aristocrats, and became an actor behind the scenes. In January 1792, at Washington's behest and only after a bitter Senate battle, Morris was named Jefferson's successor as minister to France. He held the position throughout the Terror until orders for his recall reached him in the summer of 1794. Among his many activities on behalf of the French—before and after being named minister—were counseling government ministers as the Revolution began to accelerate, advising them on drafting the new constitution, and—most controversial of all (though unknown to his American contemporaries)—participating in an abortive attempt in the summer of 1792 to help the royal family escape Paris and raise a royal army. After the defeat of the efforts to save Louis, his energies were dedicated to the often nearly impossible task of assisting Americans caught in the chaos of the succeeding governments and the Terror.

His actions, both as a private citizen and as a minister, and his unabashed expression of views directly contrary to the pro-revolutionary sentiments of many Americans, led to strong criticism by many of his contemporaries, and that aura of disapproval continues to hang over much of the literature dealing with Morris to this day. However, Morris's influence on America's relations with France during this critical period was, whether it be considered good or bad, significant. The long-held, widely held, and unquestioned disapproval of him and his performance has forestalled meaningful investigation, leaving an important gap in our knowledge and understanding of the critical decade of the 1790s. The fact that Morris was recalled has lent continuing blind support to the assumption that his influence was negative, but his recall was based on complaints whose

sources and legitimacy have never received serious scrutiny. There is surprising evidence about both: much of the denunciation of Morris had nothing to do with his supposed injury to French-American relations. Rather, Morris was inconvenient to a considerable number of people.

Morris stands accused by some of his contemporaries and some current historians of having worsened relations with France. In the eyes of many others, in spite of his important position and the enormous responsibility he carried, his influence was nugatory. These conclusions also do not bear up under scrutiny, and require a new review of the record to make an informed judgment. The time has therefore come to reexamine Morris's years in Paris and to reassess his influence on American foreign relations and diplomacy of the period. There are numerous lines of inquiry: one of these concerns the quality and impact of his observations on the events in France. He was, so to speak, America's only official news reporter, and he sent regular reports and commentaries to Washington throughout his stay in France, in addition to his official dispatches to Jefferson and occasional letters to his friend Alexander Hamilton. Washington's responses to Morris and comments to others establish that Morris's views had a definite influence on the president's policy toward France (and England, for that matter, for the two countries had America whipsawed between them). The French themselves, who have not forgotten him, invariably stress their admiration for his remarkably accurate predictions about the course of the Revolution and its aftermath, and the French ministers he advised shared this admiration. Whether their respect was justified, or whether he was justifiably considered a reactionary monarchist who "poisoned" Washington's mind (as Jefferson would charge) is one of the inquiries that engendered this book.[2]

Aside from their contemporary significance in shaping American policy, Morris's observations and commentary are extremely valuable to anyone who seeks to understand the French Revolution itself, for Morris was present for most of the critical phases of the Revolution and regularly conversed with many of the principal actors. Morris recorded events, conversations, and the personalities and ambitions of the revolutionaries, and in many instances identified the nascent misconceptions on both sides of the Atlantic that would eventually fracture the friendship between the two countries.

Another important aspect of Morris's experience and writings concerns American relations with Britain at the time. Morris negotiated with the British cabinet on Washington's behalf in the spring of 1790, and his views on the British government and the best strategy for American policy toward Britain had considerable influence on Jefferson and Washington, but

caused Alexander Hamilton great consternation. The entertaining story of his verbal jousts with the British in that critical year (while he was secretly encouraging Spain and France to go to war with Britain)—all while Hamilton was busy stabbing him in the back in America—is too little known.

Equally worthy of attention are Morris's actions as an American revolutionary participating in another country's upheaval, first as a private citizen and then as a diplomat. What were the proper bounds for him in either status, and did he transgress them? In this connection, it must be remembered that Jefferson had a great deal to do with the start of the Revolution; was Morris only doing what Jefferson himself would have done had he stayed in France?

Finally, Morris's performance as a minister has been little studied and rarely appreciated. As the French government violently metamorphosed from a monarchy run by the reform-minded and sophisticated men Jefferson knew to a series of disorganized regimes of increasing terror, Morris was faced with an assignment that every experienced diplomat dreads, with essentially no instructions from his government. Americans were being thrown in jail, American ships were being seized or blocked in port, their cargoes confiscated, and they had nowhere to turn except to Morris. The boxes filled with American, French, and British cries for help lie forgotten in the collection of Morris's papers at the American Philosophical Society, and have been barely touched by historians. It was a time without parallel, the Terror in France, and Morris's experience is a remarkable story and an *American* story, for Morris was thoroughly American in all he said and did in France.

The evidence unearthed and reviewed for this book reveals a story that is in large part unexpected, since it is contrary to long-standing conventional wisdom about Gouverneur Morris. Thomas Jefferson, who preceded Morris as minister, is a counterpoint for much of the discussion because, despite some recent books with more critical viewpoints, he is the standard by which many Americans measure their diplomatic representatives during this period. It may come as a surprise to the reader to learn that Jefferson and Morris were initially remarkably similar in many aspects of their opinions about France and the French, and the two men got along extremely well while they were in Paris together.

After Jefferson returned to America, his views of the Revolution were through the American looking glass, affected by American politics and American opponents, and, despite the reports of chaos and violence, he supported the toppling of Louis XVI and establishment of a supposedly

republican government. Morris, on the other hand, consistently believed that France was not yet capable of functioning as a republic and that its only hope of avoiding anarchy and eventual despotism lay in an enlightened constitutional monarchy. In the end, it may be argued with justice that both men were right in their particular contexts; Morris, who was on the scene, saw and knew with personal force the human cost of the Revolution, while Jefferson's true concern was with its effect on America's political development. In any event, Jefferson ultimately changed his mind. "Despite the ensuing changes of regime in France, it took Napoléon Bonaparte's rise to power to convince Jefferson that his enthusiasm for the French Republic had been mistaken and that his earlier support for a French constitutional monarchy had been well founded," write the editors of his papers.[3] This had been Morris's conviction from the outset, including the prediction of a Napoléon if such a monarchy was not achieved.

Whatever criticism Morris may justly deserve, his influence on early American foreign relations was not trivial, nor was the responsibility he carried. While in France, Morris faced, virtually alone, a diplomatic hornet's nest in which all of America's foreign policy dilemmas of the 1790s were enmeshed, and he struggled painfully to make his best judgments about the appropriate tack to take. George Washington thought highly of Morris and expressed considerable affection for him, and never condemned him for his actions in France. It is time to explore whether Washington's esteem was justified, and whether we should reclaim Gouverneur Morris as a great American statesman.