Envoy to the Terror

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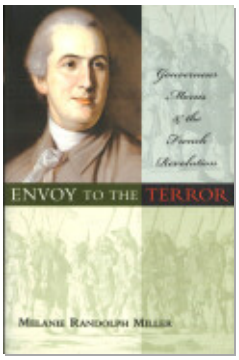

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Chapter Fifteen

Conclusion

The fatalistic remark "Whatever is, is,"[1] recurs frequently in the papers of Gouverneur Morris, and the aphorism undoubtedly stood him in good stead throughout the vicissitudes of his life, from the time he lost his leg through the days of the Terror. He would probably make such a remark today, were he aware of the secondary—even tertiary—place he holds in American memory.

There are signs that the ice jam around Morris may be starting to break. Richard Brookhiser's 2003 biography of Morris takes a primarily flattering view of its subject, and Brookhiser's appreciative prose reacquaints the American public with previously known but now forgotten information about Morris's contributions to the Constitution and the outlines of his life and views, though it contains nothing new about Morris's time in France. Later in that same year, William Howard Adams published a more in-depth biography. Unlike most of his fellow Jefferson scholars, Adams takes Morris seriously and presents him in a positive light. The section of Adams's book concerning Morris's time in France cites the research preformed and the conclusions reached by this author in the dissertation form of this work.

Even so, some American historians may persist in clinging to their contempt for Morris. A fairly typical review of Brookhiser's book, by a historian, refers to Morris as a "Foundering Father" and a "lightweight" whose contributions to the Constitution and to our country as a whole were negligible, and says nothing of his time in France other than asserting that he gave the monarchs "foolish advice that eroded their support."[2]

Nonetheless, this book, Kaufman's work on Morris's contributions to the American Constitution, and Mr. Adams's scholarly biography may together help to revitalize interest in Morris and refurbish his place of honor in our history. One hopes so, for the disinterest shown by most historians in his story is perplexing. While scores of keen minds plow and re-plow the fields of Jefferson's and Hamilton's papers, producing shelves of

books dedicated to the nuances of their intellects and lives, Morris, who is surely as fertile a field, has had little scrutiny, and his papers demand full publication. "He is perhaps the most eloquent and ingenious man of his country, but his countrymen themselves distrust his talents," Otto wrote to Montmorin about Morris in 1792. "They admire but fear him."[3] Comments such as these would seem a tantalizing invitation to everyone who is interested in the extraordinary generation of the American Revolution. So do anecdotes such as that related by the dignified Jared Sparks to illustrate what he frankly called a "defect" in Morris's character:

> At a breakfast table he was in close conversation with a gentleman, to whose harangue he had listened patiently, till it was his turn to reply. He began accordingly, but the gentleman was inattentive, and a bad listener. "Sir," said Mr. Morris, "if you will not attend to my argument, I will address myself to the tea-pot," and went on with much animation of tone and gesture, making the tea-pot the representative of his opponent, till he had finished his replication.[4]

This work has examined a principal justification for the long disinterest in and disrespect for Morris—his sojourn in France—and found an entirely different story than the one so long accepted, one that the abovementioned review also reflects. The determined myopia of historians regarding Morris and his time in Paris has left our knowledge and therefore our comprehension of early American foreign relations incomplete. Morris was in the thick of things with respect to American-European relations from 1790 to 1794 and his actions had an impact; a significant if not overtly obvious impact. Having given Morris's performance as a diplomat closer scrutiny than it has ever before received, and with the benefit of a full review of the circumstances, the mists have dissolved.

Specifically: it appears that, rather than souring American-French relations, as DeConde and others after him have suggested, Morris *prevented* hostilities between the United States and France from August 1792 throughout his tenure. This is not a far-fetched hypothesis, but a proposition based on the record developed in this book. Much as the revolutionary French governments may have disliked Morris, it is a fact that the provocations were on the French side, and they were flagrant. Morris was urged repeatedly by the American victims of these transgressions to make official demands amounting to a "declaration of War," but he refused. He also refused, in writing to his government, to characterize these offenses in

a way that would have seemed to require satisfaction. Rather, he presented the injuries as the inevitable result of the "intestine broil" of France. He urged that America, as France's friend, must temper her protests and, should requests for reparation prove impossible to accomplish, suffer patiently. This pragmatic approach infuriated the complaining Americans in France, but it had a calming effect on the American government and its treatment of French depredations occurring outside of Morris's sphere. The experience of James Monroe, Morris's successor, is instructive in this regard: he was seen as the ideal American representative at first, sympathetic to France and the Revolution, but when the United States entered the Jay Treaty with Britain, the French felt betrayed by him and he lost his credibility. The depredations continued, American resentment escalated, and the Quasi War between America and France followed in 1798.

The popular view of Morris as a reactionary monarchist must also be discarded. Though he differed from Jefferson because he did not think a republic was immediately practicable for every nation, the record demonstrates that Morris's commitment to the republican ideal was as deeply rooted as Jefferson's, and his love for the French and desire for them to enjoy liberty and spread liberty throughout Europe were also as strong as Jefferson's. He grieved when it became clear that their effort would fail, and he did everything he could to try to avert disaster even though, as his letters and diaries show, he had little hope. In this connection, Morris's opinions on the French Revolution, reported to his government, do not merit dismissal as uninformed or biased commentary. There is no more convincing demonstration of his political insight than the fact that the majority of Morris's predictions for France, many of them quite specific, many of them made quite early on, *did* take place. Moreover, his opposition—borne out by what took place—to instituting republican governments in nations not yet "fitted by Education and Habit for the Enjoyment of Freedom" remains an important lesson for Americans, especially those who shape our foreign policy.

Morris's willingness to stay on in Paris during the horrors and personal griefs of 1792–1794 cannot be discounted, nor can his unceasing efforts to help Americans and others, often in the face of stark ingratitude, such as that from Lafayette and his wife. Perhaps his actions in this regard are not meaningful in the sense of having made an impact on American foreign relations, but they constitute an episode of an American public servant's valor and commitment to duty meriting both recognition and study, not the insulting dismissal they have heretofore received.

Finally, the record establishes that rather than an indiscreet bungler, Morris was a shrewd and gifted diplomat whose negotiations with the British in 1790 did credit to his country and resulted in the dispatch of a minister to America. It is not idle to speculate that he might have had greater success than John Jay in negotiating an equitable treaty with the British and that America might have suffered much less internal division as a result.

Morris's activities as a businessman should not somehow taint his achievements. Because he was a businessman, Morris had a clear understanding of America's current financial position and needs, as well as a glowing conception of the future of his country. It was not Hamilton's limited vision of an economy tied to and dependent on Britain and British credit, or Jefferson's idealized vision of an agrarian country of small virtuous family farmers, selling their produce to the world, but one of independent economic power.[5] In late September 1790, expressing his frustration with the British government's indifference to American approaches, he wrote to Washington that American was still in the "seeding Time of national Prosperity." [6]

Morris's, of course—not Hamilton's or Jefferson's—was the vision of American prosperity that was fulfilled. Morris did much to assist it in his contributions to the Constitutional Convention, his papers on national finances, as well as his trade ventures of the 1790s, and much later, his support for the Erie Canal.

The detractions made by Thomas Paine, William Smith, and Stephen Sayre, as well as William Short and Alexander Hamilton, which have been largely unchallenged and in many cases blindly reendorsed during the past two hundred years, have distorted the story of Gouverneur Morris and kept him hidden from sight. At close inspection, with the motives of ambition, fanaticism, expedience, and simple ill will extracted, we have seen that the condemnations do not stand up. Not that Morris was perfect by any means. He tried to use his friendship with Washington to gain acceptance of a debt proposal without admitting his personal connection. The letter written by the president in 1792 to reprove Morris for his conduct in London was premised on false information as to Morris's actions, but we cannot help concluding that it accurately depicted indiscretions he had been known to commit in America. Morris himself was entirely aware of this problem; in April 1789 he confessed in his diary that he had been "so weak & absurd as to express many Opinions which I ought to conceal and some of which I may perhaps find Reason to alter."[7] More serious

than this, of course, was his involvement in French affairs while minister: the propriety of this course of action has provoked controversy and should provoke more as new voices enter the debate. Still, if Morris is condemned for trying to restrain the Revolution, Jefferson must stand alongside for his own conduct in helping ignite it.

Morris himself bears some blame for his inconspicuous place in our history, for he was indifferent to posterity. Moreover, his contribution to the Constitution, his service in France, and his work as a senator may have been overshadowed by the cynicism of his latter years, during which he was critical of American policy, bitterly opposing the War of 1812 and supporting (in certain respects) the Hartford Convention.[8] This should not be the case. Morris's thoughtful insights into politics and government never faltered, nor did his enlightened appreciation of women, his wit, or his enjoyment of life—an enjoyment he considered a duty to God.[9] His diaries and letters up to his death in 1816 are eloquent and absorbing national treasures.

Morris has always caught the eye of a few, of course, including the amateur historian who would become a president. "We have never had a foreign minister who deserved more honor than Morris," Theodore Roosevelt wrote appreciatively. "In his whole attitude towards the [French] revolution, Morris represents better than any other man the clear-headed, practical statesman, who is genuinely devoted to the cause of constitutional freedom."[10] It is a judgment that the research for this work confirms. Despite his faults, the landscape of America's early national history is greatly enriched by returning Gouverneur Morris to the picture and now, a century after Roosevelt wrote, nearly two centuries since Morris died, it is more than time for Americans—not just historians—to recognize his importance and celebrate him as one of the Fathers' most engaging members.