Envoy to the Terror

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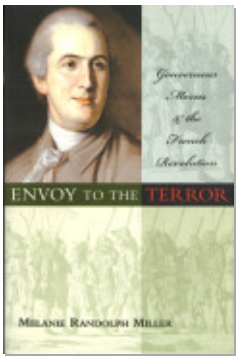

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Chapter Nine

Hidden Antagonists

When Morris advised William Short that an appointment as minister to Paris would make Short many enemies who eventually would succeed in removing him, Morris was dead right; but it was Morris, not Short, who was to endure the painful truth of this prediction. An odd assortment joined forces in 1792–1793 to oust the new American minister: William Stephens Smith, son-in-law of Vice President John Adams and a would-be diplomat, and Stephen Sayre, a former London sheriff, banker, bankrupt, and arms dealer, were acting as agents for France when Morris got in the way. Their plans were piggybacked onto the nationalistic dreams of the "Maestro de Libertadores,"[1] a dashing Venezuelan named Francisco de Miranda (1756–1816). Miranda hoped to liberate his country with French aid, and Smith and Sayre wanted to use the American debt to France to supply French troops, commanded by Miranda, to attack Spanish America. Morris was an obstacle to these men, as well as to those in the French government who hoped to profit by advances on the debt payments and dispensation of the supply contracts.

The group also attracted another supporter, possibly innocent of the commercial flavor of their intrigue: John Skey Eustace, a self-aggrandizing young American serving in the French army. He added a dramatic—and absurd—note of fanaticism to the chorus denouncing Morris.

Morris never knew of these efforts to undermine him. The fact that he scarcely knew any of these men except Smith, whom he liked and trusted, made no difference: they would prove extremely effective in harming him both in France and in America.

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William Smith was on Washington's staff during the Revolutionary War.[2] He thereafter served as Adams's secretary at the American legation in

London, and in that capacity became friends with Jefferson, who initially thought highly of him. Smith clearly possessed considerable personal charm, but he was very ambitious, and apparently capable of indifference to (or perhaps ignorance of) the best interests of his country. When Adams left London, Smith hoped to be appointed his successor, and asked Jefferson for assistance. Jefferson, however, did not favor continuing a diplomatic establishment in England.[3]

Smith's ambitions for the position did not abate, and were encouraged when Hamilton sent him, in the winter of 1790–91, on the mission discussed previously, to urge the British government to send a minister to the United States. Such an action would require reciprocation; hence Smith's expectations. Despite Washington's blunt repudiation, Smith was convinced that he had turned in a masterful performance and deserved an appointment.

While in London, Smith renewed his friendship with Francisco de Miranda. Miranda, who had been dismissed from the Spanish army, had the lifelong dream of freeing the Spanish colonies in America.[4] He had gone to America to garner support in the early 1780s, and became friends with Smith as well as with Hamilton, Henry Knox, and Paine (he met Morris, though no friendship developed).[5] After returning to Europe, Miranda spent time at the court of Catherine the Great, where his handsome face and elegant figure caught the eye of the empress.[6] Their friendship—or intimacy—proved useful. In London in 1789, he cultivated an acquaintance with the British ministry to gain support for an insurrection in Spanish America. The Spanish attempted to have him extradited, but he avoided arrest by claiming to be a member of the household of the Russian ambassador, Count de Woronzow, a highly respected friend of Morris. Thereafter, Miranda acted as an unofficial agent for the English in "clarifying" Russian policy, and provided Woronzow with useful information about the English—a dual role of which the English were ignorant.[7]

When news of the Nootka Sound incident arrived in London in 1790, Miranda hoped for war, and that the English would now want to encourage rebellion in Spanish America. He presented his ideas to Pitt and Grenville, and they cautiously promised a small yearly stipend to pursue the project.[8] He also hoped to obtain money for supplies for the insurrectionists. This plan held the promise of generous commissions or rake-offs, and while Miranda may have been indifferent to such profits, some of his associates were not. One such associate was another American friend, Stephen Sayre, recently released from debtor's prison in London.

Sayre was an enterprising American scoundrel who was never at a loss for a new scheme to make money, and he was often in trouble. In 1775, he was arrested in London on suspicion of plotting to abduct George III; three years later, he criticized John Paul Jones's handling of the *Ranger* off of Britain and got into a fistfight with the thin-skinned sailor. The London bank he managed failed in 1776, and he acted for a short time as an unofficial envoy for the American commissioner Arthur Lee, seeking assistance from other courts for the war effort. Benjamin Franklin did not like him, and denied that he was acting for Congress. Sayre in turn called him a "great villain."[9]

Sayre returned to America in 1783, and joined the same dancing assembly (a sort of social club) in New York City as Smith and Miranda, with whom he became good friends. He also became close to the unscrupulous William Duer, and through him, Knox and Samuel Ogden, Morris's brother-in-law. When Miranda left for England, Sayre and Duer agreed to assist his revolutionary projects, and to correspond with him in cipher.[10]

Sayre himself returned to Europe in 1785. In early 1787 he was sent to Fleet Prison in London (for a debt to a trusting widow) for nearly two years, a humiliating experience that inflamed his hatred for England. Miranda assisted him with occasional remittances, sent through Smith.[11] Sayre wrote repeatedly to Knox, asking for an appointment as a consul for America in Europe, hoping to cloak himself and his questionable commercial activities with diplomatic immunity.[12] In fact, this would not have protected him, but appointment as a secretary to Pinckney might have done so, and Sayre repeatedly dunned Knox, Pinckney, Jefferson, and even Washington for various diplomatic positions, without success.

Sayre also informed Duer and Knox of Miranda's activities and the resulting prospect of British funds for army supply contracts, and both men agreed to an interest. He pressured Miranda to use his influence with the British to have him appointed as commissary general (a plum position for anyone interested in graft), but Spain's concession to Britain snuffed out the scheme by the end of the summer of 1790.[13]

With prospects for milking the British dimmed, Sayre went to France and hedged his bets by marrying a well-to-do Frenchwoman. He was always on the lookout for new ways to make money, however, and paid calls on Morris and Short. "His Object is to get into the Affair of the Debt, which he knows I find very little about," wrote Morris, who agreed to pass on Sayre's "application."[14] Sayre then joined forces with Jean-Frédéric Perregaux (later Morris's landlord), a Paris banker who has been identified as in the pay of the British, in developing his own debt proposal. He

became a snuff manufacturer and tobacco merchant, joined the circle of British and American revolutionary sympathizers who frequented White's Hotel, and became a crony of the Girondins Brissot and Clavière.[15]

The astute Sayre, whose eye was always on the main chance, gave lip service to the French Revolution, but it is difficult to identify any specific conduct supporting it other than his business dealings. Nonetheless, rhetoric sufficed, for he earned the trust of the Girondins, and when they sent Talleyrand to London in January 1792, Morris was startled to learn that Sayre was part of the retinue. It may be an indication of Sayre's moral elasticity that, according to Olivier Blanc, the same historian who has named Perregaux as a British agent, Sayre was now also in the pay of the British, along with Miranda.[16]

Talleyrand's mission, previously discussed, was to seek assurances of British neutrality as France prepared for war with Austria and Prussia; Sayre's was to buy arms, and his attachment to the mission was clearly another effort to claim immunity. How successful it would have been is open to question: the duc de Biron, another member of the mission, was arrested in London for debt, even though Talleyrand tried to claim diplomatic immunity for him.[17] Sayre had a bad reputation in London, and Morris was told this was one of the reasons that Talleyrand was not well received. Sayre's cupidity was also blamed when the French failed to acquire good-quality arms.[18]

Sayre rode the waves caused by the king's fall that August and continued to work with the new government, thanks to his friendship with Clavière and Brissot. In September 1792, he was back in London to procure arms. This time he was acting for the ministers of war and foreign affairs.[19] He again asked Thomas Pinckney, the new American minister, for a diplomatic appointment, which he blandly admitted would protect his arms dealings. Pinckney refused, saying that it would be "an affront to England and a violation of international law."[20]

Meanwhile, an angry and bitter William Smith had returned. He had been thoroughly chagrined by Pinckney's appointment to London, and had taken no comfort in the customs sinecure the president had given him, but abruptly resigned and left for Europe.[21] In a letter reminiscent of Short's laments, he wrote to Knox:

> The suddenness of my departure for Europe which you will hear of before this reaches you . . . there doubtless will be many speculations on the subject of my departure—to you I can say, that the station I was forced into—was painful to me beyond expression—it may be thought

> haughty—but my soul is above it—I go my dear sir to "take arms against a world of troubles and (if possible) by opposing, end them."[22]

Smith apparently did not conceal his rage, for the British minister to America, George Hammond, wrote of it to Grenville, suggesting that Smith would probably "throw himself in your Lordship's way," seeming to suggest the use of him as an agent.[23]

Arriving in England in April 1792, he crossed paths with Morris, who was on his way to take up his duties in Paris. It was a friendly encounter, and Smith gave Morris "a Detail of American Parties and Politics." Smith agreed to advise young Robert Morris, Jr., recently arrived in Europe on his father's business, and Morris informed his friend's son that Smith was "a Man of Honor and Integrity and if he cannot serve he certainly will not injure you at least not designedly." Morris was wrong. Friendly as Smith may have appeared, he resented Morris and others for "enjoying the fruits" of his diplomatic labors, and when Sayre arrived in London the following September with business propositions that required Morris's removal, Smith was receptive.[24]

Sayre was fresh from the overthrow of the king. More important, he was privy to the furious disappointment of foreign minister Lebrun and finance minister Clavière when Morris refused an advance on the American debt to France: the money would have financed supply contracts in America, which Sayre hoped to direct. Sayre undoubtedly discussed the problem of Morris with Smith, for Abigail Adams Smith wrote to her mother:

> The French are somewhat disposed to complain that their good friends, the Americans, do not step forward in their cause. . . . [Morris] is most obnoxious to the Republicans, and he refuses to pay the debt due them.[25]

The money would also have been used to implement Miranda's scheme of attacking Spain's territories. Sayre wrote to Lebrun that France should act quickly, and perhaps also to Brissot and Paine, for they, too, supported the plan.[26]

Sayre's letters identify Morris as a problem, not only with respect to the debt payments, but because it was assumed that he was criticizing the new republic in his dispatches, making American cooperation in providing arms and money to the French war effort uncertain. Sayre wrote to Miranda (now in the French army and increasingly influential), "I send

you a small Treatise, touching the appointment of Morris—make a proper use of it—his nomination has given great disgust."[27]

Two weeks later, back in Paris, he reiterated the need to get rid of Morris:

> Our friend Colon. Smith thinks that he may succeed—M.[Morris] is recall'd from this Court, especially, if I go out to Phila in the capacity of Envoy—my utmost endeavours would be exerted to accomplish this double advantage—Smith knowing our designs will act here in conformity—supporting you with all his influence.

According to Sayre, the mayor of Paris, Pétion, would get Miranda commissioned and sent to America. Sayre would buy arms from West Point, but worried that the "two Morris[es]" would prevent this, for Smith had told him that Robert "commands Washington." He asked Miranda to have the French appoint him as a "minister to Congress" regarding the plan, a role that was eventually given to Smith.

> You may rely upon it, that the fellow here [Morris], has made most damnable Representations to Washington—Jefferson has declared Morris['s] Appointment [was] directly against his advice—W. had great difficulty to get a Majority in the Senate . . . there is a very severe pamphlet wrote against W. for having sent him contrary to the sense of the nation.—Smith gave it me to bring over: but I left it, by mistake in London.[28]

Miranda had been in France since the preceding March. Like Sayre, he was an intimate of the Girondins, socializing with men such as Danton (at that time a Girondin) and Brissot. He was never a true Girondin, however. His enthusiasm for the Revolution stemmed from his hopes that it would spark the Spanish colonies to revolt. After the fall of the monarchy, Miranda had been approached by Pétion (perhaps at Sayre's urging), to join the French army. He threw himself into the war and became a general.[29]

Miranda corresponded with Sayre and Smith throughout the fall of 1792 concerning the project against Spain and recommended it to Knox.[30] Meanwhile, the two Americans were working with Brissot, who in late November asked General Dumouriez, commander of the French Army of the North, to release Miranda from service to become governor-general of Santo Domingo. However, when Brissot presented his plan to use Santo Domingo as a base for attacking Spanish possessions, with an army of twenty-two thousand French and mulatto troops, Miranda was not

enthusiastic, for he rightly perceived that rather than freeing the colonies, France intended to take them over under the pretext of liberation.[31] Moreover, Dumouriez was not eager to give up one of his best commanders. Miranda stayed in Europe and began to distance himself from Sayre, whose enthusiasm for South American independence would have been suspect to any critical intelligence, and who had, moreover, asked him for money once too often.[32]

Discouraged with the prospects for his native land, Miranda focused on his French command. However, matters were now going badly for the French army, and as a foreigner, he was quick to be blamed. In 1793, he was tried for his role in the disastrous battle of Neerwinden. Although the Revolutionary Tribunal acquitted him (Paine and Barlow testified on his behalf), he was rearrested after the fall of the Girondins and remained in prison until 1795.[33]

Just how far Miranda participated in efforts to oust Morris can only be inferred. While he had no real acquaintance with Morris and thus no personal animus, Miranda had no reason to disbelieve the complaints of his American friends (Paine, Barlow, Smith, and Sayre) and his good friend Brissot.[34] It is likely, therefore, that Miranda did make "proper use" of Sayre's treatise against Morris to instigate two bizarre letters vilifying the American minister, written from the field by John Skey Eustace and General Charles François Dumouriez to Lebrun in the fall of 1792.[35]

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Eustace is a strange figure whose biography remains to be written.[36] He was a classmate of Monroe, and a protégé of General Charles Lee. In 1778, after the terrible defeat of the Americans at Monmouth, Eustace supported Lee against Alexander Hamilton, and even tried to provoke a duel.[37] Before long, however, he turned against Lee, a pattern that he would repeat many times. The outlines of his character were drawn with incisive strokes in a 1798 letter from Rufus King:

> Be assured that he is a more suitable acquaintance of Monroe than of you or me. He will be a Tale bearer between you and others, with whom he may seek an acquaintance, and is base enough for the office. In the end he will quarrel with you, either because you will not lend him money, or countenance him in Pretensions that he will have no right to make.[38]

Eustace left the United States in 1784, spent some years in the Spanish colonies, and eventually ended up in France. Somewhere along the line he became a friend of Miranda, and sent letters supporting the liberation of Venezuela to the British ambassador to France.[39] In 1792, he enlisted in the French army, serving under General Dumouriez.

Eustace and Dumouriez had been informed—probably by Miranda—of Morris's refusal to order advance debt payments, and his insistence on waiting for instructions in view of the suspension of the monarchy. They also knew that Morris had requested a passport to leave for England. Morris stayed in France, but Eustace believed that he was already en route to England when he wrote to Lebrun that he had heard

> of the insolence of our *ci-devant* envoy before his departure for England, and of the righteous indignation you have shown him. I must now regard myself as the sole representative of America in France, for I am the only officer of my republic who is in the service of yours; and it is in the name of the United States, my *patrie* . . . that I declare to you that the conduct of Mr. Morris is utterly opposed to his duty as minister to France, as well as to the wishes of his principals in America.[40]

He urged Lebrun to advise the American government of Morris's "outrageous conduct," and avowed his own intention to sacrifice himself on the altar of French freedom. "Never, no, never!" Eustace declared, would he relinquish the "superb title" of being a soldier of the *patrie.* As matters turned out, Eustace was to relinquish it within four months.[41]

This rousing epistle was accompanied by a short but equally strong letter from his commander, General Dumouriez, who "certified the truth" of Eustace's letter and told his successor in the foreign affairs office that the presence of the "insolent and vile" Morris was "an injury for both republics" and that Lebrun should cease dealing with him. He instructed Lebrun to expedite a packet boat for Morris's recall.[42]

The reason for Dumouriez's vitriol may be found in the fate of his close associate, Bon-Carrère, Dumouriez's recent candidate for French minister to America. Morris reported to Jefferson that Bon-Carrère was reputedly corrupt, an allegation given substance by a document in the British archives indicating that in July 1792 he offered Lord Gower his services for money; perhaps Gower told Morris. Morris protested vigorously, and the nomination was withdrawn. Dumouriez probably blamed Morris.[43]

Lebrun had already sent complaints about Morris to America by the time these letters arrived. Their effect was therefore confined to adding to

the damage already done to Morris's ability to deal effectively with the French ministry, but this injury was considerable, and Morris had an especially hard time of it over the next few months.

Whatever Miranda's role in these letters, it is a typical irony of the French Revolution that both writers soon turned against Miranda and each other. When Dumouriez reprimanded Eustace for communicating directly with the governor of newly annexed Maestricht, Miranda joined in. The young zealot attacked his former friend in a frenzy and in early 1793, published a fiery pamphlet denouncing him; the pamphlet was one of the charges at Miranda's trial.[44]

Miranda never gave up working for Venezuela's liberation, and in 1805 instigated another plot with Smith to attack Spanish America. The expedition failed and Smith was tried for violation of federal law; though acquitted, he was disgraced.[45] Miranda tried again, and failed again. He died in a Spanish prison in 1816.

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Sayre's and Smith's efforts against Morris were unaffected by Miranda's withdrawal. In the fall of 1792, Brissot and the ruling Provisional Executive Council, which was undoubtedly pleased to get the services of the son-in-law of the American vice president, authorized Smith to ask the United States for advances on the remaining debt to be used for supplies for France and the expedition against South America.[46] Smith was thus aware of the move to recall Morris, and as Sayre told Miranda, hoped to further it, but he was friendly with Morris, and pretended ignorance of his difficulties with the ministry, giving no hint of his own part in the matter. (Smith was no admirer of the French Revolution, however willing he was to work for the Girondins for personal advantage.) Morris clearly suspected nothing. He wrote to Robert the following June that he knew "well that Orders had been given to effect my Recall and told Col. Smith so who did not believe it but on inquiry found that it was true."[47]

Armed with an official French endorsement, Smith returned to Philadelphia, and met with Jefferson and Washington on February 20, 1793. He told them

> that the French Ministers are entirely broken with Gouv. Morris, shut their doors to him and will never receive another communication from him. They wished Smith to be the bearer of a message from the

> Presdt. to this effect, but he declined and they said in that case they would press it thro' their own minister here.

According to Smith, Morris "in presence of his company and servants" had "cursed the French ministers as a set of damned rascals, and said that the king would still be replaced on his throne: he said he knew they had written to have him recalled, and expected to be recalled." Smith presented a letter from Lebrun, and described the plan against South America.[48]

Given these credentials, Smith's disappointment must have been great when the cabinet unanimously rejected the French proposal. His report must have rattled the members, the opposite effect of what was intended, and undoubtedly spurred Washington to begin developing his famous neutrality proclamation, asserting America's intention to stay neutral in the war beginning in Europe.[49]

However, as Smith's approving father-in-law noted, Smith had "acquired the confidence of the French ministry and of the better sort of members of the National Convention," and he proceeded to make large purchases of arms for the French, despite protests by the British minister.[50] Moreover, he succeeded in undermining Morris. His reports seemed to the president and Jefferson to independently verify the complaints from Lebrun and Clavière, received about a week earlier. They were further confirmed by Sayre, who also returned to America that spring, prudently avoiding the fate awaiting his Girondin friends. He obtained an audience with Washington (or so he wrote ten years later), and told the president that Morris should go. Washington, Sayre reported, did not take kindly to the advice; but it was one more stone in the pile being heaped over Morris's reputation. Many years later, Sayre wrote charitably that he had "no dispute" with Morris's qualifications. "He is a man of the world—speaks the French language with ease and accuracy—but," he continued, "his appointment was unfortunately ill-timed—his hardy front would grace the levee of Bonaparte," but "it did not accord with the taste of the sans culottes."[51]

Morris remained unaware that he had run afoul of such dramatic plots. Nonetheless, despite their origins in greed, the efforts of Sayre and Smith, in tandem with the French complaints, helped convince Washington that Morris was disagreeable to the French and should be recalled. Although the lack of a suitable replacement put the matter on hold for another year, Washington would offer no resistance when an official request for Morris's recall arrived in the spring of 1794. It is a fitting irony that the plans of Miranda, Sayre, and Smith were not in the end advanced by his departure.