Envoy to the Terror

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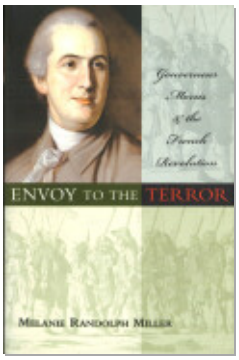

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Chapter Two

Morris Appraises Paris

In November 1788, Morris, preparing for his trip to Europe, asked Washington for letters of introduction to "those Persons who may in your Opinion be useful to me and to whom you may think it proper to present me, among others to Mr. Jefferson, with whom I have only a slight Acquaintance." He added:

> I believe I have mentioned to you my Wish not to be encumbered with the Letters introductory of the many who are prone to give them. I think them a Kind of Paper Money, which is not only of little value, but which is not always a reputable, tho' a Legal Tender. I solicit yours, as an undoubted Bill of Exchange which is Gold wherever it goes.[1]

Washington responded graciously with nine letters.One was to the baron Van der Capellan who, Washington noted with characteristically dry humor, "may, for ought I know (not having received a letter from him these four or five years) be in the Land of Spirits—where also a handsome introduction may not be amiss." He asked Morris to procure a watch for him in Paris similar to one Jefferson had bought for Madison, directing that it be "*well* executed in point of workmanship" but not a "finical ornamented one."[2] Morris promptly fulfilled this request, sending a whimsical account of his efforts to find the best watchmaker in Paris.

The letters Washington wrote were all any friend of the president could have wished.He told Jefferson that he would find Morris

> full of affability, good nature, vivacity and talents. As you will also find in him a deportment calculated to do credit to the national character, I cannot hesitate to believe that you will be desirous of having opportunities of being useful to him.[3]

The comte de Moustier, France's minister to America, also gave Morris letters, as did Benjamin Franklin.[4] Morris also carried letters from James Madison to Jefferson. Morris thought highly of Madison at that time, and would have been surprised by the unenthusiastic cover letter that his fellow delegate wrote. With unmistakable dislike, Madison said merely:

> This will be handed to you by Mr. Governeur Morris who will embark in a few days for Havre . . . He is already well known to you by character, and as far as there may be a defect of personal acquaintance I beg leave to supply it by this introduction.

He added in cipher, "I am a stranger to the errand on which G. Morris goes to Europe. It relates I presume to the affairs of R. Morris which are still much deranged."[5]

Madison was correct, but there was more to Morris's trip than simply making repairs to Robert's affairs. This was the time of a post–Constitutional Convention frenzy of commercial activity in the United States. With the promise of a stable and creditworthy America, businessmen in America and Europe were eager to invest in a panoply of schemes. The Morrises and their associates had the connections and the capital for success in such ventures.[6]

Robert Morris had many concerns, among them William Constable, John Rucker, & Company. Constable was an enterprising merchant who had secretly played both sides during the Revolutionary War; the "& Company" referred to Robert and Gouverneur. Gouverneur's share of the capital stake (5,000 pounds New York currency) had been put up by Robert, and Gouverneur repaid him by acting as his attorney.The firm invested in trade with China and Europe, and acted as agent for Robert's tobacco contract with the French Farmers-General, a government-appointed monopoly with sole rights to process and sell tobacco in France. The tobacco money was to underwrite export shipments from Europe to America.

In 1787, the firm's agent in London suddenly refused to honor Robert's bills and fled. Although they did not know it yet, this default was the start of Robert's downward spiral, which would land him in disgrace and debtor's prison by 1798. Gouverneur, who remained loyal throughout, spent much time in Europe trying to restore Robert's credit, but it was a thankless task. As he watched his old friend carom from one losing land speculation to another he did not hesitate to warn him in strong terms, making him what one historian calls Robert's "harshest critic and most perceptive adviser."[7]

The immediate impetus for Gouverneur's trip was the need to convince the Farmers-General to accept late deliveries of tobacco. In addition, he was to pursue purchasing the American war debt to France, brokering purchases of American domestic securities, and selling tracts of New York lands. There was also the vague possibility that he might be appointed to represent America on financial matters in Holland, a prospect he addressed only obliquely in his letters.[8]

Morris had long wanted to "shoot the Gulph" and see Europe. At the age of twenty, on the threshold of his legal career, he had considered making the grand tour, for he felt strongly that he had "been so hurried through the different scenes of childhood and youth, that I have still some time left to pause before I tread the great stage of life."[9] Now, nearly seventeen years later, in mid-December 1788, he departed for Europe at last, a mature and seasoned man, yet still without a wife or a secure fortune. The voyage was made at the most unpleasant time of the year—the desire to avoid a winter voyage frequently appears in American letters of this period—but Robert's troubles left no time to waste. Morris passed the forty days of miserable weather writing a paper on American finances and import duties, which he later presented to Jefferson.[10] Arriving at Havre at the end of January, he entered negotiations with one of Robert's business connections to purchase wheat on the Hudson for sale in France.[11] Then, accompanied by his servant, Morris proceeded to Paris and took up lodgings at the Hôtel Richelieu, on the rue de Richelieu, near the Palais-Royal. On February 9, Thomas Jefferson wrote to his secretary William Short, who was taking a sightseeing trip through southern Europe, that Gouverneur Morris had just arrived.[12]

This was the "year without a spring" in France, but the constant snow did not confine Morris to his rooms. He immediately contacted the Farmers-General, and plunged into the social rounds, keeping an eye open for business opportunities. The weather depressed him, however: "And this is the smiling European Spring of which so much is said and sung," he wrote with disgust, and, while grateful for the attentions of Jefferson and other new acquaintances, he was lonely and homesick. "Go to Mr. de V——le.," he wrote. "Invisible. Wait on Madame de La Luzerne. Invisible." Accepting invitations from people he did not know, he felt alienated by the unfamiliar manners and handicapped by his yet unrefined ability in French.[13]

Morris already had something of a reputation in France, both for his part in the Constitution and as an expert in finance. This last was thanks to his friend the marquis de Chastellux, Rochambeau's chief of staff, who died shortly before Morris reached Paris. The marquis had been quite

taken by Morris, and was deeply impressed by his letters on Franco-American commerce, and had circulated them among his friends.[14]

Morris's social forays introduced him to French morals, and, despite his notoriety as a rake in his own country, he was taken aback. The French, he observed, "having no Liberty in their Government, have compensated to themselves that Misfortune by bestowing a great Deal upon Society."[15] He was disconcerted that the comte de Narbonne, the son of a lady of the king's aunt's household, was actually believed to be "the Fruit of an incestuous Union between the late King and Madame Adelaide his Daughter." He was dismayed to hear that the foreign minister comte de Montmorin (formerly French ambassador to Spain where he became a friend of the American charge, William Carmichael), "for whom I express so much Esteem, lives with Madame de B[eaumont] his Daughter. I hope this is not true."[16] Eight months after his arrival, he wrote that Paris was

> perhaps as wicked a Spot as exists. Incest, Murder, Bestiality, Fraud, Rapine, Oppression, Baseness, Cruelty; and yet this is the City which has stepped forward in the sacred Cause of Liberty.[17]

These impressions were tempered by meeting the reformer Malesherbes, now nearly seventy, who had "so much of that serene Gaiety which accompanies a virtuous and good Heart that it is impossible not to feel a very sincere Affection for him."[18] Morris also liked the widow of Chastellux, an Irish woman in her late twenties, who was far along in pregnancy with her late husband's son when Morris arrived. Morris became her constant visitor, along with the beautiful and rich but unfortunate duchesse d'Orléans (her husband, the king's cousin, would recklessly encourage popular disaffection against the king) and Mme de Ségur, wife of the comte de Ségur, who had also served in America. All three women became his good friends.

When Morris made the acquaintance of Jacques Necker, the director of finances, at that moment probably the most popular man in France, his first thought was that if Necker was "really a very great Man I am deceived; and yet this is a rash Judgement."[19] He soon confirmed the impression, however: "[H]e is one of those people who has obtained a much greater Reputation than he had any Right to," he wrote to Washington.

> [A]n unspotted Integrity as Minister, and serving at his own Expence in an Office which others seek for the Purpose of enriching themselves, have acquired him very deservedly much confidence. Add to this that his Writings on finance teem with that Sort of Sensibility

> which makes the Fortune of modern Romances, and which is exactly suited to this lively Nation, who love to read but hate to think.[20]

"Gods! what a Theatre is this for a first Rate Character!" Morris lamented, noting that Necker was "as much an Instrument as any one of those which he makes Use of," and correctly predicting his eventual fall from favor. Jefferson felt the same, as had Benjamin Franklin before him. "It is a tremendous cloud indeed which hovers over this nation," Jefferson wrote to John Jay, "and he at the helm [Necker] has neither the courage nor the skill necessary to weather it.[21]

Morris's first impression of Necker's daughter, the famous Mme de Staël, was no more flattering. He considered her unattractively masculine, and he was intimidated by the glittering wit of her salon ("a kind of temple of Apollo," he called it) at the same time he was irritated by its superficiality. "A Conversation too brilliant for me," he wrote after a visit. "I shall not please here because I am not sufficiently pleased."[22]

Morris resumed his friendship with the marquis de Lafayette, who received him enthusiastically, certain that Morris, like Jefferson, would encourage Lafayette's ambitions both for the country and for himself. At the outset, he was right: Morris thought Lafayette could lead the French to enlightened reform. Both men were soon undeceived, and their friendship would grow extremely strained.

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Morris's arrival coincided with preparations for the first Estates General in France since 1614.[23] The convocation was an act of fiscal desperation by Louis XVI and his ministers, who needed new taxes to cover the shortfall of revenue, already bad and now exacerbated to the brink of disaster by the costs of the American Revolution, with social unrest fueled by a terrible harvest the summer before. Fiscal and administrative reforms intended to curb the aristocracy's ancient tax privileges were essential, but Louis's attempts had failed repeatedly since as early as 1776. The most recent effort had been through an Assembly of Notables, which Louis and his finance minister Charles Alexandre Calonne summoned in 1787. The assembly, encouraged by Lafayette, who detested Calonne, rejected the proposed reforms, which included abolition of internal customs barriers, reduction of the onerous salt tax, and land taxes payable by all, including the church. They also insisted on examining a statement of the government's accounts. These positions reflected an increasingly strong political

view that taxation without political representation was unacceptable, a view given force by the American experience.[24]

Lafayette was receiving quiet counsel from Jefferson, who urged caution to the eager young marquis and recommended the English constitution as a model of government.[25] Yet Lafayette and the others of the "Patriotic" party were in no mood for restraint. The recalcitrant notables were dismissed near the end of May 1787, and Calonne's replacement, Brienne, attempted to have fiscal measures approved instead by the regional parlements, giving them the force of law. The Parlement of Paris refused, and when it was exiled by the king to Troyes, it joined with several other parlements in issuing a remonstrance against the king.

The remonstrance effectively advised Louis that no reforms would be approved unless he agreed to convoke an Estates General, consisting of elected representatives of the three estates (the church, the nobility, and commoners). Instead, in May 1788, Louis issued the "May Edicts," transferring the powers of the parlements to a new entity. There were outraged protests, and Louis reluctantly agreed to reappoint Necker, who had resigned in 1781 after an outcry caused by publication of his *Compte rendu*, a document describing the country's financial situation. Necker reconvened the parlements, and the first decree registered was for convocation of the Estates General. Elections were to be held, and grievances presented. The delegates were to assemble at Versailles in May 1789.

As the convocation neared, one key and volatile issue remained unresolved: the manner of voting by the three Estates. In 1614, votes had been taken "by order," which meant the nobility and clergy could always outvote the Third Estate even though they represented but a small fraction of the population and the national wealth. Reformers sought to double the votes of the Third Estate and to allow voting by head. Necker tried to deal with the matter by reconvening another Assembly of Notables, but they were now in a reactionary mode and voted against doubling the Third Estate, an act that identified them as defenders of privilege and destroyed their popular appeal. At the end of the year, Necker and the king overruled them and directed that the Third Estate would be doubled. Whether the vote would be by head or by order, however, was not decided, but left to the Estates themselves. This would prove a fatal miscalculation.

Another matter of intense debate was the form of a declaration of rights and a constitution, to be deliberated upon by the Estates General. Interest in the new American Constitution was keen. "Every body here is trying their hands at forming declarations of rights," Jefferson wrote to

Madison, enclosing a draft he had helped Lafayette write. "You will see that it contains the essential principles of ours accommodated as much as could be to the actual state of things here."[26]

Morris was also infected by the enthusiasm he found for reform. Two weeks after arriving, he wrote to Moustier in America:

> I find on this Side of the Atlantic a strong resemblance to what I left on the other—a Nation which exists in Hopes, Prospects and Expectations. The reverence for antient Establishments gone, existing Forms shaken to the very Foundation, and a new Order of Things about to take Place in which perhaps even to the very names, all former Institutions will be disregarded.[27]

However, Morris, like Jefferson, urged restraint. The French were "easily, too easily, misled," he told Moustier, and wrote to William Carmichael in Madrid:

> I have here the strangest Employment imaginable. A Republican and just as it were emerged from that Assembly which has formed one of the most republican of all republican Constitutions, I preach incessantly Respect for the Prince, Attention to the Rights of the Nobility, and Moderation not only in the Object but also in the Pursuit of it. All of this you will say is none of my Business, but I consider France as the natural Ally of my Country and of Course that we are interested in her Prosperity—besides (to say the Truth) I love France.[28]

In mid-April, he had a long conversation with Lafayette, now a deputy for the Second Estate (the nobles). "We consider of a Revolt in Paris," Morris recorded, but they agreed it would cause "much Mischief" without producing any good. However, the fact that he would even discuss instigating a "revolt" is striking proof of Morris's initial approval of the aims of Lafayette and his fellow members of the Society of Thirty, a club that was the principal organ of the Patriotic party, working to promote election of deputies with reforming principles.[29]

Yet despite Morris's willingness to advise Lafayette, he did not plan to stay much longer in France.[30] His business proved more problematic than anticipated, however, and Paris had more attractions than had appeared at first—Morris would still be in Paris in mid-July, when the Revolution was well under way.