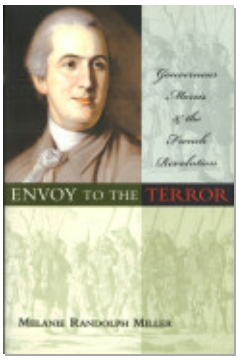
Envoy to the Terror

Melanie R. Miller



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Chapter Seven

The Opponents

The naming of the American minister to France, a choice destined to grate upon the nerves of so many, was made in early November 1791, in response to news that the British were sending a minister to the United States. According to the editors of the Jefferson Papers, when Washington told Jefferson that he intended to appoint Thomas Pinckney to London and Morris to Paris, Jefferson hoped to persuade him to do the opposite, and left a blank on the documents where the name of the court was to be inserted.[1] Jefferson was increasingly uneasy about Morris's views on the Revolution—those views, as noted before, remained unchanged, but Jefferson's were becoming more radical, and he worried about the effect of Morris's dispatches on Washington and American policy. However, Jefferson had been pleased with Morris's firm hand with the British. In any event, he did not change the president's mind, for Washington instructed him to insert "London" into Pinckney's letter, stating that "[f]or the reason's mentioned to you yesterday, I prefer London to Paris for his Mission." Washington also named Short as minister resident to The Hague.

The nominations faced difficulties in the Senate. There were many senators who believed that the United States should have no foreign establishments, and raised the constitutional issue of authority to make that decision. There were also a number opposed to Morris's nomination. The two parties joined forces when the Senate committee began to consider the nominations in late December. The committee included Caleb Strong, Aaron Burr, Richard Henry Lee, James Gunn—all four of whom voted against Morris's appointment—and Oliver Ellsworth. On January 3, Jefferson wrote Short that they had been "twelve days in suspense . . . Whatever you may hear otherwise, be assured that no mortal not even of their own body can at this moment guess the result." A week later there was still no vote, and he added a postscript: "Tho the Senate has been constantly on the subject in my cyphered letter, there is no decision as yet."[2]

Whatever his views may have been of Morris, Jefferson did his duty and worked hard for the confirmations. On January 4, he drafted a letter from Washington to the Senate asserting that the Constitution had "made the President the sole competent judge to what places circumstances render it expedient that Ambassadors or other public ministers should be sent," and that the Senate had power only to give or withhold consent to the person nominated.[3]

The letter proved unnecessary after Jefferson met with the committee and presented these arguments in person. The meeting apparently turned the tide with the committee members with respect to agreeing to the establishments. It had no impact on support for the nominations themselves, however, and the debate on Morris's appointment was contentious.[4] James Monroe was the most outspoken and told the Senate:

> His manners are not conciliatory—his character well known & considered as indiscreet—upon the grounds of character he was twice refused as a Member of the Treasury board, once at Trenton & afterwards at New York—Besides he is a monarchy man & not suitable to be employed by this country, nor in France. He went to Europe to sell lands and Certificates.[5]

Monroe's opposition would not have surprised Morris, but he would have been wounded to the soul to hear the speech by Roger Sherman, who damned Morris's talent with faint praise ("he is capable of writing a good letter and forming a good Draft"), admitting that he had "never heard that he has betrayed a trust or that he lacks integrity," but attacking Morris's moral character, with regard to which Sherman considered him

> an irreligious and profane man—he is no hypocrite and never pretended to have any religion. He makes religion the subject of ridicule and is profane in his conversation. . . . It is a bad example to promote such characters; and although they may never have betrayed a trust, or exhibited proofs of a want of integrity, and although they may be called men of honor—yet I would not put my trust in them—I am unwilling that the country should put their Trust in them, and because they have not already done wrong, I feel no security that they will not do wrong in future.

Sherman then veered off into a discussion of Benedict Arnold who was also "an irreligious and profane character—he was called a man of honor," but

had "betrayed his Trust" and "would have delivered up the Commander in chief & betrayed his country." Therefore, concluded this senator whom Morris had described as "certainly one of the noblest men in America,"[6] as "the like has happened from other such characters; and I am against their being employed and shall therefore vote against Mr. Morris."

Apparently "no person vindicated him against these charges except his namesake," wrote Monroe, but Washington's prestige saved the nomination. On January 12, 1791, Pinckney was confirmed without dissent, Morris was confirmed by sixteen votes for to eleven against, and Short by fifteen votes for to eleven against (opposition to Short's appointment related to objections to establishing a minister in Holland).[7]

Two weeks after the vote, Monroe wrote to his friend St. George Tucker about the debate, telling him that Morris was opposed because of his

> general moral character wh. precluded all possibility of confidence in his morals. 2ndly his known attachment to monarchic govt. & contempt of the Republicans, rendering him unfit to represent us & especially at the French court in the present happy turn of their affairs. 3d. his general brutality of manners & indiscretion giving him a wonderful facility in making enemies & losing friends & of course unfit for a negotiator [note the echo of Hamilton's fabricated allegations]—4thly his being at present abroad as a vendor of public securities & back lands.[8]

This letter is remarkably vitriolic, but no more so than Jefferson's denunciation, made six weeks later, after meeting with Washington to discuss a statement of congratulations to Louis XVI on the new French constitution. Although Jefferson personally rejoiced in the new constitution, Washington had directed him to avoid "saying a word in approbation" of it, "not knowing whether the king in his heart approved it." Washington's comment confounded the secretary of state, and Washington must have noticed his chagrin. "Why indeed says he I begin to doubt very much the affairs of France," Jefferson recorded. "There are papers from London as late as the 10th. of Jan. which represent them as going into confusion." Jefferson was in a cold rage. "This is one of many proofs I have had of his want of confidence in the event of the French revolution," he wrote in his notes.

> The fact is that Gouverneur Morris, a high flying Monarchy-man, shutting his eyes and his faith to every fact against his wishes, and

> believing every thing he desires to be true, has kept the President's mind constantly poisoned with his forebodings.[9]

The tremendous irony in this angry paragraph cannot be sidestepped: even the editors of his papers do not question that it was *Jefferson* who resolutely closed "his eyes and his faith to every fact against his wishes" regarding the Revolution.[10] Regardless, the animosity Jefferson expressed toward Morris had many sources, and we now turn to flushing them out.

Morris did not always recognize his antagonists. Some were clothed in the guise of good comradeship, like Short, or long friendship, such as Alexander Hamilton. Others he had never particularly liked, such as Thomas Paine, but they spent a fair amount of time together and Morris was angry to find that Paine had denounced him behind his back. Some he scarcely knew, such as William Jackson and Stephen Sayre, but because he was in a public position, they knew him and for various reasons did their best to damage him with the French and American governments. That he was recalled is a measure of their success. That George Washington's affection and respect for him remained intact is a measure of their failure. Yet Washington's loyalty was arguably primarily based on faith; to determine whether Morris was truly deserving of approbation or censure, the merit of the attacks and the merit of the men who made them must be examined.

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On November 20, 1790, William Short wrote a very friendly letter to Morris from Amsterdam. Although chargé d'affaires in Paris, he was in Holland tending to debt payments to France. Short was uninterested in the subject of loans, which he called "a poor dry affair worse a great deal than the black letter of Coke Lyttleton."[11] The Dutch bankers, he reported, had asked after Morris, saying that Morris had what they admiringly called a "long head." Short complained of missing Paris, and asked Morris to write, as his letters "at all times & from all places are highly agreeable to me" and "would be more than ever so at present. Adieu & believe me ever yours." Morris, in his response, told Short he expected to return to America before long. Short answered that it would be "with a real & uncommon regret that I should see you leave that place."[12]

Few historians have devoted attention to William Short, (1759–1848), whom Jefferson called his "adoptive son"; the only biography of this difficult character is by George Shackelford.[13] He was a southerner, a friend of

James Monroe, and his uncle was married to Jefferson's wife's half sister. Jefferson had supervised his legal studies, and Short became his private secretary, going to France in late 1784; his French was excellent and superior to Jefferson's.[14]

When Jefferson left France in 1789, he appointed Short as interim chargé, but told Short repeatedly that he could not expect to replace Jefferson as minister. Nonetheless, Short from the outset thought otherwise, and his aspirations were nurtured by his French friends, who could not believe that a mentor as powerful as Jefferson wouldn't ensure Short's appointment. In indulging this persuasion, Short ignored Jefferson's blunt discouragement and his advice that a return to the United States was necessary for a successful political or diplomatic career.[15] The delays in the appointments did not help, and by the time Washington made his choices, Short was convinced he deserved the position and, moreover, that Jefferson owed it to him. He had also become wildly jealous of any perceived competitor, including Morris. In a typical letter, dated October 6, 1791—less than a year after the letter to Morris quoted above—he told Jefferson that Morris's "aristocratical principles, his contempt of the French revolution and of the French nation expressed in all societies without reserve, and his dogmatizing manner and assumed superiority has exposed him generally to ill will and often to ridicule."[16] Short repeated such attacks many times, yet there is no evidence that Morris ever did anything antagonistic to Short; quite the contrary. The reason for Short's metamorphosis to mortal enemy lay in his obsession with the post of minister to France, and in his changing relationship with Jefferson.

Those who have written about Short have been generally flattering in their assessments, but his letters indicate much room for dispute. In addition, Jefferson's letters to Short prove that, contrary to Shackelford and the Jefferson editors,[17] Jefferson did *not* support Short for appointment as minister to France. From the outset, he did not consider Short qualified; and, by the time of the nominations, Short's criticism of the Revolution had convinced Jefferson he was unsuitable for the post.

A typical exchange of letters in 1790 provides ample evidence for these conclusions. In June, Short received his interim chargé commission from Jefferson and immediately assumed it was a permanent one. He did not realize his error for two days because the accompanying message was in code, and he was at first unable to open the cabinet containing Jefferson's cipher. With the cipher in hand, he was shattered to learn his mistake, one

laborious word at a time, all the more so because he had obviously hurried to tell his friends that he had received the position and modestly accepted their compliments. Short wrote Jefferson of his chagrin, complaining at great length; in the remainder of 1790 alone, he wrote seven letters on the subject.[18] Before receiving the first angry letter in early August, the secretary wrote Short that Congress would soon recess, and "your successor" could not be appointed until December, and could not depart until spring.[19] The message was clear: *your successor*.

By the end of September, Jefferson had received Short's June letter and wearily repeated himself. "My several letters, private, will have left me little to add on the subject of your stay in Europe," he began soberly. Short's insistence that Jefferson controlled the appointments showed that he had "forgotten [his] countrymen altogether, as well as the nature of our government." Moreover, Jefferson added, the government would soon adopt a rule prohibiting officials from serving longer than seven years away from America because they would lose touch. He did not mention that this was his idea.[20]

In response, in late October 1790, Short wrote Jefferson a letter startling in its unrestrained anger. "I observe you do not count on me as being even thought of," he burst out, "and of course I take it for granted that my name has never been put in the view of him who names [Washington]." Seemingly deaf to Jefferson's reiterated counsel, he repeated that everyone assumed he would be appointed—as if their assumptions were relevant. By saying nothing, he angrily accused Jefferson, "your known friendship for me by giving an unfavorable construction to your silence, may have a consequence that I am sure you do not wish." It was one of many long, repetitive, self-pitying, importuning letters.[21]

Short soon perceived Morris as a likely rival and went to work to scuttle Morris's chances. In October 1791, he sent Jefferson the *Gazette* article criticizing Morris, described previously, saying piously that it was his "duty to inform you in what light he[Morris] is considered at this place." He told Jefferson Morris was boasting that he could be named American minister to France if he chose to, an entirely untrue assertion, and criticized Morris for advising the king:

> A foreigner who thus meddles in the affairs of a country with which he has nothing to do, and particularly in opposition to the public opinion does it as his peril and risk and cannot blame those who attach the seal of intrigue and design to such conduct, and particularly when he is a volunteer.

Short's censure must have stung Jefferson, who had of course done something very similar while in France. Short also asserted (wrongly) that Montmorin disliked Morris, and hinted darkly that there were reasons against appointing Morris "which can have been observed only here."[22]

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At the same time that the editors of the Jefferson papers describe Short as a better diplomat than Morris, they compare Short quite unfavorably to Jefferson.[23] Short was not in the league of either man: he lacked diplomatic deportment; he was not graced with the social skills which are essential to a diplomat; he was not a sought-after dinner guest. He *was* a good, thorough reporter of events in France, and this certainly was important; but a minister is not merely an observer, but also an agent, and there Short fell short. He tended to harass the people he was supposed to be negotiating with.[24]

Morris had taken the younger man's measure immediately, noting in June 1789 that Short spoke of "the Paris Societies in the Tone of an older Man than he is, and therefore I think after Mr. Jefferson's departure he will run into them, peut-être à l'abandon." When Short later confided his budding ambition for the appointment and that if he didn't get Paris he would leave, Morris responded with acute and friendly advice:

> Either you mean to pursue the diplomatic Course, or you do not. If you do not, then you will naturally wish to establish yourself speedily in America—you will observe that by the word *wish* I mean a Conclusion of Reason rather than the Incitements of Inclination—If you mean to pursue the diplomatic Line then you ought not to throw yourself out of it so shortly after announcing your Career, and especially if you should thereby exhibit ill Humor, which in Effect is only kicking against the Pricks, and will enable your opponents at a future Day to observe that you are too irascible for that Station which of all others requires the greatest Pliancy of Disposition.

If there were many candidates for the position, "then your Success would make you many Enemies"—an ironic and accurate prediction for Morris himself. "Sooner or later they would succeed in removing you," he added.[25]

Short also lacked *sang-froid*, an important diplomatic attribute. Late one evening in September 1791, Morris went to visit at Mme de Staël's. Short was there, as was Lady Sutherland, the lovely wife of the English ambassador,

Lord Gower. Morris admired her very much. As Lady Sutherland got into her carriage to depart, she invited Morris to dine that week.

> She takes no Notice of Mr. Short who stands next me, and in turning round to speak to him after she is gone I find both his Countenance decomposed and his Voice broken. Thus he will go Home with Illwill wrankling in his Heart against me because he is not taken Notice of. This is hard but this is human Nature. He is Chargé d'Affaires and I am only a private Gentleman. He therefore expects from all and more especially from the Corps diplomatique a marked preference and Respect. I wish him to receive it but that is impossible in this Quarter for the present.[26]

Lady Sutherland seemed to have taken a dislike to the sandy-haired Short and later attacked his capability as a chargé. Morris defended him, assuring her that he was "a very sensible, judicious young Man and very attentive to his Business."

> She says he has not the Look and Manner which such Character [as a diplomat] requires. I reply that he might not do so well perhaps in Russia but at any other Court I do not conceive Figure to be very important.

When on a second occasion the ambassadress criticized Short, Morris was curt:

> She again brings up Mr. Short (I know not why she dislikes him so much) and asks if he will ever be a great Man among us. I tell her that I think not as he is not a public Speaker but he may notwithstanding be a very useful Man here. I say this in a Tone which ends that Part of the Conversation.[27]

In late 1791, Jefferson wrote Short that the Paris nomination was "in suspence" between Short and Morris, but this did not mean Washington was undecided. Rather, Morris was assured of Paris if Pinckney took London; otherwise, he was assured of London.[28] Washington may have agreed that Short would be the default choice for Paris if Morris declined. Jefferson apparently urged Washington to choose *Pinckney* for Paris instead of London, in order to forestall the appointment of Morris; the evidence is that he did *not* push for Short.

Jefferson already had excellent reason for dissatisfaction, based on the character the young man had exposed in his letters, but there was an even more compelling motive: Short was now a sharp critic of the course of the Revolution, contrary to Jefferson's views. If, under these circumstances, Jefferson *had* seriously advocated Short's appointment, he would have been sacrificing what he believed to be his country's interests to his private loyalties. The more reasonable conclusion is that Jefferson was not enthusiastic about Short as a diplomat, but thought he could handle the limited duties of minister to The Hague.[29]

When the news of Washington's nominations arrived in Paris in late January 1792, Short was outraged. He immediately wrote to Jefferson that he must see how "particularly improper" Morris was for the post. If only he had realized earlier that Morris was really a candidate, Short lamented, he would have said much more.[30] James Swan wrote gleefully to Morris:

> Mr. Short was the first who inform'd me of it last Friday. If mortification, chagrine & disappointment were ever felt by man, he is under the operations of these violent passions at the moment; indeed he does not conceal them. . . . Of this I shall entertain you when I shall have the pleasure to see you here.[31]

Short continued to complain for the duration of Morris's appointment.[32] The theme he pursued most emphatically, perhaps because he knew it would be most effective with Jefferson, was that Morris's views (so similar to his own!) were opposed to the Revolution and had made him very unpopular in France. Indeed, although others said the same to Jefferson, it was Short who pursued and amplified this notion and gave the impression that the condemnation of Morris was universal:

> They have seen him the constant supporter of what they consider a diabolical system of government, and what they suppose must also give much displeasure in America. They have seen him so constantly the enemy of the principles of the present revolution as to be constantly cited and to be considered as the servant of the opposite party.[33]

According to Short, Morris was considered "one of the last men that the American government would name here," and thus it appeared the decision was solely because of dissatisfaction with *Short*. "This idea carries with it a sting in my mind that I never before had any idea of, and makes

me bewail my hard fortune," he wrote pitifully. He also told Jefferson that Lafayette was dismayed, which was true; Lafayette wrote a reproachful letter to Washington, suggesting that Short be substituted for Morris.[34]

Short did not let up. In a typical letter, taking up nine single-spaced pages in the Jefferson Papers, he wrote that Morris's "pretensions and desire" had made him seek the position, even though he was a businessman and thus belonging to a class that Short's friends described sneeringly as "*les intriguants*."[35] He claimed again that Morris had boasted of expecting the appointment, which Morris had not done but which Short himself had come very close to doing.[36]

Short made this last accusation directly to Morris, who denied it, telling Short that based on his letters from Robert he was "perfectly convinced" that Washington had not communicated to "any one Person his intention to nominate me twenty four Hours before the Nomination did actually take Place."[37] In any event, Morris continued, "I assure you that I never did apply to any Person nor in any way for any Post or Place whatever."

Morris also denied that he had tried to prevent Short's nomination:

> On the contrary when I have been talked to on that Subject I have invariably opposed the Opinions expressed by some Persons who affected I believe to be your friends to you and mine to me. On the whole I have great reason to be persuaded that you stand very well in the opinion of our government and I am persuaded also that you will always merit that good opinion.

"You will see in the circumstantial relations I have just now made how unfounded are the Ideas which have been entertained by the People you allude to," Morris concluded. " I think you will also perceive the Pain I feel at such Imputations." Morris's account of his behavior was accurate, with the exception that he had told Robert in May 1790, before he heard the complaints about his mission to London, that if he ever should be offered a position he would prefer Paris. By 1791 Morris was, as he told Short, sure that Short would be chosen.[38]

Short's frenzied letters continued. He told Jefferson the National Assembly's foreign affairs committee had resolved unanimously to deny Morris. The foreign minister was to instruct the French minister in London to keep Morris away from France, while the king requested his recall. However, because Morris had already left London, the committee decided instead that a complaint should be sent directly to America. Short had been asked to stay until another minister was appointed but had (so he

said) refused. Thereafter, said Short, Morris had been lucky, because the tumult of events in France had made people forget his "interference with respect to the King's accepting the constitution," including those who learned it from Morris himself "in salons where his vanity did not allow him to conceal it."[39]

Short's assertion that the Girondin government considered refusing to receive Morris *may* have been true. Morris heard the story when he arrived from London.[40] However, a review of the French archives reveals nothing of such a plan, and Short's allegations should be considered in the light of a remarkable diary entry by Morris on May 12, 1792: "Mr. Swan comes who insists that the Idea of not receiving me was started by Short." Morris added characteristically, "[B]ut I do not believe it," and that was the end of the matter for him.[41] Whether Short stooped this low will probably never be known, but Jefferson apparently never told Washington Short's story about the French denying Morris. It is hard to avoid concluding that Jefferson simply did not believe Short and protected his friend from his own folly by quietly putting the letters away.

Still Short persisted, with increasingly outlandish charges. He began to claim that Morris and Jefferson had known Washington's intentions since as early as 1790. "I alone was not consulted. . . . And this," he wailed, "after having been made to pass through the fogs and ice and bogs of Holland during two winters successively."[42] Short could be at his most eloquent when he was at his most denigrating, producing an unintended effect: behind the jealousy of these raging letters, like a photographic image forming in a chemical bath, the reader can see the sparkle and genius of Gouverneur Morris. In the same letter, which concerned the American debt to France, Short wrote sarcastically to Jefferson: "Every thing is so easy to Mr. Morris in conversation—every obstacle is got over with so much facility in his plausible language." Morris, said Short, was "a man who levels mountains and fills vallies with a few phrases."

It would seem that Short was too wrought up to stop: his letters maintained a fevered pitch for years.[43] One cannot help but feel sympathy: the two-year delay between Jefferson's departure and the appointments certainly gave a rational if not realistic basis for Short's increasing sense of entitlement, and Short held the fort during a difficult period in France. However, his letters demonstrate remarkable naïveté regarding American political realities—a naïveté in sharp contrast with his insightful reports about revolutionary France. Short's tirades also reveal someone utterly self-centered and with no self-control; hardly a compelling choice for a diplomatic post.

Besides ambition, the strongest motive for Short to remain in France—although he never said a word to Jefferson, who disapproved—was his attachment to Rosalie de La Rochefoucauld, which began in 1787. Rosalie was married to the much older duc de La Rochefoucauld, a friend of Jefferson in Paris. Rosalie was devastated when Short did not get the appointment, and her mother-in-law, who liked Short, wrote Jefferson to complain.[44] After Rosalie's husband was murdered in September 1792, Short helped shelter her fortune.[45] When she was imprisoned by the revolutionary government, Short, on an assignment to Madrid, was frantic and sent Jefferson some of his angriest attacks on Morris, although he enlisted Morris's help in passing letters to her and in trying to get her released. Morris sent him regular reports on her well-being, and arranged for Robert to manage her estate on Haiti.[46]

Short never gave up. In 1795, he returned to France to live with Rosalie, who gave him a huge "loan" enabling him to make a sizable fortune. In 1801, when Jefferson was president, Short asked once more to be named minister. Jefferson refused outright, citing the policy he had recommended long ago to Washington against anyone having a foreign mission beyond an absence from America of "six, seven, or eight years." [47]

It remains to be considered whether Jefferson sacrificed Morris to his loyalty to Short. Jefferson had ample evidence from his letters to realize that Short was not reliable when it came to matters of personal ambition, and Jefferson's readiness to believe ill of Morris does not reflect well on his objectivity or judgment. By 1792, Jefferson's friendliness toward Morris had disappeared from his letters, and the principal culprit was probably Short.

Short's jealous broadsides have hung in the air for two centuries. It is fortunate that Jefferson did not honor his request to destroy these self-incriminating letters. By keeping them intact, for "other eyes to see," Jefferson has permitted posterity to divine Short clearly, and to do greater justice to Morris.[48]