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A Reappraisal of the Conflict Between John Adams and Vergennes in 1780

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A REAPPRAISAL OF THE CONFLICT BETWEEN
JOHN ADAMS AND VERGENNES
IN 1780

BY
Nicholas James Sullivan, S.J.

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of Master
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August
1943
VITA

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After his elementary education in the public schools of Pittsfield, he attended St. Joseph's High School in Pittsfield and graduated therefrom in June, 1933. During the next four years, he attended St. Michael's College, Winooski Park, Vermont, from which college he received the degree of Bachelor of Arts in June, 1937. In September of that year, he entered the St. Andrew-on-Hudson Novitiate of the Society of Jesus. For the three years he spent there he was academically connected with Fordham University, New York City.

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CHAPTER I

THE INCIDENT

On February 15, 1779, Gerard, the French minister to the United States officially notified the Continental Congress that it was the "desire of His Most Christian Majesty that the United States would speedily put themselves in a condition to take that part in the negotiation for peace which their dignity and interest required." He added that they should "lay a solid foundation for obtaining a speedy peace" by "giving their plenipotentiary the most ample instructions and full powers." 1

Although Congress took prompt action on the French suggestion and received a committee report "as to conditions of pacification and particularly as to the Mississippi and Fisheries" 2 on February 23, it was not until August 14 that "the Instructions for a treaty of peace with Great Britain" 3 were finally agreed upon. The debate in Congress had been long and difficult; it had been fiercely sectional and had indicated that future American-French relations were not to be smooth.

First, there was the Mississippi question. Throughout 1778, the United States and Spain had been angling for control of the

2 Ibid., III, 58.
3 Ibid., III, 300.
Mississippi. Since France desired an alliance with both Spain and the United States, at first she took no part in their dispute. But by October of 1778, Gerard, the French minister, departed from the position of disinterested criticism of the two countries' claims and became the avowed champion of the cause of Spain. This is somewhat understandable because, as Edward Corwin has pointed out, a Frenchman was prone to regard England's claim to the Mississippi—and hence the claim of the United States—as founded upon conquest alone.4 Gerard knew that Vergennes desired Spain's assistance in the prosecution of the war against England, and he had little understanding of, and no sympathy with, the American claims as they were represented in Congress. So it was that on January 28, 1779, Gerard reported to Vergennes that he had informed the Americans that the French government no longer accepted the American pretensions in the West.5

Disagreement about the Mississippi was but one phase of the peace problem. Whether the United States should propose participation in the Newfoundland fisheries as a sine qua non of the peace with Great Britain was the other moot question, and its determination caused heated debates for four months. Gerard found himself drawn into this dispute also, and he entered with a great show of passion. On May 14, 1779, he

reports to Vergennes:

I told them that I was convinced that England would grant them the fisheries by the same title as that by which they had previously held them, to wit, as subjects of the British crown, but that they had no need of the aid of France for that arrangement.6

Faced with the threat of civil war or secession if New England was opposed in her fisheries, Gerard bluntly informed Congress that "if the Americans had the audacity to reduce His Majesty to the necessity of choosing between the two [Spain and the United States], his decision would not be in favor of the United States...[and] that certainly the king would not consent to consume the rest of his realm through a succession of years in order to procure a small increase of fortune for a few New England shipowners."7

Confronted with such vigorous representations the New England delegates agreed not to insist upon the fisheries as a sine qua non of the peace, but they were careful to have John Adams of Massachusetts appointed as peace commissioner. Despite a rhetorical condemnation of the fisheries which he had made in the past,8 Adams was to prove himself a dependable protagonist for the interests of New England.9

The appointment of John Adams could have been justified by many

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7Ibid., III, 177-81.
9Ibid., III, 263.
arguments. He had returned from a diplomatic mission in France but two months before. From this mission, as Carl Van Doren expresses it, he had "honestly recommended himself out of office." 10 At this time, Adams carried with him a letter of commendation from the French foreign minister, Vergennes:

Although you are to be henceforth without a public character in France, be persuaded that the esteem and consideration which you have justly acquired are by no means diminished, and I flatter myself, sir, that you will not deprive me of the pleasure of assuring you of it by word of mouth, and being at the same time the interpreter of the favorable sentiments with which the king honors you. They are the consequences of the particular satisfaction which his majesty has received from the wise conduct you have held during the whole time of your commission.11

Adams's patriotism, honesty and courage were absolutely beyond question. Despite his egoism, as Bernard Fay12 says, "it would have been hard to find a more educated or perspicacious man." Although he lacked solid diplomatic training, there was no other possible choice who had been better trained. Indeed, so wise did the choice appear that immediately following his selection, Adams received flattering letters from Gerry and Lovell and a most gracious note from La Luzerne.13

10Van Doren, Carl, Benjamin Franklin, Garden City Publishing Co., Inc. New York City, 1938, 608.
11Wharton, op. cit., III, 55.
12Fay, Bernard, Franklin, the Apostle of Modern Times, Little Brown and Company, Boston, 1929, 441.
13Wharton, op. cit., III, 352.
On November 13, 1779, Adams sailed from Boston on the French frigate, Sensible, with his two sons, John Quincy and Charles. He had a most unpleasant journey, and when the leaky Sensible put into the port of Ferrol, Adams decided to make the rest of his way overland. His diary contains the rueful account of the hard journey through Spain, where, to the disgruntled Yankee, "nothing appears rich but the churches; nothing fat but the clergy."14

Adams had hardly arrived in the French capital before he sent Vergennes the startling communication that he considered it his duty to inform the British government that he was in Europe to conclude treaties of peace and trade. In the year which had elapsed since the French had suggested that America send a plenipotentiary for peace with England, the fortunes of the war had changed. Vergennes feared that Adams's announcement would indicate to the British that America was no longer so desirous of continuing the war and that it would induce the British to make new overtures to win over the peace bloc in the Continental Congress.

Anticipating the objection that the time was not ripe for the announcement of the purpose of his mission, Adams had prefaced his request by saying:

From conversation with gentlemen at Boston, who were members of Congress, and from private letters, I learned in general that it [the decision to send a commissioner for peace] was not of any sudden deliberation or the fruit of any particular event of the war, prosperous or

14Adams, Works, III, 244.
adverse, but a measure that had been more than a year under consideration.  

Then he had continued by urging the following questions which were so unwelcome to Vergennes and which more than anything else produced the awkward situation that followed.

(1) Whether in the present state of things, it is prudent in me to acquaint the British ministry that I am arrived here, and that I shall be ready to treat whenever the belligerent powers shall be inclined to treat.
(2) Whether it is prudent in me to publish in any manner more than the journals of Congress may have already done the nature of my mission.
(3) Or whether to remain on the reserve, as I have hitherto done since my arrival in Europe.

In answering these questions Vergennes fell back upon an introductory remark of Adams, in which Adams had admitted: "As I was not at Congress when this transaction [the choosing of the plenipotentiary] took place, I am not able to inform your excellency very particularly of the rise and progress of it." Vergennes said, "I think, before I reply to different points on which you consulted me, that it is proper to wait for the arrival of M. Gerard, because he is probably the bearer of your instructions, and will certainly be able to make me better acquainted with the nature and extent of your commission." In general, however, he counseled concealment.

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15 Wharton, op. cit., III, 492.
16 Ibid., III, 492-3.
17 Ibid., III, 492.
18 Ibid., III, 496.
To Adams, concealment was distasteful, and the French refusal to accept his statement of the nature of his mission, together with the belief that Gerard would have more detailed and more accurate information about it, seemed to be an insult to a sovereign nation. Two excerpts from the eight items of comment which Adams added to his diary in regard to this incident show how deeply he felt about the matter:

The instructions of a sovereign to his ambassador are a secret and confidential communication between them; a sacred deposit, committed by the master to the servant, which the latter is under the strongest ties of honor, fidelity, and conscience, to preserve inviolate, until he has an express permission or injunction to reveal it.

The Count had probably instructed M. Gerard by some means or other, to penetrate into the secrets of Congress, and obtain from some of the members, or some of the secretaries or clerks, copies of the most confidential communications between Congress and their ministers. 19

During the next few months Adams repeatedly urged the publication of the nature of his mission. Each request was to Vergennes like a blow from a light lash. He told Adams that he would announce in the Gazette of France that Adams had arrived "to assist at the conferences for a peace when that event shall take place," 20 but later told him that

20 Wharton, op. cit., III, 580.
he had not known that such announcements were never made in this publi-
cation. He then assured him that it would be quickly published in the
Mercure de France.

On June 16, 1780 their relations were subject to a series of
events which made them more and more strained. On this day, Adams sent
to Vergennes a Boston newspaper, which he had received from a friend.
In it there was an account of a Congressional bill "establishing an
annual tax for seven years, for the redemption of their part of the bills
payable in silver and gold at the market price in hard money." Adams
contented himself with the above words of explanation. Since the bill
provided that 97 cents out of a dollar would be defaulted, Vergennes
viewed the bill quite differently. His criticism of it was quite justifi-
fably severe, but at times it became offensive. He wrote Adams:

It appears that the assembly of Massachusetts
has determined to adopt the resolutions of
Congress fixing the value of the paper money
at forty for one of specie.... While I admit,
sir, that the assembly might have recourse to
the expedient above mentioned in order to remove
their load of debt, I am far from agreeing that
it is just or agreeable to the ordinary course
of things to extend the effect to strangers as
well as citizens of the United States.... I
will only add that the French, if they are
obliged to submit to the reduction of Congress,
will find themselves victims of their zeal, and
I may say of the rashness with which they exposed
themselves in furnishing the Americans with arms,
ammunition, and clothing; and, in a word, with
all things of the first necessity of which the
Americans stood in need. You will agree with me,
sir, that this is not what the subjects of the
king ought to expect; and that, after escaping

21Ibid., III, 786.
the dangers of the sea, the vigilance of the English, instead of dreading to see them plundered in America they ought, on the contrary, to expect the thanks of Congress and of all the Americans, and believe that their property will be as secure and sacred in America as in France itself.22

Vergennes added that La Luzerne had orders to make the strongest representations to Congress against the bill. Adams wrote immediately to Franklin and urged him to attempt to have Vergennes's orders stopped. He then appealed to Vergennes to withhold his orders until he, Adams, could write a defense of the Congressional action. That very night he sent off to Vergennes a long dissertation justifying the American monetary policy.

His principal arguments were: "No foreign merchant ought to expect to be treated in America better than her native merchants." He reminded Vergennes that France was suffering no monetary loss in supporting America in the war:

The flourishing state of her [France's] marine and commerce, and the decisive influence of her councils and negotiations in Europe, which all the world will allow to be owing in a great measure to the separation of America from her inveterate enemy and to her new connections with the United States, show that the obligations are mutual.

And finally, he takes up Vergennes own words when he says:

I can not excuse myself from adding that most of the arms, ammunition, and clothing

22Ibid., III, 806-7.
for the army have been contracted for here by the ministers of Congress, and paid for, or agreed to be paid for, here in silver and gold. Very little of these articles have been shipped by private adventurers. They have much more commonly shipped articles of luxury of which the country did not stand in need, and upon which they must have made vast profits.23

Meanwhile, Franklin had sent Vergennes "a request in consequence of an application" made to him by Adams that the orders should be suspended, "as that plenipotentiary is able to prove that those orders are founded on false reports."24 Vergennes in answering Franklin referred to Adams's last letter quite disparagingly:

Mr. Adams, on the 22d, sent me a long dissertation on the subject in question, but it contains only abstract reasonings, hypotheses, and calculations which have no real foundation, or which at least do not apply to the subjects of the king, and in fine principles, than which nothing can be less analogous to the alliance subsisting between his majesty and the United States.25

The "pretended proofs"26 of Adams did nothing to change Vergennes's opinions. Indeed Vergennes wrote to Franklin that "the king is so firmly persuaded, sir, that your opinion...differs from that of Mr. Adams that he is not apprehensive of laying you under any embarrassments by requesting you to support the representations which

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23Ibid., III, 809-16.
24Ibid., III, 827.
25Ibid., III, 827.
26Ibid., III, 827.
his minister is ordered to make to Congress."27 To Adams, Vergennes wrote, "I think all further discussion on this subject will be needless."28

The fragile relations between Vergennes and Adams were not strengthened by Franklin's letter to Vergennes. Franklin assured Vergennes that the sentiments of Congress "and those of the Americans in general, with regard to the alliance...differ widely from those that seem to be expressed by Mr. Adams in his letter to your excellency."29

At this point it is interesting to consider the footnote which Francis Wharton appended in his edition of the above letter of Franklin. It condemns Franklin for being over-severe: "Adams' letter to Vergennes of June 22, 1780, while it takes untenable ground as to the standard by which government debts are to be paid, only by implication shows unfriendly feeling to France."30 Franklin, however, in condemning Adams's views "with regard to the alliance" itself, put his fellow diplomat in a very bad light with the French court.

Such a letter from Franklin was particularly inopportune for Adams, because Vergennes, at this time, seems to have been influenced by some indiscreet remarks Adams had made to subordinate officials of the French foreign office. On June 17, 1780, Adams had taken a defiant stand on the touchy question of the Congressional monetary policy:

27Ibid., III, 827.
28Ibid., III, 828.
29Ibid., III, 844.
30Ibid., III, 844, n.
The course Congress had taken was wise, indeed very wise, just very just; and those who complained of it were either English emissaries or spies.... The French had less reason for complaint than anybody else.31

Again, on May 9, 1780, in assuring Genet that he thought the alliance solidly founded, Adams showed a surprising lack of deference to the French will.

To suppose that France is sick of the part she has taken is to suppose her to be sick of that conduct which has procured her more respect and consideration in Europe than any step she ever took.... It is to suppose her sick of that system which has broken off from her rival and natural enemy the most solid part of his strength; a strength that had become so terrible to France and would have been so fatal to her.32

Such language of the undiplomatic Adams induced Vergennes to read more hostility to French interests into Adams's letter than it really contained. Consequently, the show of suspicion on the part of Vergennes awakened real distrust in Adams in the French foreign office. Unfortunately, Adams did not stop writing his disturbing letters.

On July 13, 1780 Adams discussed the naval efforts of France in the war, when he penned Vergennes "a few observations upon the present conjuncture of affairs."33 In order to cut off effectively the British line of supply, he urged that the French fleet be maintained throughout

31Doniol, op. cit., IV, 416, n.
32Wharton, op. cit., III, 667.
33Ibid., III, 848-55.
the winter at "Boston, Rhode Island, Delaware, or Chesapeake Bay."34 Perhaps this was sound strategy, but if the United States decided that it was necessary to suggest to the French how they might more effectively use their fleet, it was the province of Franklin to do this. Moreover Adams incorporated into his letter some offensive animadversions. He was careful to quote an English propaganda squib which read:

Let the whole system of France be considered from the beginning down to the retreat from Savannah, and I think it is impossible to put any other construction upon it but this, viz., that it has always been the deliberate intention and object of France, for purposes of their own, to encourage the continuation of the war in America in hopes of exhausting the strength and resources of this country and of depressing the rising power of America.35

And Adams comments upon this idea as if there might be a foundation in fact for it:

If these contrary opinions should be suffered to gain ground, as they most assuredly will if something is not done to prevent it, when all the world sees and declares as they do that it is the best policy of France, if she considered her own interest alone in the conduct of the war, to keep a superior naval force upon the coasts of the continent of North America, I leave your excellency to judge what a melancholy effect it will have upon our affairs.36

Before Vergennes answered this letter of Adams, Adams determined to run a tilt at Vergennes from another quarter. He decided to challenge the letter Vergennes had sent him five months before regarding...
concealment of the full nature of his mission. First he quoted Vergennes's letter; then he appended eleven comments which he thought the subject required. He began his remarks:

I should have been very happy if your excellency had hinted at the reasons which were in your mind, because after reflecting upon this subject as maturely as I can, I am not able to collect any reasons which appear to me sufficient for concealing the nature of my powers in their full extent from the court of London. On the contrary, many arguments have occurred to me which seem to show it to be both the policy of the United States and my particular duty to communicate them.  

Ten reasons follow.

Then, while Vergennes had not yet received Adams's last letter, Vergennes wrote assuring Adams that "The Chevalier de Ternay and the Count de Rochambeau are sent with the express design which is the subject of your letter." As if in answer to the British squib, he added, "You will perceive, sir, by this detail, that the king is far from abandoning the cause of America and that His Majesty without having been solicited by Congress, has taken effectual measures to support the cause of America."  

In answer to this letter, on the very next day, Adams enthusiastically and spontaneously responded: "I assure Your Excellency that scarcely any news I ever heard gave me more satisfaction."  

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37 Ibid., III, 861-3.  
38 Ibid., III, 870-1.  
39 Ibid., III, 872.
response was such only because he had not given due attention to the letter.

On July 25, 1780 Vergennes gave a complete answer to Adams's request relative to the publication of the nature of his mission. Feelings were not spared; tact was not used in exposing the position of the French ministry; the answer was vitriolic. Adams was informed that "to be solicitous about a treaty of commerce before peace is established is like being busy about furnishing a house before the foundation is laid." The result of the publication would but "give credit to the opinion...that the United States incline towards a defection." To propose what Adams did would be "to propose what was chimerical, and would be taking a step which it [the English ministry] would hold in derision." Vergennes found it necessary to point out to Adams that "the English ministry would consider that communication as ridiculous." He found he had to warn Adams that "The English ministry would either return no answer, or if they did, it would be an insolent one. In case of the latter, why should a man needlessly expose himself to insult, and thereby make himself the laughing-stock of all the nations?"

In commenting on the eighth of the eleven arguments of Adams, Vergennes at last seems to find something to praise, but the praise only makes the rest of the letter the more bitter to Adams. Vergennes begins: "This is a sensible reflection. It proves that Mr. Adams is himself

40 Ibid., IV, 3-6.
41 Ibid.
42 Ibid.
43 Ibid.
44 Ibid.
convinced that there are circumstances which may induce him to conceal his powers." Finally Vergennes asks the self-respecting Adams to "do the ministry of Madrid the justice to believe that they will have sagacity." All things considered, Vergennes treated Adams like an ignorant school-boy whose ignorance was causing him to make a fool of himself.

Adams must have been chagrined by this letter, but he began his answer to Vergennes quite humbly; he promised to "suspend" any communication with the British ministry. But after a rather cryptic sentence, "Your excellency's arguments, or indeed your authority, will probably be sufficient to satisfy these people [Congress] and to justify me," he becomes more argumentative. He has just spoken of "the due deference" which will be shown to the sentiments of the ministry of France. Now he begins a direct refutation of Vergennes arguments by saying, "This deference, however, by no means extends so far as to agree in all cases to those sentiments without examination." On July 27, 1780, the very next day, Adams "observed one expression" of Vergennes's other letter which he thought it his "duty to consider more particularly." Vergennes had said that His Majesty's action had not been solicited by Congress. Adams undertook to prove at length that such was not the case. Congress first made a request for

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45 Ibid.
46 Ibid.
47 Ibid., IV, 7-10.
48 Ibid., IV, 12-14.
this aid as early at 1776 and had repeated the request several times. This was too much for Vergennes.

He no longer restrained his anger. On the 29th of July, 1780, he wrote a stinging letter to Adams and severed relations between the two.

When I took upon myself to give you a mark of my confidence by informing you of the destination of Messrs. de Ternay and Rochambeau, I did not expect the animadversions which you have thought it your duty to make.... To avoid any further discussions of that sort, I think it my duty to inform you that, Mr. Franklin being the sole person who has letters of credence to the king from the United States, it is with him only that I ought and can treat of matters which concern them, and particularly of that which is the subject of your observations.

Besides, sir, I ought to observe to you that the passage in my letter which you thought it your duty to consider more particularly...had nothing further in view than to convince you that the king did not stand in need of your solicitations to induce him to interest himself in the affairs of the United States.49

A few days after receiving this letter Adams withdrew to Holland. Vergennes communicated with Franklin and sent him copies of the correspondence which he had had with Adams. He requested Franklin to transmit them to Congress "that they may judge whether he is endowed, as Congress no doubt desires, with that conciliating spirit which is necessary for the important and delicate business with which he is

49 Ibid., IV, 16-17.
We shall conclude our account of the incident of the "teasing of Mr. Adams" with Franklin's summation of it in his report to Congress:

Mr. Adams has given offense to the court here by some sentiments and expressions contained in several of his letters written to the Count de Vergennes. I mention this with reluctance, though perhaps it would have been my duty to acquaint you with such a circumstance, even were it not required of me by the minister himself.... Mr. Adams did not show me his letters before he sent them.... It is true that Mr. Adams's proper business is elsewhere.... He thinks, as he tells me himself, that America has been too free in expressions of gratitude to France, for that she is more obliged to us than we to her, and that we should show spirit in our applications. I apprehend that he mistakes his ground.... M. de Vergennes, who appears much offended, told me yesterday that he would enter into no further discussions with Mr. Adams, nor answer any more of his letters. He is gone to Holland to try, as he told me, whether something might not be done to render us less dependent on France.\(^51\)

\(^{50}\)To La Luzerne, August 7, 1780. Doniol, op. cit., IV, 424, n.

\(^{51}\)Wharton, op. cit., IV, 21-25.
CHAPTER II

THE INFLUENCE OF NATIONAL AND RELIGIOUS PREJUDICE

In the previous chapter we have seen that Adams ensnarled himself in a troublesome and, to some extent at least, an unnecessary imbroglio. It is our purpose now to consider the causes of this diplomatic entanglement.

It is impossible for us to view Adams's dispute with Vergennes as did his grandson, Charles Francis Adams. Charles Adams based his argument upon Vergennes's instructions to Genet: "to assure Mr. Adams that it would always give him pleasure to be supplied by him [Adams] with intelligence from good sources touching American affairs."¹ Charles Adams concluded that his grandfather merely supplied such information and followed normal diplomatic procedure. The rupture was due entirely to French duplicity, whetted by the unsympathetic utilitarianism of Franklin. Such an explanation falls before the simple fact that normal diplomatic procedure should have told Adams that both discretion and courtesy called for his holding himself strictly aloof from everything which did not concern the object of his mission. It should have told him that Franklin was the United States' Minister to France, while Adams

¹Adams, John, Works, op. cit., I, 314.
was accredited only to negotiate treaties of peace and commerce with England.

But the explanation with which we wish to concern ourselves in this chapter differs _toto coelo_ from that of Charles Adams. It is that proposed by Henri Doniol, a prime authority regarding Franco-American relations during the Revolution, of whom Edward Corwin wrote, "For an American student, with limited time at his disposal, to attempt an investigation of the Archives [of the French Department of Foreign Affairs] without a thorough acquaintance with Doniol to begin with, would be deliberately to incur the risk of one-sided and ill-considered, however, surprising, results."²

Doniol places the blame for the diplomatic complication in the virulent anti-Gallic hatred of John Adams. Although no _ex professo_ treatment is accorded the motives of John Adams, Doniol again and again expresses his conclusions about them as he describes the incident of our first chapter. First Adams concealed his true motives and bided his time. Then when an opportunity to do damage presented itself, he drew aside the veil.³

² Corwin, _op. cit._, 380.
³ Adams depuis un mois en France quand La Fayette était parti, donnait déjà alors des motifs d'augurer que les antipathies et la passion antigallicanes, représentées jusqu'ici par Arthur Lee à notre cour d'une façon dissimulée ou brouillonne, s'y montreraient désormais à nu et en quelque sorte systématiquement, sous le couvert officiel. Doniol, _op. cit._, IV, 409.
Doniol maintains that Adams was a subtle intriguer and a good actor; that he affected ignorance in order to disturb, that he sent artful letters to entrap an unwary French minister. But at other times Doniol claims that he was possessed of the insolence of an Eastern potentate. If Adams expressed attachment for the alliance, it was probably because an obliging ministry had been beguiled into requesting such an affirmation just when it suited the plan of John Adams. At times, Doniol hints, that Adams was like a street urchin hurling stones at the unsuspecting passer-by; at other times he leapt to attack like one of Attila's Huns; but then, suddenly, he would reverse himself and become a very Uriah Heep with the pedantry of his captious arguments.

4Correct en apparence avec le gouvernement du roi les premiers jours, il n'avait pas moins parlé de son mandat comme s'il agissait de traiter immédiatement avec l'Angleterre, et c'est ainsi qu'il affectait de le comprendre en écrivant au Congres en ce moment. Ibid., IV, 409.
5Le sens et les intentions de sa lettre étaient visiblement étudiés. Elle ne se bornait pas à dire, elle visait à faire entendre. Ibid., IV, 410.
6Sans balancer, d'ailleurs, il s'autorisait de ses conversations à Boston et de ses correspondances privées pour interpréter de cette manière le mandat que lui avait confié le Congrès. C'était donc bien l'esprit de l'Est qu'il entendait apporter dans son ambassade. Ibid., IV, 410-11.
7Avec l'air de se défendre que les Anglais pussent s'adresser à lui, il répondit le lendemain par de telles démonstrations d'attachement à l'alliance, qu'il avait probablement souhaité d'être amené à les faire. Ibid., IV, 413.
8Cette pierre jetée, Adams n'attendit guère pour en lancer une autre.... Ibid., IV, 420.
9Cette lettre à peine lue, le 27 juillet, il sautait sur sa plume.... Ibid., IV, 421.
10Mais la lettre du 25 le fit éclater, si l'on peut dire cela de quelqu'un se plaisant moins aux importements qu'à la pédanterie d'argumentations captieuses. Ibid., IV, 421.
At all times, le sectaire antigallican\textsuperscript{11} was ruled by anti-French hatred,\textsuperscript{12} and even when he departed for Amsterdam, he transported his politique antifrançaise.\textsuperscript{13}

Now there can be little doubt that Doniol, when he was commenting upon John Adams as Minister Plenipotentiary, surrendered his usual prudent judgment as an historian to the enticements of the rhetorician and loyal Frenchman. He surely went beyond the facts when he impugned Adams’s patriotism by speaking of "le prétendu zèle de John Adams,"\textsuperscript{14} and when he commented upon Vergennes’s refusal to recognize Adams until Gerard should return, by choosing a euphuistic adverb to express what was really an utter lack of diplomatic courtesy: "M. de Vergennes, le 15, répondait obligeamment à J. Adams d’attendre le retour prochain de Gérard."\textsuperscript{15}

Such a position in so noted an historian perhaps explains why Edward Corwin said: "There are certain phases of the subject of French intervention in the War of Independence with which Doniol does not pretend to deal, while

\textsuperscript{11}M. de Vergennes déclara sur l’heure la rupture, et il le fit dans des termes qui remettaient plus que sèchement à sa place le sectaire "antigallican." \textit{Ibid.}, IV, 422.

\textsuperscript{12}C’est après ces affirmations de la passion antifrançaise ou de la haine d’humiliation ressentie par lui ou par ses amis contre les peuples dont ils n’avaient pu et ne pouvaient encore faire autrement que d’appeler le secours, que J. Adams avait donné à M. de Vergennes avis de l’adhésion du Massachusetts. \textit{Ibid.}, IV, 416.

On n’était pas, pour cela, débarrassé de cet envoyé tenace. Ecouté de ce côté, il chercha à revenir par d’autres....par ceux surtout qu’il supposait devoir causer le plus de gêne au gouvernement du roi. \textit{Ibid.}, IV, 419.

\textsuperscript{13}Il avait transporté à Amsterdam sa politique antifrançais.\textsuperscript{15} \textit{Ibid.}, IV, 425.

\textsuperscript{14}\textit{Ibid.}, IV, 426.

\textsuperscript{15}\textit{Ibid.}, IV, 411.
on the phases with which he does deal he throws, for the most part, only the light shed by the French correspondence,"\(^{16}\) and why Samuel Bemis said: "John Adams was a most resolute, unbending, and pertinacious American. As a diplomatist he deserves better of his country than many historians have been ready to admit."\(^{17}\)

But despite Doniol's prejudice, his charge is a serious one, and it deserves careful consideration. Was Adams's political life dominated by hatred of the French? It might be argued that Adams must necessarily have failed as a diplomat at the French court. It could be claimed that he necessarily must have regarded the French as a recent enemy, since he supported the British against the French in the Seven Years War. As a democrat, he must have disliked monarchist France. As a bigot, he must have hated Catholic France. As a provincial, he must have feared the adroit French diplomacy. And the arguments are not all a priori. For in Adams's own Autobiography there are passages indicative of anti-French sentiment amounting almost to hatred. Our problem is: do they prove the active influence of national and religious prejudice in shaping the policy of John Adams?

Unfortunately it is indisputable that like many fellow New

\(^{16}\)Corwin, op. cit., 380.

Englanders Adams was infected early in life with an unreasoning Gallo-phobia. To Adams the French in Canada were "faithless and turbulent" in civil life and priest-ridden in religion. While the French in the homeland were also dangerous in diplomacy.

On March 21, 1756, the twenty-six year old Adams records a Sunday night conversation on "the present situation of public affairs" held at the house of Reverend Anthony Wibird. Judge Cranch of Braintree spoke of a letter of the Bishop of Quebec which had been used as a malicious squib against the "turbulent Gallicks." This letter was supposed to show the "hostile spirit of the French Catholics." Adams reports Cranch as commenting upon this letter particularly about the French missionaries among the Indians. Adams concludes very briefly, "Some, he says, are very good men." 18

The tone of the last remark can be understood if we consider a note in Adams's diary for the previous month:

The Church of Rome has made it an article of faith that no man can be saved out of their church, and all other religious sects approach to this dreadful opinion in proportion to their ignorance, and the influence of ignorant or wicked priests. 19

On June 22, 1756, Adams comments upon the French and Indian War then raging:

The year opened with the projection of three expeditions, to prevent the further, and

19 Ibid., II, 5.
remove the present, degradations and encroachments of our turbulent French neighbors.... The British nation has been making very expensive and very formidable preparations to secure its territories against an invasion by the French, and to humble the insolent tempers and aspiring projects of that ambitious and faithless nation. 20

On June 29, 1766, he mentions that two of his friends, Goffe and Paxton "told stories about the virtue of some neutrals [the French Acadians], their strict justice, their aversion to profaneness, etc." Adams brushes aside the whole incident with the sneer, "All this from Goffe and Paxton was meant in favor of Roman Catholic religion and civil slavery, I doubt not." 21

When we apply the following principle of Adams's political creed to the question of his anti-French bigotry, 22 we have added evidence to believe in its existence. Adams believed that "religion has been so universally associated with government that it is impossible to separate them." 23 Now we know that Adams was prejudiced against the Catholic religion. Therefore, the argument would run, he is prejudiced against the French.

20Ibid., II, 23, 214.
21Ibid., II, 196.
22The most vulnerable point of attack on the French alliance was the fact that the ally was Catholic." Van Tyne, The Loyalists of the American Revolution, Peter Smith, New York City, 1929, 154.
On January 23, 1761 Adams borrowed from a certain Mr. Gridley the second volume of the Corpus Juris Canonici, notis illustratum, Gregorii XIII Jussu editum. Before reading it he says that "it will explain many things in ecclesiastical history, and open that system of fraud, bigotry, nonsense, impudence, and superstition, on which the papal usurpations are founded." After reading, his judgment is: "This Institute is a curious monument of priestly ambition, avarice, and subtlety. 'Tis a system of sacerdotal guile."24

Although Adams prided himself that "narrow thoughts and bigoted principles did not govern his actions,"25 he could inform James Warren approvingly that in 1775 in his home town of Braintree that "we have a few rascally Jacobites and Roman Catholics in this town, but they dare not show themselves."26 Even after extended acquaintance with Catholic France and Spain, the Church remains a "Platonic, Pythagoric, Hindoo monster;"27 and he doubts whether the superstitious South American Catholics are capable of forming a "confederation of free governments."28 On May 19, 1821 he asks Thomas Jefferson in a letter: "Can a free government possibly exist with the Roman Catholic religion?",29 and two years later he notes that it would be unprecedented that a

24Ibid., II, 116-7.
25Ibid., X, 46.
26Ibid., IX, 355.
27Ibid., X, 100.
28Ibid., X, 145.
29Ibid., X, 398.
"Roman Catholic monarchy of five-and-twenty millions of people, at once [be] converted into intelligent, free, and rational people."30

This last is a direct attack upon the possibility of a French Republic.

It is not necessary to mention his historical writings on Coligny and the St. Bartholomew's Day massacre to prove prejudice. Let a few of his remarks upon the Society of Jesus suffice; in a letter to Thomas Jefferson on November 4, 1816, he says:

My History of the Jesuits is in four volumes in twelves, under the title of "Histoire Générale de la Naissance et des progrés de la Compagnie de Jésus, et l'Analyse de ses Constitutions et ses Privilèges, printed at Amsterdam in 1761. The work is anonymous, because, as I suppose, the author was afraid, as all the monarchs of Europe were, at that time of Jesuitical assassination....

This society has been a greater calamity to mankind than the French Revolution, or Napoleon's despotism or ideology. It has obstructed the progress of reformation and the improvement of the human mind in society much longer and more fatally.31

Three months before, Adams touched upon the restoration of the Society of Jesus:

The restoration is indeed "a step toward darkness," cruelty, perfidy, despotism, death, and --- ! I wish we were out of danger of bigotry and Jesuitism. May we be "a barrier against the return of ignorance and barbarism."

What a colossus shall we be?32

31 Ibid., X, 229.
32 Ibid., III, 225-6.
At times this record of ignorance, bigotry, and hatred is lightened. There was the time in the cathedral at Leon—Adams often visited the churches to study the architecture and to learn the language from the sermons—when Adams was present for High Mass:

The bishop, as he turned the corners of the church, spread out his hand to the people who all prostrated themselves on their knees as he passed. Our guide told us we must do the same; but I contented myself with a bow.33

Then there is his rueful description of Versailles. After deploring the licentiousness of the French women, the dishonesty of court officials, and the hypocrisy of Voltaire and Richelieu, he admits there was "a great deal of humanity...of charity and tenderness for the poor...Yes...There was a sort of morality." And then quite begrudgingly he adds, "There were many other qualities that I could not distinguish from virtues."34

We have now presented the strongest positive evidence for affirming that national and religious prejudices were the causes of Adams's trouble with Vergennes. Statements by Adams when he was president, or which appear to be the result of his break with Vergennes are clearly post factum. In spite of this evidence and in spite of the very unusual conduct which Adams pursued in his relations with Vergennes, it is our conviction that we must search elsewhere for his true motives for acting as he did. We have seen that as an individual Adams was violently opposed to the Catholic Church. We have seen that, with the patriotic

33Ibid., III, 248.
34Ibid., III, 171.
exuberance of the young British colonist, Adams was unfair to the French during the Seven Years War. More than that can not be charged against Adams.

First of all, anti-Catholicism did not influence his political opinions in opposing France. Adams himself handled this objection in a letter to M. Genet in which he answered four charges of the Englishman, General Conway, against the stability of the Franco-American alliance:

Religion is the fourth part of the barrier. But let it be considered, first, that there is not enough religion of any kind among the great in England to make the Americans very fond of them. Secondly, that what religion there is in England, is as far from being the religion of America as that of France. The hierarchy of England is quite as disagreeable to America as that of any other country.... The Americans had, and have still, more reason to fear the introduction of a religion that is disagreeable to them, at least as far as bishops and hierarchy go, from a connection with England, than with any other nation of Europe. The alliance with France has no article respecting religion. France neither claims nor desires any authority or influence over America in this respect;... So that upon the whole, the alliance with France is in fact more natural, as far as religion is concerned, than the former connection with Great Britain or any other connection that can be formed.35

But John Adams was not such a religious bigot as his cousin, Samuel. For, after disclaiming belief in the doctrine of "the total and universal depravity of human nature," he confessed that he was not a strict Calvinist. "I believe with Justin Martyr, that all good men are Christians, and I believe there have been, and are, good men in all nations sincere and conscientious."37

Indeed, John Adams was a firm believer in religious tolerance as a political doctrine, but for him religious tolerance did not mean an insipid indifferentism in private life as it does for so many today. The man who said: "I am, therefore, of opinion that men ought (after they have examined with unbiased judgments every sound system of religion, and chosen one system on their own authority for themselves) to avow their opinions and defend them with boldness,"38 and who was proud that "it is notorious enough that I have been a church-going animal for seventy-six years from the cradle"39 could also say, "My opinions, indeed, on religious subjects ought not to be of any consequence to any but myself."40 John Adams could make the foregoing statements because he could distinguish between an individual who in debate boldly attacked the doctrines and practices of a church and a statesman who accorded the same church tolerant treatment.

36Ibid., X, 254.
37Ibid., X, 390.
38Ibid., II, 8.
39Ibid., IX, 637.
40Ibid., X, 389.
That John Adams as a statesman was not intolerant of the Catholic Church can be proved both from his statements and from his public acts. He longed for the day "when all men of all religions consistent with morals and property, shall enjoy equal liberty, property, or rather security of property, and an equal chance for honors and power." He disliked the laws of Protestant Holland:

The proviso of conforming to the laws of the country, respecting the external show of public worship, I wished to have excluded; because I am an enemy to every appearance of restraint in a matter so delicate and sacred as the liberty of conscience; but the laws here do not permit the Roman Catholics to have steeples to their churches, and these laws could not be altered.

When he drafted the Massachusetts Constitution, he was careful to include an article guaranteeing freedom of religion.

He was even more opposed to the Episcopalian Church than he was to the Catholic. But there too, the objection was not so much to the Anglican Church, "but to the authority of parliament on which it must be founded." On December 29, 1765, he scornfully announced that "the Church people are, many of them, favorers of the Stamp Act at present." He referred to Anglican ministers as "slaves in principle,"

41 Ibid., VIII, 232.
42 Ibid., VII, 648.
43 Ibid., X, 185.
44 Ibid., II, 168.
or "poisonous talkers" or "instilling wrong principles in church and state into the people, striving to divide and disunite them." And some conversed "with some of the seekers of appointments from the Crown--some of the dozen, in the town of Boston, who ought, as Hancock says, to be beheaded."\(^{45}\) Because the Church of England was a creature of Parliament, with the king at its head, and its laws determined by British statesmen, Adams learned to hate it in political life, more than he did the Catholic Church.

With the mention of the fact that Adams more often complained of the lack of religion in France rather than the presence of the Catholic religion there, we come to our second consideration, viz., was Adams a hater of the French people. Perhaps we may be driven to conclude that anti-Gallic hatred did not determine Adams's course as a statesman, that just as he was capable of tolerating the religion of the French, so he was capable of impartiality and fairness toward the French as nationals.

As early as January 2, 1761, Adams, still a young and loyal British subject, was writing:

> If we consider every thing, the religion, government, freedom, navy, merchandise, army, manufactures, policy, arts, sciences,

\(^{45}\)Ibid., II, 169.
numbers of inhabitants, and their virtues, it seems to me that England falls short in more and more important particulars than it exceeds the kingdom of France.46

In the course of the next twenty years there are many more passages in his writings showing that Adams was capable of appreciating French worth and that he was not dominated by anti-Gallic hatred.

Just a year before the incident which Doniol explains by accusing Adams of anti-Gallicism, Adams was confiding to the privacy of his diary that even though the pleasure of returning home from his diplomatic mission in France was very great, that "it is a mortification to leave France."47 In a letter to his wife, Abigail, our supposed Gallophobe explains himself more fully as he describes Paris:

The weather is every day pleasant; soft, mild air; some foggy days, and about ten of twelve days in January were cold and icy. But we have had scarce three inches of snow the whole winter. The climate is more favorable to my constitution than ours. The cookery and manner of living here, which you know Americans were taught by their former masters to dislike, is more agreeable to me than you can imagine. The manners of the people have an affectation in them that is very amiable. There is such a choice of elegant entertainment in the theatric way, of good company, and excellent books, that nothing would be wanting to me in this country but my family and peace to my country.

46Ibid., II, 110.
47Ibid., III, 195.
to make me one of the happiest of men. John Bull would growl and bellow at this description. Let him bellow if he will, for he is but a brute. 48

Since Adams's command of the French language was much better, he could now enjoy chance conversations with the common people of France. That he liked them is indicated by his description of the female shopkeepers, who are "the most chatty in the world. They are very complaisant, talk a great deal, speak pretty good French, and are very entertaining." 49

John Adams studied and admired French authors. 50 He appreciated and defended French court and religious ceremonials. 51 He was a student of French architecture, painting, and music. 52 All of these facts are difficult to reconcile with the charge that he was a mere "sectaire antigallican."

However to consider the charge adequately, we must ask whether Adams's statecraft and political activity was determined by his hatred of the French. Again the evidence seems to show that it was not.

In his letter to Genet in answer to General Conway's attack upon the French alliance, Adams advanced the argument that "when two

48 Adams, Charles Francis, Familiar Letters of John Adams and His Wife Abigail Adams, During the Revolution, Hurd and Houghton, New York City, 1876, 358.
50 Ibid., III, 222.
51 Ibid., III, 125.
52 Ibid., III, 118, 158.
nations have the same interests in general, they are natural allies."

He affirmed that between America and France "nature has raised no other barrier than the ocean," and concluded that a common enemy and an essential community of interest had brought it about that "America became the natural friend of France, and she the natural friend of the United States."53

Another argument which seems quite persuasive against a charge of anti-Gallicism is founded upon Adams's perspicacity as a statesman. In 1775 John Adams was the outstanding leader in America who urged the colonists to contract treaties with France.54 He urged these treaties, because he was well-informed of the needs of the United States. These needs were so great that Edward Corwin concluded that "the great majority of students today would, I suppose, concede that but for our alliance with France the War of Independence would have ended without independence."55 It was truly folly for a shrewd American statesman to be unalterably opposed to the French.

One other reason for doubting that Adams was a "sectaire anti-gallican," may be found in his ability to evaluate French motives. To many Americans of that day to bring in French aid was like the Trojans

53 Ibid., VII, 174-5.
54 Ibid., II, 487.
55 Corwin, op. cit., l.
dragging the wooden horse within their walls. Squibs were published in the Tory press which capitalized on their French antipathies:

Say Yankees don't you feel compunction
At your unnat'ral, rash conjunction?
Can love for you in him take root,
Who's Catholic, and absolute.56

The French alliance now came forth,
The Papists flocked in shoals, sir,
Friseurs, Marquis, Valets of Birth
And priests to save our souls, sir.57

Even Washington admitted that he "never built much upon a French war."58

But Adams in his mature life expressed none of this shallow anti-French prejudice, rather he gave an acute analysis of French motives which accords with that of our greatest modern authorities:

Some gentlemen doubted of the sentiments of France, thought she would frown on us as rebels, and be afraid to countenance the example. I replied to these gentlemen, that I apprehended they had not attended to the relative situation of France and England; that it was the unquestionable interest of France that the British continental colonies should be independent. ...But there was more than pride and jealousy in the case.

Her rank, her consideration in Europe, and even her safety and independence were at stake.59

Adams insists that the French action was not a mere act of revenge against England; he does not indicate that he believed the French were desirous of subjugating a part of the United States for their very own. He is capable of appraising their true needs and intentions.60 Such penetration is usually lacking in the prejudiced.

So far from being prejudiced against the French during his years as a diplomat, Adams was thoroughly disgusted by anti-French bigotry. A certain "F" told Adams that half the gentlemen of Paris were atheists and said he wished he "could find one honest man among their merchants and tradesmen." Adams retorted:

"Mr. F." says I, "let me be so free to request of you, when you arrive in America, not to talk in this style. It will do a great deal of harm. These sentiments are not just; they are contracted prejudices; and Mr. Lee and Mr. Izard have hurt themselves and the public too by indulging in a similar language." F. "Oh! I am no hypocrite." Thus this prater goes on.61

Even after Adams's dispute with Vergennes which led him to insist that Vergennes is the only member of the French court "who ever

60We are accepting the thesis of Corwin rather than that of Turner.
manifested any resentment that came to my knowledge," he wrote thus to the head of the American state department, Secretary Livingston:

> Ingratitude is an odious vice, and ought to be held in detestation by every American citizen.... We are under obligations of gratitude [to the French] for making the treaty with us at the time when they did, for those sums of money which they have generously given us, and for those even which they have lent us, which I hope we shall punctually pay, and be thankful still for the loan, for the fleet and army they sent to America, and for all the important services they did....

> The French are, besides, a good-natured and humane nation, very respectable in arts, letters, arms, commerce, and, therefore, motives of interest, honor, and convenience join themselves to those of friendship and gratitude, to induce us to wish for the continuance of their friendship and alliance.

From these facts, and because neither Franklin nor Vergennes attributed Adams's conduct to his supposed anti-Gallicism, we are forced to look elsewhere for an explanation of Adams's actions. Doniol, it seems, too easily permitted himself to argue from the existence of anti-Gallic feeling rampant in America to anti-Gallic prejudice as the explanation of Adams's unusual conduct while in France. Actually, Adams appears to have been following a more subtle counsel than mere prejudice.

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62Ibid., I, 652.
63Ibid., VIII, 94.
CHAPTER III  
THE INFLUENCE OF INDIVIDUAL PREJUDICE

The French historian and biographer, Bernard Fay, has another explanation of the incident which was chronicled in the first chapter. Since he is an acknowledged authority in this period of history, it is with some misgiving that we take issue with his view, but we feel compelled to do so in the interests of truth.

Fay admits that the patriotism of Adams can not be challenged, and he makes no mention of anti-Gallic hatred. Rather, his explanation is founded on Adams's peculiar personality:

Mr. Adams had the instinct of self. He conceived all his interests to be rights, which made him profoundly moral and very powerful in discussion. Moreover, he was a lawyer and imposed a logical and rigorous form on his egoism so that he could believe in his own justice. Whenever he perceived the existence of someone else he was judicious and excellent, but ordinarily he was occupied only with himself.¹

With rather a generous measure of sarcasm, Fay develops his thesis:

At first Adams had highly respected Mr. Franklin, whose conversation was so interesting, and who was a reflection of Mr. Adams's brilliancy in Congress. As such he was very satisfactory. But when

¹Fay, op. cit., 441.
Mr. Adams arrived in Paris in the spring of 1778 and had to be a mere reflection of Doctor Franklin, who ruled over the ministers, ladies, and the learned men, he immediately thought the situation was unhealthy. Nevertheless, his instinct of "justice" made him wait for some provoking incident before he should give vent to his anger.2

Fay next explains how Adams united with Arthur Lee against Franklin and how "the two of them made life difficult for Franklin."3

Now Vergennes was peculiarly friendly to Franklin, "as he [Franklin] had been named minister on account of Vergennes' solicitation," and "in 1781, Franklin held onto his post only because he had some personal friends who were clever at intrigues, and because he enjoyed the favor of the King of France."4 Indeed, if he could Vergennes always dealt with Franklin alone of all the American commissioners. So in 1780, "when the hopes of peace had faded, the jealous New Engander gave some lessons in politics and morals to Vergennes to divert himself."5

This explanation of Bernard Fay places jealousy of Franklin as the motive for Adams's attack upon Vergennes. Such a stand is supported by the fact that Adams's long letter of comment upon the Vergennes episode is mostly an attack not upon Vergennes, but upon Franklin. Adams finds Franklin guilty of "gross inconsistency in demanding or requesting the Count to recall his orders." He is surprised that Franklin

2Ibid.
3Ibid., 442.
4Ibid., 443.
5Ibid., 443-4.
was "so ignorant as not to see the iniquity of the French claim of silver dollar for paper dollar." He wonders whether the King thought "Dr. Franklin a hypocrite." Then he noted that there was a paragraph in Franklin's letter "which is a downright falsehood." The sentence in Adams's letter which sums up his understanding of Franklin's motives says: "I have always seen that it was Dr. Franklin's heart's desire to avail himself of these means and this opportunity to strike Mr. Adams out of existence as a public minister, and get himself into his place."6

Since this attack upon Franklin was written for the Boston Patriot thirty one years after the incident of which it speaks, and twenty-one years after the death of Franklin, it is a good indication of the persistence of Adams's feelings against Franklin. There is also abundant evidence to indicate that Adams had developed his dislike of Franklin before the incident of our first chapter. Before considering this evidence, some indication should be given of the ebullient character of Adams's dislikes when they rose from affronted vanity.

When Adams was but twenty-three, he records in his diary that he was insulted in company by Robert Treat Paine, who was "conceited, and pretends to more knowledge and genius than he has." The conversation must have concerned Adams's studies in law, for he writes:

He asked me what Dutch commentator I meant? I said, Vinnius. "Vinnius!" says he, (with

6Adams, Works, op. cit., I, 649-64.
a flush of real envy, but pretended contempt,)
you cannot understand one page of Vinnius.")
He must know that human nature is disgusted
with such incomplaisant behaviour; besides,
he has no right to say that I do not under-
stand every word in Vinnius or even in...
for he knows nothing of me. For the future
let me act the part of the critical spy upon
him; not that of an open, unsuspicious friend.7

He continues his account of Bob Paine's high-handed dealings with him
by indignantly recalling that he had been told that once Paine in his
absence called him "a numskull and a blunderbuss before all the
superior judges."8 Just at the end of this none too impassive account,
Adams's better nature again asserts itself and he concludes more justly
that, although Paine "is an impudent, ill bred, conceited fellow", he
"has virtue, and piety, except his fretful, peevish, childish complaints
against the disposition of things. This character is drawn with resent-
ment of his ungenerous treatment of me, and allowances must therefore be
made."9

Unfortunately, Adams made no request that allowances be made,
when he permitted himself to be "led on naturally by the Chevalier and
M. Marbois" in a discussion of Franklin, as he was returning to America
after his first diplomatic mission in France in 1778. Adams had just
hinted that Franklin did not go to church because he had no religion.
Marbois's next remarks unleashed Adams's bias against Franklin:

"No," said M. Marbois; "Mr. Franklin adores
only great Nature, which has interested a

7Ibid., II, 50.
8Ibid., II, 51.
9Ibid., II, 51.
great many people of both sexes in his favor."
"Yes," said I, laughing, "all the atheists, deists, and libertines, as well as the philosophers and ladies, are in his train, -- another Voltaire, and thence -- "Yes," said M. Marbois, "he is celebrated as the great philosopher and the great legislator of America." "He is," said I, "a great philosopher, but as a legislator of America he has done very little. It is universally believed in France, England, and all Europe, that his electric wand has accomplished all this revolution. But nothing is more groundless. He has done very little. It is believed that he made all the American constitutions and their confederation; but he made neither. He did not even make the constitution of Pennsylvania, bad as it is...."

When Marbois spoke of the wit and irony of Franklin, Adams observed that "these were not the faculties of statesmen." Later, Adams makes mention in a sneering way of "Mr. F's natural son, and natural son of a natural son." He concludes the interview by remarking that he thought it his "duty" in "the interests" of his country to "do justice to his [Franklin's] merits." "It would be worse than folly to conceal my opinion of his great faults," even from the influential French ambassadors.

When Adams had returned to Braintree, he wrote Thomas McKean his opinions of Franklin:

He is not a sufficient statesman for all the business he is in. He knows too little

10Ibid., III, 220.
11Ibid., III, 221.
of American affairs, of the politics of Europe, and takes too little pains to inform himself of either.... He is too old, too infirm, too indolent and dissipated, to be sufficient for the discharge of all the important duties of ambassador, board of war, board of treasury, commissary of prisoners, etc., etc., etc. 12

In judging whether Adams's evident dislike of Franklin determined his diplomatic dealings in France in 1780, it is necessary first of all to explain the diplomatic situation in France and the basic diversity of policy pursued by Franklin and Adams. We shall leave an extended treatment of the second of these considerations for our next chapter, since it is our opinion that in motives of state we have the ultimate explanation of why Adams antagonized Vergennes.

The diplomatic situation and American diplomatic methods were quite unusual in 1780. American diplomats labored under enormous difficulties. They were bound by instructions which manifestly could not provide for every eventuality. If there appeared to be a need of modification on their instructions, the great distance to America made it impossible for them to refer to their government for advice and for new instructions. Hence they were forced to assume an attitude of uncompromising firmness. 13 Indeed, every diplomat was accorded remarkable freedom of action.

In addition, account must be taken of the government of the

12Ibid., IX, 486.
United States which they were representing. As Adams put it, Congress was neither a legislative nor a representative assembly but rather an assembly of diplomats, i.e., of plenipotentiaries.\textsuperscript{14} Congress was representing states who were very jealous of their sovereignty. The difficulty, then, of representing Congress, carrying on important and, therefore, sometimes secret negotiations was almost insuperable.

Finally, with a newly organized department of state, but without a trained diplomatic corps, and with no established diplomatic relations with the important countries of the world, the ambassadors of the former colonies of England were beset by enormous difficulties. Franklin's solution of those difficulties is expressed in a letter to Arthur Lee, March 21, 1777: "I have not yet changed the opinion I gave in Congress that a virgin state should preserve its virgin character and not go about suitoring for alliances, but wait in decent dignity for the best. I was overruled; perhaps for the best."\textsuperscript{15}

The view which prevailed was that of John Adams. He had held that ministers should be sent to all of the great capitals of Europe, even though they had no assurance of being officially received. He termed this type of representation "militia diplomacy," and after Franklin's criticism of his dealings with Vergennes, he defended his diplomatic

\textsuperscript{14}Doniol, op. cit., IV, 348, n.
\textsuperscript{15}Franklin, Benjamin, Works, Jared Sparks editor, Hilliard, Gray and Company, Boston, 1840, VIII, 439.
conduct to the president of Congress by contrasting his course with that of "veterans of diplomats." He said that he approved of "the militia," which "sometimes gain victories over regular troops even by departing from the rules." He concluded with a sentence which placed his diplomatic procedure in sharp contrast with that of Franklin: "I have long since learned that a man may give offense to a court to which he is sent and yet succeed." On the other hand, as Claude Van Tyne says, Franklin's whole diplomatic policy in France was simple—"It is my intention, while I stay here, to procure what advantage I can for our country by endeavoring to please the court."

There was bound to be disagreement between these two men. However Bernard Fay's thesis goes beyond mere difference of policy and maintains that jealousy of Franklin determined Adams's course of action in 1780. In spite of the considerable evidence showing Adams's dislike of Franklin, and in spite of the fact that Adams's unjust suspicions of Franklin undoubtedly made both Adams and Franklin less effective in France, it does not seem that dislike of Franklin determined Adams actions. Rather, the dislike itself sprang in part from another and more important source: essential divergence of policy.

Gilbert Chinard explicitly contradicts the thesis of Fay: "The

16 Wharton, op. cit., V, 196-7.
so-called hostility of Adams towards the French Court was not grounded on petty jealousy of the 'veneration' in which Franklin was held, nor on any personal resentment."18 Carl Van Doren19 implicitly rejects Fay's thesis by commenting at length on the relations between Adams and Franklin without ever hinting at Fay's explanation.

Fay's thesis must be rejected because it contradicts the opinions of reputable authorities; moreover it appears to be forced, since it does not explain why an honest and shrewd statesman like Adams should choose Vergennes as the man to attack; and finally, because of the truly amazing inferences by which Fay arrived at his conclusions.

Fay attacks Adams in this way: "Franklin and Lee did not get along together, and Adams judged Franklin to be in the wrong, right away."20 Now such a conclusion so unfavorable to Adams is not at all evident. We know what disgraceful contention born of factions had split the American commissioners before the arrival of Adams. Despite this situation, we have no reason for believing that Adams took sides right away with anyone:

It is with much grief and concern that I have learned, from my first landing in France, the disputes between the Americans in this kingdom; the animosities between Mr. Deane and Mr. Lee; between Dr. Franklin and Mr. Lee; between Mr. Izard and Dr. Franklin; between Dr. Bancroft and Mr. Lee; between Mr. Carmichael and all. It is a rope

18Chinard, op. cit., 121.
19Van Doren, op. cit.
20Fay, op. cit., 441.
of sand. I am at present wholly untainted with these prejudices, and will endeavor to keep myself so. Parties and divisions among the Americans here must have disagreeable, if not pernicious, effects.... I am sorry for these things, but it is no part of my business to quarrel with anybody without cause; it is no part of my duty to differ with one party or another, or to give offense to anybody; but I must do my duty to the public, let it give offense to whom it will.21

Six months later, just before Adams left for America, he had not yet taken a stand with any party and he sums up the situation sadly—"There is no man here that I dare trust at present. They are all too much heated with passions and prejudices and party disputes."22 He does not seem to have sided with Lee, for he says, "However difficult his temper might be, in my opinion he was an honest man, and had the utmost fidelity towards the United States, [but] he has confidence in nobody; he believes all men selfish, and no man honest or sincere."23 If Adams attacked Franklin by saying that "his age and real character render it impossible to search every thing to the bottom," of Lee he added: "Lee, with his privy council, is evermore contriving: the results of their contrivance render many measures more difficult."24

22 Ibid., III, 188-9.
23 Ibid., III, 187-8.
24 Ibid., III, 189.
Confronted by these facts, it seems that Van Doren's conclusion is a much better summary than Fay's: "Franklin at once and Arthur Lee, a little later told Adams of the bad blood in the embassy. He seems to have tried to avoid being a partisan of either side, and to devote himself to straightening out the confused accounts and disorderly methods of official business into which the envoys had fallen."25

As his next point Fay says: "Franklin did not pay for his pleasant house but did pay for his suitable retinue of servants. This was all wrong. He should have paid for the house, since it was humiliating for an ambassador to be lodged for nothing, but he did not need a coach or so many servants, as the United States was a poor country."26

This irony seems to miss its mark. When Adams arrived in France, the financial condition of the commission was appalling. Each commissioner had a different commercial agent, who drew upon whatever sums were at hand for his personal expenses. No accounts were kept, no duplicate bills were made, no distinctions were made between personal and public expenses. For example, Franklin had established himself in the Hotel Valentinois, without inquiring about the rent. Since this was to be the headquarters of the commissioners, Adams, who had charge of accounts, wrote Le Ray de Chaumont to discover "what rent we ought to pay

25Van Doren, op. cit., 599.
26Fay, op. cit., 441.
you for this house and furniture, both for the time past and to come." 27
As Chinard remarks, "Adams was pleasantly surprised and somewhat
suspicious when the French financier answered" 28 that he had "conse-
crated" his house to Franklin and that to have his house "immortalized
by receiving into it Dr. Franklin and his associates" was reward enough. 29
Adams merely thought that it was improper for the American commissioners
to accept this house as a gift from Chaumont who had bid for a number of
American contracts.

Next Fay presents quite an amusing picture of the two men:

Franklin worked night and day, sometimes sleeping
only two or three hours, and was more interested
in the output of his work than in sticking to
formalities. Adams started to put Franklin's
portfolios into such order that the Patriarch
could no longer find anything he wanted. 30

Little need be said of this summation of the two men except that it is
monstrously unjust. Adams did a great service to the American
commissioners by putting their accounts in order, and with the exception
of Fay, most scholars admit that Adams's organizing ability nicely
complemented the bonhomie of the Doctor. A glance at Franklin's social
calendar makes the expression "worked night and day" appear particularly
ill-chosen.

One final charge Fay makes against Adams which should be
mentioned in passing. Fay mentions the fact that Adams wrote to his

28Chinard, op. cit., 113.
30Fay, op. cit., 442.
cousin Sam and urged that the plurality of commissioners in France be reduced to one. Fay adds, "His own choice was so evident that he did not take the trouble to state it."31 Here too there is injustice done to Adams. Arthur Lee had urged his own appointment as the single commissioner. Adams did not. Indeed when Adams made the recommendation that there "be a single commissioner appointed," he expected either to be recalled or to "be sent to some other capital."32 When Adams heard of the appointment of Franklin as single commissioner, he wrote in his diary:

But this day Dr. Winship arrived here from Brest, and soon afterwards the aide-de-camp du Marquis de Lafayette, with despatches from Congress, by which it appears that Dr. Franklin is sole plenipotentiary, and of consequence that I am displaced: The greatest relief to my mind that I have ever found since the appearance of the address. Now business can be done by Dr. Franklin alone; before it seemed as if nothing could be done.33

In conclusion, it seems necessary to censure Adams for his undiplomatic and uncharitable remarks against Franklin to the French ambassadors, and to condemn his injustice in commenting so unfairly upon Franklin's actions during the Vergennes episode. But just as this last item does not show virulent hatred, since the publication of a number of Franklin's letters moved Adams, who was then a vain old man,

31Fay, op. cit., 442.
32Chinard, op. cit., 124.
33Adams, III, 191.
to defend himself, so it seems that the thesis of Bernard Fay must be rejected. Imprudent speech and ebullient vanity scarcely prove jealousy of Franklin was the ultimate reason which determined John Adams to antagonize Vergennes.
CHAPTER IV
THE INFLUENCE OF MOTIVES OF STATE

For a correct understanding of the foreign policy of John Adams in 1780, it has seemed necessary to outlaw the twin vices of national and individual prejudice as determinants of his actions. Now, even if it were admitted that the hasty temperament and diplomatic inexperience which characterized Adams were augmented by another somewhat irrational element, namely: his dread of French sagacity in negotiation, it seems that the ultimate explanation of his seeming hostility to Vergennes would not yet have been advanced. Fear of the "superior dexterity of the French plenipotentiaries"\(^1\) would explain why Adams was never wholly at ease at the French court, but it does not explain the motive force behind Adams's course of action.

The ultimate reason which moved Adams to act as he did seems to have been that he accepted certain principles to be found in Washington's *Farewell Address*, long before they were so enunciated:

> The great rule of conduct for us, in regard to foreign nations, is, in extending our commercial relations, to have with them as little political connection as possible. So far as we have already formed engagements, let them be fulfilled with perfect good faith. Here let us stop.

Europe has a set of primary interests,

\(^1\)Adams, *Works*, *op. cit.*, II, 110.
which to us have none, or a very remote relation. Hence she must be engaged in frequent controversies, the causes of which are essentially foreign to our concerns. Hence, therefore, it must be unwise in us to implicate ourselves, by artificial ties, in the ordinary vicissitudes of her politics, of the ordinary combinations and collisions of her friendships or enmities.²

There is abundant evidence to show that early in his career as a statesman Adams wholeheartedly accepted the above view. For example, speaking of the French alliance, Adams added these comments to his Autobiography for the year 1775:

That our negotiations with France ought, however, to be conducted with great caution, and with all the foresight we could possibly obtain; that we ought not to enter into any alliance with her, which should entangle us in any future wars in Europe.... If we united with either nation [France or England], in any future war, we must become too subordinate and dependent on that nation, and should be involved in all European wars, as we had hitherto; that foreign powers would find means to corrupt our people, to influence our councils, and, in fine we should be little better than puppets, danced on the wires of the cabinets of Europe. We should be the sport of European intrigues and politics.³

Now, when we recall that before 1776, the English colonists in America had become involved in every war in which the mother country was

³Adams, Works, op. cit., II, 505.
engaged, whether or no they understood or cared about the issues involved, Adams's words seem to be an acute and cogent statement of fact. However, because the above account labors under the drawback of having been written many years after 1775, it may be argued that perhaps Adams inserted inadvertently some *ex post facto* views into his *Autobiography*. None the less, because of the constant reiteration of this sentiment in his letters and diary, as we shall show in this chapter, it is at least probable that he was giving an accurate account from memory of his sentiments in 1775.

There is another probable argument for asserting that almost from his cradle as an American statesman Adams held that those European nations, who either openly or covertly attempted to influence the councils of the United States, should be resisted stoutly. It is the argument proposed by Samuel Bemis, and it is a particularly brilliant piece of historical inference. Bemis first takes note of a paragraph which appeared in Tom Paine's *Common Sense*, which was published in Philadelphia in January, 1776:

> any submission to, or dependence on Great Britain, tends directly to involve this Continent in European wars and quarrels.... As Europe is our market for trade, we ought to form no political connection with any part of it. 'Tis the true interest of America, to steer clear of European contentions, which she never can do, while by her dependence on Britain, she is made the makeweight in the scale of British politics.⁴

Now, Adams in his old age wrote in his Autobiography that Paine's treatment of independence "was clearly written," but contained only "a tolerable summary of the arguments which I had been repeating again and again in Congress for nine months."

Bemis admits that a thorough search of E. C. Burnett's Letters of Members of the Continental Congress revealed no record of any statement of Adams which explicitly enunciated the principle in question before January 1776, but he concludes that it is "quite possible and likely that Adams independently developed a reasoning against involvement in European wars and politics, even before Paine."

There is, however, an abundance of direct and certain evidence that Adams accepted the principle of no "entangling alliances" by March 1776. Just at this time Adams was intensely aware that once the colonies were independent they would be deprived of trade with England, and that without trade the colonies' hopes of independence would never be realized. Consequently, to supply that lack, Adams looked to France, the traditional enemy of England, and a country which possessed valuable commercial holdings in the West Indies. From the first, however, he conceived his problem to be not how to attract French aid, but how to avoid being swayed by French influence while America was receiving her assistance. On March 1, 1776, he stated his position quite clearly

6Bemis, op. cit., 13, fn.
during a debate in the Constitutional Convention:

Is any assistance attainable from France? What connection may we safely form with her? 1. No political connection. Submit to none of her authority; receive no governors or officers from her. 2. No military connection. Receive no troops from her. 3. Only a commercial connection; that is, make a treaty to receive her ships into our ports; let her engage to receive our ships into her ports; furnish us with arms, cannon, saltpetre, powder, duck, steel.7

Adams at no time tended to minimize the need of a commercial treaty with France; indeed, although he was a great lover of independence and one of the outstanding jurists of America, he said that it was his conviction "that these three measures, independence, confederation, and negotiations with foreign powers, particularly France, ought to go hand in hand, and be adopted together."8 Nevertheless, when Patrick Henry on May 20, 1776 wrote in panic to Adams that it was necessary to make alluring offers to France "to anticipate the enemy at the French court," because otherwise the "consequence is dreadful,"9 Adams viewed the situation more calmly. He moved with caution, always with the hope that a commercial treaty would be sufficient to guarantee French aid. It was his constant policy to avoid any political union with France.

When he was appointed to prepare a form of treaty to be

8Ibid., II, 503.
9Ibid., IV, 201.
proposed to foreign powers, Adams proved again that he must be classed with Richard Henry Lee, who reiterated in his letters that "American independence must be her own achievement,"10 and Arthur Lee who constantly urged upon Samuel Adams that "American liberty must be of American fabric."11 The drafting committee consisted of Dickinson, Franklin, Benjamin Harrison, Robert Morris, and John Adams. In September of 1776, it submitted its report in the shape of an elaborate draft of a treaty, which John Foster said was "mainly the work of John Adams."12 In his Autobiography, Adams summarized his work:

The committee appointed me...to draw up a plan and report....When it came before Congress, it occupied the attention of that body for several days. Many motions were made to insert in it articles of entangling alliance, of exclusive privileges, and of warranties of possessions.... It was chiefly left to me to defend my report, though I had some able assistance, and we did defend it with so much success that the treaty passed without one particle of alliance, exclusive privilege, or warranty.13

Even in his private letters we find Adams insisting upon the same principle. In a letter to James Warren on April 27, 1777, he

11Ibid.
wrote:

I do not love to be entangled in the quarrels of Europe; I do not wish to be under obligations to any of them, and I am very unwilling they should rob us of the glory of vindicating our own liberties.

It is a cowardly spirit in our countrymen, which makes them pant with so much longing expectation after a French war. I have very often been ashamed to hear so many whigs groaning and sighing with despondency, and whining out their fears that we must be subdued, unless France should step in. Are we to be beholden to France for our liberties?14

Although Congress's instructions did not permit Franklin and Deane, the American commissioners at Paris, to offer France an alliance, when they heard of the preparation of Burgoyne's expedition, they resolved to disregard this limitation. On February 2, 1778, they promised that if France became involved in a war with England as a result of her treaty of amity and commerce with the United States, the latter would not make a separate peace. Their action was sanctioned, indeed joyfully approved, by Congress.

At this very time John Adams was journeying to France to become America's third commissioner to that country. When he was informed of the treaty of alliance, he recognized America's need of an ally at this time and accepted the news with equanimity. After he

14Ibid., IX, 462.
arrived in Paris and had studied the military alliance at first hand, he wrote, "The longer I live in Europe, and the more I consider our affairs, the more important our alliance with France appears to me. It is a rock upon which we may safely build."15

However, Adams's acceptance of the alliance as a temporary military expedient did not mean that he had abandoned his conviction of the folly of entangling alliances. Indeed his belief that he should do all in his power to prevent permanent attachment of the United States to France or to any other European country still persisted. His attitude at this time is substantially that of Washington who said:

I am heartily disposed to entertain the most favorable sentiments of our new ally, and to cherish them in others to a reasonable degree. But it is a maxim founded on the universal experience of mankind that no nation is to be trusted farther than it is bound by its interest, and no prudent statesman or politicians will venture to depart from it.16

Adams's cautious attitude toward the French alliance is both understandable and to a considerable extent justifiable. He was the representative of people who were exposed to Tory propaganda which told them: "Nothing therefore seems clearer, in human affairs, than, that the revolted colonies, unaided by Great Britain, can never shake off the

15Wharton, op. cit., II, 676.
16Washington, Writings, op. cit., XIII, 256.
yoke of France, and that dependence on that kingdom must ruin America."\textsuperscript{17}

The New Englanders somehow always had misgivings when the Patriot propaganda answered:

\begin{quote}
Let Britain's Monarch aim at lawless pow'r,
And on our western world his vengeance show'r;...
While you great Louis, with God-like mind,
Persist in your resolve to save mankind.\textsuperscript{18}
\end{quote}

Adams knew that this war was to be long and costly for the French. He felt that France intended to exploit any possible gains she was able to make from the war. He feared that some of the commercial, territorial, or diplomatic gains of France might be at the expense of the former colonies of England.

Despite the fact that there is no evidence to show that France had sinister intentions in regard to America in the war, Adams was not the only judicious statesman who mistrusted Vergennes. Besides several American diplomats, informed statesmen of both Spain and England thought that America would pay dearly for her alliance with France. Florida Blanca characterized Vergennes's notion that a "durable peace" would follow upon the abasement of England as "quixotic."\textsuperscript{19} While, on the one hand British statesmen feared the outcome of the alliance for themselves; on the other, they revealed their suspicion of French motives toward

\textsuperscript{17}Royal Gazette, Dec. 5, 1778. Quoted by Davidson, \textit{op. cit.}, 320, fn.
\textsuperscript{18}Pa. Packet, Sept. 4, 1778. Quoted by Davidson, \textit{op. cit.}, 377.
\textsuperscript{19}Corwin, \textit{op. cit.}, 106.
America. "The laws of self-preservation," they said, must direct Britain. "If the British colonies are to become an accession to France," then Britain must carry on such a campaign that "that accession [be] of as little avail as possible to her enemy."²⁰

It comes as no surprise, then, to find Adams, soon after his arrival in Europe, urging America not to count too much upon French aid. In a letter to Lovell on July 26, 1778, he writes:

> You may depend upon it, although your agents in Europe were to plead with the tongues of men and angels, although they had the talents and the experience of Mazarin or the integrity of d'Asset, your army in America will have more success than they.²¹

Throughout his diary and letters we find the patriotic Adams placing his confidence in the power of American arms. He hated the thought of being "beholden to France." The violence of his feeling upon this point stirred him on one occasion at least to an exaggerated outburst of passion. He tells us on the twenty-ninth of April, 1778, Arthur Lee, Vergennes and he met the Marshal Maillebois:

> Mutual bows were exchanged, as we passed, and Mr. Lee said to the Comte de Vergennes, "That is a great general, sir." "Ah!" said...

²⁰The Annual Register, or a View of the History, Politics, and Literature, For the Year 1778, J. Dodsley, Pall Mall, London, 1779, ³³²³.
²¹Wharton, op. cit., II, 664-5.
the Comte de Vergennes, "I wish he had the command with you!" This escape was, in my mind, a confirmation strong of the design at court, of getting the whole command of America into their own hands.... My feelings, on this occasion, were kept to myself, but my reflection was, "I will be buried in the ocean, or in any other manner sacrificed, before I will voluntarily put on the chains of France, when I am struggling to throw off those of Great Britain."22

During 1779, Adams made a journey to the United States, and returned not as a mere commissioner to France, but as minister plenipotentiary for the peace. As we have seen the New Englanders were careful to have Adams appointed to this post, since they had been unable to have the Newfoundland fishery rights included as a sine qua non of the peace. Adams was recognized as one who would never sacrifice American rights in an effort to win the regard of France.

As an exponent of "militia diplomacy," Adams was inclined to follow a policy which accorded him considerable freedom of action in dealing with the French court. As minister plenipotentiary for the peace, he believed himself entitled to even greater freedom of action. And indeed, when we consider the disgraceful state to which the Continental Congress had fallen at this time, it is hard to condemn outright Adams's attitude.

Further, from his numerous adverse criticisms of Franklin's

diplomatic policy, we may conclude with Morse that Adams looked upon Franklin as "charmed and almost useless." 23 With all of these facts before us, it seems necessary to conclude that Adams regarded his mission, in part at least, as affording him an opportunity of safeguarding America's independence of France.

Then came the incidents narrated in our first chapter. Adams, who had not visited Philadelphia on his return to the United States, had no presentiment of the tremendous influence and information which Gerard and La Luzerne enjoyed as regards the councils of the Continental Congress. It was a tremendous shock to a man who feared that France covertly might be obtaining an overweening influence over his country, to find Vergennes loathe to accept his account of his mission and confident that Gerard would have more complete and accurate knowledge of the mind of the Continental Congress.

This initial shock was followed by bewilderment at Vergennes's reluctance to announce the purpose of his mission. Why not tell the British that he had come to contract commercial as well as peace treaties with them? One reason which would suggest itself to a man of Adams's bent of mind would be that perhaps Vergennes intended to confine American trade to France even after the expiration of the war for

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23 Morse, John T., John Adams, American Statesmen Series, VI, Houghton, Mifflin and Company, Boston, 1899, 163.
independence. Finally, Adams's stand on the monetary policy of the United States was an unforeseen but natural result of his great desire to see America govern her own affairs, free from the shackles of European politics.

Even after Adams's break with Vergennes, there is abundant evidence that Adams persevered in his conviction that America must keep her skirts clear of European commitments. He tells us that he want to Holland for the very purpose of rendering "us less dependent on France." 24 In his defense of this action Adams asked these rhetorical questions, "Was this a crime? Was dependence upon France an object of ambition to America? If dependence had been our object, we might have had enough of it without solicitation, under England." 25

When Adams secured financial agreements with the Dutch, he noted in his diary that he considered this victory one of the greatest in his whole life. In his state of exultation, he wrote to Dana, "When I go to heaven, I shall look down over the battlements with pleasure upon the Stripes and Stars wantoning in the wind at the Hague." 26 Although the treaty with the Dutch was truly a great accomplishment--Foster says that "next to the French Alliance, the most important event in the foreign relations of the Colonies was the negotiation of the treaty with Holland," 27--it is not too much to say that Adams was so proud

24Wharton, op. cit., IV, 21-5.
27Foster, op. cit., 43.
of it because it made the sovereignty of the United States more secure.

As we study Adams's words and deeds during the next few years, we see with how much force the principle of no "entangling alliances" moved him. In Holland he not only won a certain amount of financial independence from France, but he would not even admit without qualifications that the United States was beholden to France for diplomatic assistance in Holland. When Livingston asked Adams whether he had consulted Duc de la Vauguyon, the French minister to Holland, to ask his advice, Adams replied that de la Vauguyon "has been under infinite obligations to the United States of America and her minister for the success he had in this country." Although Adams acknowledged that "our cause could not have succeeded here without the aid of France," he was quick to add: "The American cause and minister have done more to introduce a familiarity between the French ambassador and some leading men here than any other thing could; and if anybody denies it, it must be owing to ignorance or ingratitude." 28

When Adams returned to Paris to take part in the peace negotiations "with an olive branch in his mouth, in his heart, and in his head," 30 he had by no means forgotten his principles regarding American independence from Europe. On November 11, 1782, he told Whitefoord, secretary to Mr. Oswald, the English representative:

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28Wharton, op. cit., V, 689.
29Ibid.
30Adams, Works, III, 290.
For my own part, I thought America had been long enough involved in the wars of Europe. She had been a foot-ball between contending nations from the beginning, and it was easy to foresee that France and England both would endeavor to involve us in their future wars. I thought it our interest and duty to avoid as much as possible, and to be completely independent, and have nothing to do, but in commerce with either of them.31

Just a few days later, Adams did not hesitate to explain himself to Oswald in person:

"You are afraid," says Mr. Oswald today, "of being made the tools of the powers of Europe." "Indeed I am," says I. "What powers?" said he. "All of them," says I. "It is obvious that all the powers of Europe will be continually manoeuvring with us, to work us into their real or imaginary balances of power. They will all wish to make of us a make-weight candle, when they are weighing out their pounds.... But I think it ought to be our rule not to meddle; and that of all the powers of Europe, not to desire us, or, perhaps, even to permit us, to interfere, if they can help it."32

Study of Adams's staunch support of all American interests at the peace table, of his collaborating with Jay rather than Franklin, of the gathering of clouds of his distrust of Vergennes might well indicate

31Ibid., III, 308.
32Ibid., III, 316.
additional evidence to show how strongly the motive of fear of "entangling alliances" influenced Adams's actions as a diplomat. We prefer to conclude with the following passionate outbreak of his diary, as he referred to the fact that the peace commissioners for the United States were under orders to do nothing without the advice and consent of Vergennes:

I have been injured, and my country has joined in the injury; it has basely prostituted its own honor by sacrificing mine. But the sacrifice of me was not so servile and intolerable as putting us all under guardianship. Congress surrendered their own sovereignty into the hands of a French minister. Blush! blush! ye guilty records! blush and perish! It is glory to have broken such infamous orders. Infamous, I say, for so they will be to all posterity. How can such a stain be washed out? Can we cast a veil over it and forget it?33

It may well be admitted, with Morse, that Adams in his policy toward Vergennes in 1780 resembled "a ship blundering through a fog bank,"34 but it can not be denied that the goal of that ship was to free America of entangling alliances.

33Ibid., III, 359.
34Morse, op. cit., 180.
CHAPTER V
EVALUATION OF ADAMS'S ACTION

The decisive motive governing the foreign policy of John Adams in his dealings with Vergennes in 1780 seems to have been not prejudice but a determination to lessen America's dependence upon France. However, to pass judgment upon the means which John Adams chose to implement that aim, and consequently to evaluate the incident which resulted, it is necessary to consider both the personality of Adams and the particular circumstances of his diplomatic dealings with Vergennes.

The contemporaries of John Adams have supplied historians with abundant material for understanding his character. One of the most famous pen-pictures of Adams is that drawn by Benjamin Franklin. In a letter to Livingston, head of the American state department and rather unfriendly toward Adams, Franklin wrote: "He [Adams] means well for his country, is always an honest man, often a wise one, but sometimes and in some things absolutely out of his senses."\(^1\) Although, upon reading the above opinion of himself, Adams reacted by writing a long attack upon Franklin and attempted to prove that wisdom guided all of his actions,\(^2\) still it seems that Franklin's opinion is quite fair. However, it was obviously influenced by the Vergennes incident.

\(^{2}\) Adams, Works, op. cit., I, 649-64.
Franklin mentions Adams's honesty and patriotism; he implies that Adams was endowed with moral integrity. We can not fail to mention that such a judgment is in sharp contrast with Adams's opinion of Franklin. In one of his withering summaries of Franklin's character, Adams remarked, "I can have no Dependence on His Word. I never know when he speaks the Truth, and when not." 3

Thomas Jefferson, another outstanding leader of American Revolutionary history, adds his opinion of Adams: "He is vain, irritable, and a bad calculator of the force and probable effects of the motives which govern men. This is all the ill which can possibly be said of him." 4 Here too, we have what should be an unprejudiced view of Adams. Although Jefferson was a frequent correspondent of Adams in later life, he had been his political enemy. Further, no discerning American during the mature life of the out-spoken and tactless Adams should have hoped to exchange mutual encomiums with him.

In his diary as a young man, Adams repeatedly scored himself for yielding to vanity. 5 Undoubtedly, this fault in later life made for intractability. Lindsay advised William Lee that he should be successful in working with Adams, were he careful, "not to hurry Adams too much; to lead his ideas as softly as possible may be well, but if I am not

5Adams, Works, op. cit., II, 61,72.
mistaken in his character, he will not be driven, and has too high opinion of himself to take up hastily the opinions of others." 6

Adams's colleague at Paris, the celebrated American diplomat and jurist, John Jay, paid Adams's statesmanship a high compliment when he wrote to urge his appointment as United States's ambassador to the Court of Saint James:

It cannot, in my opinion, be long before Congress will think it expedient to name a minister to the court of London. Perhaps my friends may wish to add my name to the number of candidates. If that should be the case, I request the favor of you to declare in the most explicit terms that I view the expectations of Mr. Adams on that head as founded in equity and reason, and that I will not, by any means, stand in his way. Were I in Congress I should vote for him. He deserves well of his country, and is very able to serve her. It seems to me but fair that the disagreeable conclusions, which may be drawn from the abrupt repeal of his former commission, should be obviated, by its being restored to him. 7

From the above quotations, we have grounds for passing judgment upon Adams's personality and character, and these quotations may be corroborated by the estimate of the various biographers of Adams. Both Foster and Morse insist that Adams's "temperament was not suited to diplomacy," 8 because "his heat, quickness, pugnacity, want of tact, and

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7Wharton, op. cit., VI, 457.
8Foster, op. cit., 96.
naive egotism could not have been compatible with permanent success in this calling."\(^9\) Gilbert Chinard and Charles Francis Adams agree with Claude Van Tyne, who calls Adams "the stern Coriolanus of diplomacy,"\(^{10}\) in insisting that Adams was "a man of fundamental honesty and real courage."\(^{11}\) Vernon Parrington stresses Adams's intellectual worth: "In spite of his dogmatisms and inconsistencies he remains the most notable political thinker--with the possible exception of John C. Calhoun--among American statesmen."\(^{12}\) He concludes, "Though tactless and blundering in dealing with trimming politicians...his many sterling qualities merit a larger recognition than has been accorded them by a grudging posterity."\(^{13}\) In this last opinion Parrington is in substantial agreement with the judgment of Samuel Bemis, quoted in our second chapter.

The evaluation of Adams's character leads directly into a discussion of his antagonism of Vergennes, which was the subject of our first chapter. We have seen that Adams was by nature a poor diplomat. However inculpably, Adams would naturally give offense to almost any court to which he was sent. Perhaps it was this fault in a man otherwise so great which led Chinard to say: "One cannot help regretting at times

\(^9\)Morse, op. cit., 166.
\(^{10}\)Van Tyne, The American Revolution, op. cit., 220.
\(^{11}\)Chinard, op. cit., iii.
\(^{13}\)Ibid.
that Adams did not stay at home among the people of his blood and tongue. In Congress he would probably have played a much more useful role. His ardent patriotism might have spurred on a lagging and dispirited assembly of men pinning all their hopes on foreign help."

But it is Adams in France whom we are to judge. First of all, looking to the debit side of the ledger which records his diplomatic transactions in 1780, Adams seems to have lacked sufficient reasons for his "teasing" of Vergennes. However laudable was his ambition to lessen the dependence of the United States upon France, some of the means he used to effect his aim were quite purposeless and merely irritating. Adams was needlessly careless of diplomatic form. On several occasions Vergennes had to suggest what common diplomatic courtesy should have told Adams. Such conduct was inexcusable.

Secondly, Adams's assumption of duties which were clearly Franklin's was not only high-handed and officious, but it prejudiced the success of the American embassy. Moreover, it introduced needless bad feeling among the ambassadors of the United States; it presented the embassy with problems which undoubtedly should never have risen. It is difficult to imagine a more undiplomatic move than to flaunt the

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14Chinard, op. cit., 157.
15Vergennes in a letter to La Luzerne summarized Adams's attitude by saying that he had "une nouvelle preuve de la taquinerie de M. Adams." Doniol, op. cit., IV, 424.
questionable monetary policy of the United States before the eyes of Vergennes. Furthermore, Adams's remarks to the subordinate officials of the French foreign office may have been pregnant with truth, but if it were absolutely necessary that they be uttered they should have been addressed to other persons. Finally, it is especially difficult to find a sufficient reason for Adams's letter\textsuperscript{17} insisting that America had often requested French aid in the past. For this letter came just when Vergennes was assisting most generously the American fleet, and it could only prove that Vergennes was strangely misinformed or consciously misrepresenting the facts. Adams left Vergennes no opportunity to make a gracious retreat. Such an introduction of the tactics of the lawyer or the debater into the diplomatic arena was imprudence of the highest order.

On the credit side of the ledger, John Adams as a diplomat in 1780 has the good intention which guided him. His assertion of American needs and American sovereignty nicely complimented Franklin's policy, which really would have been too pliant to the French will. As Foster says, "No man of his day had a clearer conception of the significance of American independence or of the great future reserved for his country and none of our foreign representatives was so earnest in impressing

\textsuperscript{17}Wharton, \textit{op. cit.}, IV, 12-14.
these ideas upon public men of Europe."18

Secondly, even if Adams did not always choose the best means to impress Vergennes or Franklin that in the past "America has been too free in expressions of gratitude to France, for that she is more obliged to us than we to her, and that we should show spirit in our applications,"19 still, in other matters, he manifested considerable tact and reserve. Henri Doniol notes that Adams was careful to realize that the two most delicate items in the future peace negotiations with England would be the Mississippi and the Newfoundland fisheries.20 But for over a year after his arrival in France, Adams said nothing about these most important questions. Vergennes, who had informed La Luzerne in 1780 that he was prepared to frustrate Adams's efforts regarding the fisheries,21 was never stirred into action by Adams. But when he met the British representatives in 1782, Adams gave such a spirited defense of America's rights to the fisheries that he won them for the United States:

Gentlemen, is there or can there be a clearer right? In former treaties,—that of Utrecht and that of Paris,—France and England have claimed the right, and used the word. When God Almighty made the banks of Newfoundland,

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18 Foster, op. cit., 96.
19 Wharton, op. cit., IV, 23.
20 Doniol, op. cit., IV, 426.
21 Ibid.
at three hundred leagues distance from the people of America, and at six hundred leagues distance from those of France and England, did he not give as good a right to the former as to the latter? If Heaven in the creation gave a right, it is ours at least as much as yours. If occupation, and use, and possession give a right, we have it as clearly as you. If war, and blood, and treasure give a right, ours is as good as yours. 22

Finally some mention should be made of the unusual difficulties under which Adams labored. We have already mentioned the difficulty of being a shirt-sleeve diplomat for the American Congress, but it may be well to permit Adams himself to particularize on the embarrassment of this situation:

Ambassadors in Europe can send expresses to their courts and give and receive intelligence in a few days with the utmost certainty. In such cases there is no room for mistake, misunderstanding, or surprise, but in our case it is very different. We are at an immense distance. Despatches are liable to foul play and vessels are subject to accidents. New scenes open, the time presses, various nations are in suspense, and necessity forces us to act. What can we do? 23

Besides this, Adams encountered the established policy of American docility, little short of subservience, to the French court.

But the one aggravating circumstance which excuses much of Adams's unusual conduct was Vergennes's attitude toward him. In telling Adams

23 Wharton, op. cit., VI, 52.
to wait for Gerard, to keep the nature of his mission quiet, to accept
resignedly French concern for Spain even over the United States,
Vergennes was guilty of egregious psychological blundering. He badly
misjudged Adams. Indeed, it is most probable that, even prescinding
from the individual concerned, wise diplomacy should condemn Vergennes
for acting in so cavalier a fashion.

We now come to our evaluation of the incident itself. Although
there is truth in Gilbert Chinard's summary of the importance of the
incident, we think that he overlooks certain important aspects which were
in a very immediate way effects of the incident. Professor Chinard says:

So much importance has been attributed
to the difficulties arising between John
Adams and Vergennes in the spring of 1780,
that no passing notice of them would
suffice. In themselves, they were of
little consequence, but they revealed the
rift already existing in the alliance, a
radical difference between two schools of
diplomacy and two national psychologies.\textsuperscript{24}

Now, if Professor Chinard means that we should be wrong in stressing the
individual prejudice of vanity of the principals of our drama to the
exclusion of the more important motives of state, we are in complete
agreement with him. As we have admitted, we consider some of the actions
both of Vergennes and of John Adams to have been unworthy of them. What

\textsuperscript{24}Chinard, \textit{op. cit.}, 140.
we object to in Professor Chinard's summation is that he seems to imply that although the incident may have importance as an indicator of conditions in the American embassy, in itself it was of little consequence.

Edward Corwin and Samuel Bemis agree in explaining the change in attitude of France toward Spain after 1780 as due in part at least to the Vergennes-Adams controversy. Corwin says:

But some time before this upshot of the matter, Vergennes had come to the conclusion that the standing of the alliance with the American Congress, whose chosen representative Adams evidently was, was too delicate to be further jeopardized by France's appearing in the thankless role of champion for Spanish interests where these conflicted with interests of the United States. 25

Bemis's opinion is substantially the same:

Stimulated by the delegates from Virginia and other southern States, Congress, itself containing members who owned title to western lands, became increasingly conscious of the importance of the western boundary. Spain was already belligerent and there was not so much reason to compromise as otherwise there might have been. French advice on this point became irritating. Vergennes, already aroused by the brusque statements of John Adams, who had arrived in Paris early in 1780 as peace plenipotentiary and who suggested opening direct negotiations

25 Corwin, op. cit., 278.
with Great Britain, thought it best to adopt a neutral attitude as between the conflicting interests of his two allies in the valley of the Mississippi.\textsuperscript{26}

The second important effect which, in our opinion, the Vergennes-Adams controversy had upon the diplomatic dealings of the United States was that it was the background for the treaty with Holland. Our view is based upon the conviction that there is a causal connection between the following successive sentences in Franklin's report of the incident to Livingston:

\begin{quote}
M. de Vergennes, who appears much offended, told me yesterday that he would enter into no further discussions with Mr. Adams, nor answer any more of his letters. He is gone to Holland to try, as he told me, whether something might not be done to render us less dependent on France. He says the ideas of this court and those of the people of America are so totally different, that it is impossible for any minister to please both.\textsuperscript{27}
\end{quote}

The opinion that chagrin over Vergennes's note severing relations with him induced Adams to go to Amsterdam, even though he was not commissioned to negotiate with the Dutch, is strengthened by Adams's letter commenting upon the incident. The dudgeon of Adams which resulted from his clash with Vergennes seems to have been sufficient to fan into flame his desire "to render us less dependent on France." Adams said:

"Was France avaricious of a monopoly of our dependence? The Count de

\textsuperscript{26}Bemis, \textit{op. cit.}, 103-4.
\textsuperscript{27}Wharton, \textit{op. cit.}, IV, 23.
Vergennes was, I believe; but I never suspected it of the King, or any other of his ministers or any other Frenchman, but the secretary of foreign affairs and perhaps a few of his confidential dependents."

Finally, we believe that the Vergennes-Adams controversy must be classed as one of the remote causes of Adams's collaboration with John Jay in negotiating the Peace of Paris. Because Adams had learned to distrust Vergennes, he was quite ready to unite with Jay in refusing to follow their instructions, which told them to keep Vergennes informed about the progress of the negotiations and to accept his advice in all important matters.

It seems evident, then, that the incident narrated in our first chapter is historically important. Even though both John Adams and Vergennes permitted affronted vanity and temper to influence some of their actions, still the ultimate effect of those actions went far beyond anything which could have been foreseen at the time.

Accordingly, in summarizing this incident, which played its part in lessening French partiality toward Spain in 1780, in effecting the important Dutch treaty, and finally in excluding the French from British-American negotiations in the Peace of Paris, we have found it necessary to stress the great difficulties under which Adams labored.

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He was far from his diplomatic headquarters; he had to deal with Vergennes, who assumed an attitude of arrogance, and he had to combat the too great pliancy of the American embassy. Furthermore we have admitted that his vanity, his brusquerie, his intolerance played an important, though infelicitous, part in directing his course of action. But, beyond all these influences we have stressed the existence of some key-motive which would give a plausible explanation of why Adams entangled himself, in so seemingly unnecessary a manner, in his quarrel with Vergennes.

Only three explanations have appeared which seem plausible. The first two rely upon the powerful impetus of prejudice; the third stresses intellectual conviction.

The first explanation lays emphasis on the play of national prejudice against the French as the ultimate reason for Adams's clash with Vergennes. This opinion is supported by some of Adams's anti-French remarks, by the adequacy with which anti-Gallicism, if it actually is the ultimate explanation of the incident, does seem to solve the problem, and by the authority of the great French historian, Henri Doniol. We have found it necessary to reject this interpretation, because all of Adams's anti-French remarks either were made during the emotional stress of the Seven Year's War, when Adams was a British subject, or can be much better explained by his fear of "entangling alliances." Furthermore, from his numerous eulogies of French worth and from his obvious devotion to the French military alliance, it seems that
Doniol could not have had access to the Works of Adams, when he formulated his thesis. Finally, we have been supported in our conclusion by the fact that no modern historian accepts Doniol's solution.

The second explanation is that of Bernard Faÿ. He urges that Adams's conduct must have been motivated by individual prejudice: viz., jealousy of Benjamin Franklin. Faÿ argues that Adams realized that Franklin had acquired a great reputation in Europe; that Vergennes preferred Franklin to any other American minister; and finally, that the jealousy of Franklin induced Adams to adopt his haughty attitude toward Vergennes. We have rejected Faÿ's solution because it is explicitly denied by both Chinard and Van Doren; it is based on inferences which appear truly amazing; and finally, it seems quite forced as an explanation. It is truly inconceivable that Adams who was noted both for his shrewdness and his moral integrity should choose to attack Vergennes for no other reason than because he could not restrain his jealousy of Franklin.

The explanation which we have adopted appears to be the only one which explains all the facts satisfactorily. It seems to us that Adams acted as he did because he was convinced that French influence over the councils of the United States must be lessened. The facts which have induced us to accept this solution are Adams's acceptance, even in his youth as a statesman, of the principles later expressed in Washington's Farewell Address and the Monroe Doctrine; secondly, Adams's opposition to a political alliance with the French in 1776, precisely because he was
afraid that dependence upon France would be its outcome; and finally, the truly amazing number of times Adams expresses this principle of no "entangling alliances" during the years 1778 and 1783.

Our final recapitulation is that Adams was appointed by New England representatives to the Continental Congress because they knew that he would never sacrifice American rights to please any foreign country; that he arrived in France only to contact a French minister who desired to restrain his actions; that a man of Adams's temperament could not meet such a situation with bonhomie, but would read into Vergennes's attitude a threat to American independence after the war. Then followed the series of misadvised letters between Vergennes and Adams. The whole incident seems to have arisen because a man, who was not a diplomat by nature but who was a sincere patriot, felt that France through her foreign minister was assuming an overweening influence over his country. In such a situation, this man, John Adams, decided to "put teeth" into America's independence from all countries, including France. Unfortunately, his course of action weakened his reputation as a diplomat, but fortunately its outcome was felicitous to the interests of his country.
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