BRITISH POLICY AND THE FRANCO-AMERICAN ALLIANCE OF 1778

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ABSTRACT

This is an enquiry into a somewhat neglected aspect of affairs surrounding the American War of Independence. Traditionally historians have tended to examine Britain's attempts to bring the colonists to heel and have found a multitude of factors in this area which contributed to the loss of the colonies. In addition, some historians have investigated the attitudes of France towards the rebels and towards Great Britain in this period. Their studies have revealed that the French gave assistance to the Americans both before and after the signature of the treaty of alliance between them in 1778. However, despite this evidence, it has not been customary to attribute the American victory in the war directly to French assistance. It is argued here that without French aid the revolt would have collapsed, that Britain was aware of this situation, and that the British government chose a policy which was designed to prevent France entering the war and to minimize the benefits which France could derive from the colonial rebellion. This policy was a failure, but the reason for its failure was not that the policy was faulty, rather it failed because those who put it into practice lacked energy and determination.

STATEMENT OF COPYRIGHT

DECLARATION

No part of this thesis has been submitted for a degree in this or any other university.

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CHAPTER I: THE HISTORIOGRAPHY OF THE PERIOD 1775 - 1778

The debate about the period of the American Revolution has been carried on almost from the time of the war itself to the present day; it has been examined from almost every angle by historians from several countries, who have brought to it a wide variety of viewpoints. The British side has been examined exhaustively, both before and after the pervasive influence of that great historian, Sir Lewis Namier, was exerted upon this era. The American side has been fully studied by the historians of that country, with John C. Miller prominent among the more recent contributors from that side of the Atlantic. The French side, however, has not been surveyed in real depth at this period, perhaps because the proximity of the revolutionary age draws attention away from the period under consideration here. In addition, there has been much historical study of the Franco-American alliance. This has been the case from the earliest period when research was undertaken into this period, and historians such as Bancroft[1] and Doniol[2], in the earlier years, and Corwin[3], Bemis[4] and Meng[5], have all linked French policy to the American Revolution.

There is, therefore, no shortage of written material on this period. This in turn indicates that the large quantities of available primary documents have been extensively examined, and one writer on the period has suggested that a writer who ventures to write on this would 'suffer not from lack of contemporary material, but from its plethora; not from starvation, but from indigestion of historical fare'[6]. In spite of this contention, it is the present writer's conviction that there is a need for a study of the diplomacy of the period. The reasons for this conviction may require some explanation.

The key to the present work is to be found in the first two words of the title:- British Policy, for in the reading that has been undertaken in the preparation of this work, the author has not found any study of this complex period which makes a real attempt to understand the British aspect of the affair. This seems to be a lamentable situation for, when all is considered, Great Britain was

one of the main actors in the drama, if not the main one. Yet, despite this prominent position, Pargellis and Medley are forced to admit, that 'No comprehensive study of European or English diplomacy for this period exists... There are few recent monographs of general importance'.[7] In general this has been found to be the case.

There are, as noted earlier, works on the diplomacy of the period, but in general these concentrate on the Franco-American aspects of the alliance; the writers of France being usually determined to build up the reputations of the French diplomats of the period; and those of America often concerned to show Great Britain in the worst possible light, or to enhance the diplomatic skills and integrity of the American envoys to the European courts. In the face of these concerns, justifiable as they may be, the position of Great Britain remains curiously neglected. This country, which was one of the foremost of world powers at the time, which was the mother country of the American rebels, and the chief adversary of France, a fact that was crucial in bringing the French to the aid of the colonists, is accorded treatment by the historians of these events that would be more applicable to a minor power. Britain is assumed to be running a set course, a course set out by the French Ministry, and one that will lead to the destruction of British power and the transfer of her trading interests to France. She is assumed to be governed by men of no calibre or vision, and she is assumed to be exercising unjust powers and unfounded rights over exploited colonists. Little or no thought is given to her actual circumstances; little consideration given to the rights and wrongs of the American struggle from an eighteenth century viewpoint rather than from a nineteenth or twentieth century one. Also, although the ministry of Lord North is strongly criticised, scant consideration is given to the alternatives that were open to the government, if there were any; or whether, if it had been replaced, as some suggested, an alternative government would have done any better.

For all these reasons then, the present writer believes that there is scope for another study of the diplomacy of the period, from a British point of view. This therefore is an attempt to consider the position of the British government of the time and the

alternatives that were before it. It is hoped to do this in such a way as to take account of the constraints that were imposed upon the government by the eighteenth century society in which it existed. By so doing, it is intended that a clearer understanding of the period may be gained, and, although the errors of the London government will not be passed over, it is hoped that it will be seen that the government was not incompetent, but that it was confronted by circumstances that were completely foreign to its experience. That the choices of the government were often wrong is not to be wondered at. What gives cause for surprise is rather that they did not panic, and that so many of their decisions were fair and sensible even under duress.

Before embarking on the main body of the thesis, however, it is intended to give a brief analysis of some of the works that have appeared on this period, and to draw attention to some of the influences which may, due to events current at or near to the time of writing, have affected the views of certain historians. Also in this section it is hoped to give an indication of some of the general ideas that have been brought to the study of this period of history. These comments have been placed in a separate chapter as they are of a somewhat peripheral nature to the main study.

In what follows there will be consideration of two periods of historical writing by French authors; there will be attention given to the writing of American historians in the general sense, and in particular to those writings at one period where it seems likely that current affairs played a particularly significant part in influencing the attitudes of historians. Finally there will be some briefer remarks on the works of British authors at this period; brief because few British historians seem to have embarked upon the diplomatic history of Britain in this period.

Firstly then, the French historians, of whom there are many, and who have written about the period over a wide range of time. Here however, it is intended to concentrate on the writers who wrote at two particular times - the last thirty years of the nineteenth century, and the years between the first and second world wars. At these two periods, more than any others, the present writer believes that events current in France and in the world at large played a considerable part in shaping the attitudes that were brought to bear

on the period of the American Revolution by French historians.

In 1870, just less than a century after France had defeated Britain in the American war of Independence, the French army and state were brought to their knees by the ruthlessly efficient military machine of the Prussian Army. After a brief spell of anarchy the country gradually fell into an institutional framework that was eventually to form the Third Republic, although this republican system was by no means on a sure footing. With the Bonapartist party in dissarray, the republicans taken by surprise and the state in shaky hands, the monarchist groups emerged onto the political stage, and for the first years of the new regime they dominated the Assembly and the Senate. Under the influence of this monarchist upsurge, the first two presidents of the Republic were thought to be royalist sympathisers. Thus for the first time since the overthrow of Louis Philippe in 1848, there was a chance that a member of the house of Bourbon might sit again on the throne of France.

The fact that this never took place, and the reasons why the plans failed are not significant for this purpose. What is important is that once again Monarchism was a political force in France. This was to remain so for many years to come, although there was a steady loss of strength in public support, and well into the twentieth century the League of Action Francaise was to lead the monarchist cause, and its influence on literary and cultural life in France was enormous. In this new atmosphere it was natural that good publicity should be sought for the monarchist cause in order to bring the people to a new acceptance of monarchy. In a France recently humiliated on the battlefield, memories of past victories would be very appealing.

In such a situation what better example was there than the French aid to the Americans in the War of Independence? This provided an appeal to all groups. To the Right wing it represented the last great achievement of the Bourbon Monarchy in foreign affairs, and was made even more appealing by the fact that this achievement came in the form of a blow to the traditional enemy of France - England. To those of a more moderate turn of mind the war could be seen as helping struggling colonists to set up a model country, which, it was rapidly becoming clear, was developing into

one of the most economically powerful states in the world. Thus to the centre and to the right, the groups making up the great majority of French public opinion, the American War had considerable appeal and so it became, somewhat incongruously, a publicity argument for the Monarchy. It showed the Ancien Regime at its best to the minds of the late nineteenth century.

By another fortuitous circumstance the later Bourbons were also beginning to emerge from behind the historical veil that had been tactfully drawn over them. Louis XV was at length beginning to be seen as something other than a king of many vices and few virtues. In 1844 a book had been published in Paris which was an attempt to give a favourable consideration of Louis XVI. This work is too early to be considered as a trigger to those which are about to be analysed, but it does show the extremes to which an historian can go in magnifying the achievements of his subject. The following quotation shows the attitude of the author:-

> '... il résultera de ce livre, j'espère, une conséquant, c'est que Louis XVI ne fut seulement un bon roi, mais un grand roi, pour la partie importante des affaires, c'est à dire la diplomatie et le development des forces nationales... ce livre est destiné à prouver qu'il etait un prince à idées intelligentes, élevées, nationales....'[8]

Such opinions, tending as they do to give an impression that Louis XVI was a prime mover in the making of French national policy in foreign affairs would require much convincing evidence to back them up. It is to be doubted whether many historians would accept this analysis of Louis XVI.

The major influence in foreign affairs, there can be no doubt, was the Comte de Vergennes, and in the new rush of writing on the American War this was to become clear. Vergennes was to emerge from the long shadows that had been cast over him by his audacious and brilliant predecessor Choiseul. In fact, from this time on, a trend was to begin in which Vergennes was to attain a status that Choiseul had never achieved as the symbol of France's success against her ancient opponent. The reason for this was simple; except for the Napoleonic era, the War of Independence was the last great success that the French had enjoyed in military affairs. At a time of military defeat and pro-monarchist sentiment, the

appeal of the American war was obvious.

The most important French historian at this period was Henri Doniol whose work is a cornerstone of any study of the period of the American war. Doniol called his monumental work: Histoire de la Participation de la France à l'établissement des Etats Unis. The title here betrays a certain amount of Doniol's attitude in the writing of the book, the wording implying that the French role in the war was instrumental in the creation of the United States. As is natural in a work of such great length (the book runs to five volumes) on such a brief period of history, this is one of quite exceptional detail, and it also reproduces a large quantity of contemporary material. However, the 1880's were a period when international travel was less easy than is the case today, and in addition many documents relevant to the period were not available at that time. S. F. Bemis writing at a later date has criticised Doniol's work in these terms:-

> '.... besides being out of reach of the average reader or student (the work) is too dominantly French in its point of view and its presentation of selected documents, voluminous though they are, from the archives of the French foreign office'[9]

As the title of the work implies Doniol was concerned to show only the French side of affairs, but this attitude, supported by reading and using almost exclusively French official sources, has resulted in a French interpretation of the events. This fact has further drawn Doniol into some of the traps that were laid by Vergennes and Beaumarchais; that is to say that he believed some of the arguments that were put forward by these men to draw others with their thinking. Thus Doniol is too convinced by Vergennes' arguments that France and Spain were threatened by Britain in the West Indies and that they must therefore wage a defensive war on Britain.[10] A more impartial view, which can be taken from the wealth of documentary evidence available today, is put forward by Corwin and shows this argument by Vergennes for the ploy that it undoubtedly was.[11] Further, Doniol is slightly guilty of excessive admiration for Vergennes. This can be seen by the brusque dismissal he gives to the objections that were raised by Turgot, the Controller-General, to Vergennes' plan for sending secret aid to the rebel colonists in America. Turgot sent a Memoire

to the King in which he stated his objections which were based on the fact that aid would lead to war, war to financial strain, and financial strain to the postponement of badly needed reform in the finances of the Kingdom: also, Turgot sensibly observed that the colonists would free themselves when they were ready for freedom and not before; French help would not make any difference. These arguments, potent though they were, are brushed aside by Doniol as 'moraliste' but not 'politique'.[12]

Doniol's book therefore falls down in respect of this essentially French attitude and in its reverence for the brilliance of Vergennes, his assistant Beaumarchais and their somewhat unwilling accomplices, Louis XVI and Maurepas. He views the question as a plain one of French interests, and there is little real analysis of the problem, largely due, in all probability, to the fact that Doniol had little with which he could compare his French primary sources. Further, and inevitably having regard to the above criticism, Doniol makes no attempt to comprehend the British government's point of view or the reasoning behind its policy.

Here then we have a vastly detailed account of the final culmination of France's foreign policy in the period after 1763, a policy that was the fulfilment of the ambition of the French to achieve revenge for their defeat in the Seven Years War, and one that reflected well on both the monarchy and the ancien regime. Doniol could not avoid being born at that era, but there is a strong coincidental link between the events of his lifetime and the theme of his huge work, which reflects so well on the last truly ancien regime period of French history. One could not perhaps call Doniol a propagandist of Monarchism, but he may at least have been not a little influenced by the events surrounding that period of his country's history in which he wrote, for to have published the first volume of a book of this size in 1884 the idea must have germinated in the author's mind at least several years beforehand.

Somewhat later, but still well within the period during which monarchist ideas were playing a considerable role in French Society, we find Lacour Gayet's book, in his series on the French navy under the later Bourbon Kings of France, which was published at Paris in 1905.[13] In this book we find a combination of many of the natural

prejudices of French writers on this period. This book has for its material an exceedingly difficult subject which, on the factual side, it seems to treat extremely fairly. At least in many cases the figures stated in it agree with those drawn up by the British Admiralty, hardly the most likely source from which Lacour Gayet would draw his information, and thus we may deduce that the information of the British Admiralty was accurate. It is in his treatment of people and policies that Lacour Gayet appears to miss the mark by a wide margin in more than one instance. This is never better demonstrated than, when writing of Louis XVI, Lacour Gayet wrote the following:-

> 'Louis XVI, qui n'a pas su vouloir beaucoup des choses, mais qui a voulu seconder la liberté des Américains'.[14]

This is simply not true. Louis XVI never wished to help the Americans to be free. He had greater sense than to support the Americans for their sakes, he knew exactly how dangerous that could be. Rather he supported them because of the pressure that was put upon him by his ministers and their henchmen such as Beaumarchais. Louis XVI was no 'philosophe', and neither were those who surrounded him and gave him advice. He went to war eventually because they had succeeded in wearing down his resistance and that of Maurepas. They had succeeded in doing this because they put forward enough plausible arguments in favour of the step, which convinced Louis XVI that he was doing France a great service; in fact he was storing up disaster for himself and for France.

In the same vein, though as it was written in 1918 it is unlikely that it was influenced by the same factors, we find Merlant in his book <u>La France et la Guerre de l'Indépendence Américaine 1776-1783</u> taking Vergennes as a paragon of virtue. He was 'un ésprit très élevé et très sage, l'un des plus grands Serviteurs qu'ait jamais eu la France'. As such his aims in rebuilding French greatness were not such unworthy objects as aggrandisement or territorial gain, but rather the pure and just intention to restore european diplomacy to a foundation in 'les droits sacrées de la justice et la proprieté'. In keeping with these worthy ends we find that Vergennes prepared for war

merely in order to ward off the threat of war from Great Britain.[15] The fact that no one in Britain appears to have even considered attacking France or her overseas possessions does not seem to concern Merlant. In this, as in most other ways, Merlant's book is merely a rather pale shadow of the masterly work of Doniol.

However, Merlant's work is of interest for another reason as well. This is that it marked the transition to a new phase of historical writing on the subject of the American War in France which was to be very prevalent in the inter-war years. This phase began with the arrival of General Pershing in France in 1917 at the head of the American troops when he said "Beaumarchais nous voici". This speech inaugurated a period in which writers were at pains to show the strength of the ties between France and America. These ties were supposed to have their origin in the fact that France came to the aid of the American rebels when they were desperately struggling for their independence, and were re-affirmed in 1917 when the Americans returned the compliment by coming to the assistance of the French in their hour of need. The fact that generations of Frenchmen and Americans have detested each other from the time when Quebec was a threat to the American colonists before 1763 to the time when General de Gaulle withdrew France from Nato has again been conveniently submerged in historical myth.

This attitude of repayment of a long-standing debt is clearly expressed in Admiral de Faramond's article entitled 'Les Fondements de l'Amitié Franco-Américain'. In this article the following passage is to be found:-

> 'C'est en France que les Américains trouvèrent un Roi et un peuple disposés à de grands sacrifices pour aider, à l'heure critique de sa naissance, la République des Etats Unis'.[16]

This approach is typical of a large number of inter war works by French authors who include in their introductions, and often appear to have been inspired to write by this notion of a long-standing debt having been repaid by the Americans coming to the aid of France at the latter's 'heure critique'.

There are many other interesting examples of works on the period on which contemporary events may have impinged. Of these, by reason of space, an article by de Fraguier will have to stand as an example. This article was published in 1912, at a period when Great

Britain and France were just beginning to become aware of the dangers threatening them both in the shape of Wilhelmine Germany. They were coming to realise the need to draw together in the face of the common enemy, and thus to see the need to abandon the coolness that had marked their relations up to this point. De Fraguier's article, published at this time, argues in favour of the policy of peace and reconciliation that was pursued by the Duc d'Aiguillon between 1771 and 1773. De Fraguier also takes pains to point out the advantages that might have come to France had she pursued the course laid down by d'Aiguillon after the years of mutual hostility under Choiseul. It seems that it may be more than mere coincidence that de Fraguier's article should appear at such a similar juncture in the history of the two countries.[17]

Evidently this cannot be a complete survey of the French historians who have written on this period, but it is hoped that it has helped to draw attention to some of the more evident coincidences between historical events as they happen and history as it is written. We must now however pass on from French historians to consider those of American origin, who have written about the creation of the American nation from the thirteen colonies which, it is well remembered, George III and Lord North lost for Great Britain.

In any consideration of American historical writings on this period it has to be remembered that from the start Americans have had a low opinion of the British governments of the second half of the eighteenth century. In the Declaration of Independence, with its implications that the British government had ceased to protect the basic rights of the individual, both the government and the King are subjected to attacks that are in many cases far from justified. The rights and wrongs of the Stamp Act and its aftermath do not conern us here. At this stage the point that has to be made is that there is almost an obligation on American historians to highlight the evils of the British governments of the period and to play down the faults of the Americans. To do otherwise is to cast doubts on the rights of the cause, on the wisdom of the founding fathers and on the truth of the beliefs for which George Washington and his army fought. Such thoughts amount to a doubt as to whether or not America should exist at all,

and so are hardly tenable by a patriotic American. In a sense it is the old story: 'If treason prosper, none dare call it treason'.

American writers are, it appears to me, subject to two weaknesses in the attitudes with which they approach the study of this period. Firstly they tend to assume that the Americans of the period were almost a different type of human being from their European counterparts. The American is pure and innocent, quite untouched by the dark and devious ways of European diplomacy. Bemis provides us with an excellent example of such an attitude in the following quotations:-

> 'European diplomacy in the eighteenth century was no gentle craft. The Chancelleries of power acted according to the unblishing principles of Machiavelli - that the attainment of a good end justified the use of any means, however dirty. What the monarchs of Europe and their advisers defined as a good end was the interest and welfare of their own as against the interest and welfare of other states. It was a world of the survival of the strongest .... Between wars the battles of diplomacy went on continuously and unmercifully, often with less sense of honourable treatment than obtained in the conflicts of open warfare ..... No ruler trusted another, not even a blood relative and treaty ally'.

Again on the following page:-

> 'There were no such things as national boundaries or race limits .... In all this the statesmen did not consult or even think of the wishes of the people concerned in the transfers .... these grosser crimes obscure the continual contemptuous trickery by which the diplomacy of the eighteenth century was conducted'.[18]

Value judgements such as these are really useless, although unfortunately we find that many American writers are prone to them. They make no contribution to historical analysis of the period, and serve to obscure rather than clarify the issues that are at stake. This apart, Bemis's criticisms of the eighteenth century are not only applicable to that age, for the aim of diplomacy has always been the securing and furthering of the interests of one's own country and the hindering of the aims and interest of those towards which one is hostile. The eighteenth century may not have been a paradise for diplomats, but such a paradise has never existed. There were rules that governed diplomatic behaviour - Hugh Elliot, the over zealous British ambassador at Berlin, for

example, over stepped these rules when he stole the papers of the American Arthur Lee - and although the rules were unwritten they were no less effective because of that. The diplomatic world of the eighteenth century was as least as pure as any since, and probably more so than many on either side of it in the time scale. After all the spies of the eighteenth century had far less equipment or opportunities than their counterparts of today.

If Bemis's righteous indignation about the world of diplomacy is uncalled for, then his views on self determination are totally out of place. Far from expecting that 'peoples' ought to have any right to decide their own destiny, the governing classes in the eighteenth century would have considered any such notion as close to insanity. Furthermore, such a right, even had it been granted, would have had little effect upon the life of the ordinary working man, for war, disease, famine and all the other ills of the period affected a man and his family whether they were Dutch, French or Austrian.

From this criticism of what may be called the 'wicked Europe' concept in American historical writing, we may move on to consider a further weakness which is in some senses a counterpart to this idea. This is the impression that Americans were somehow different from the Europeans of the day and that America was a land that flowed with metaphorical milk and honey. Bemis again:-

> 'Some thoughtful Americans had vaguely sensed that peace was a more normal condition of American life than of that of the old world'.[19]

And again:-

> 'It was the cynical and brutal international world of the eighteenth century into which the United States of America was to be delivered as a living state'.[20]

Here again we are faced with useless value judgement. The international world has always been cynical and brutal, and it is to be doubted whether peace was a more normal condition of life in America, for Americans had been fully involved in the Seven Years War, and were constantly involved in struggles with the Indians and indeed with the forces of nature.

The idea of America as a superior nation gives rise to a further notion. This is that her envoys to Europe were members of a new breed of diplomat on a higher plane than those of the

old world, although some are forced to make an exception to this rule in the case of Silas Deane. The chief among this group of heroes is, as is natural, Benjamin Franklin. As the chief envoy, the darling of Parisian Society and an ornament to any salon or soiree, Franklin has a natural advantage. Add to this the fact that Franklin was the friend of the Philosophe movement in France and the architect of the Franco-American alliance and one has a figure that all Americans can scarcely help but admire. But although Franklin may be an admirable figure to Americans, he was regarded very bitterly by the British who had seen him for a time as a moderating influence on the more rabid of the rebels.[21] If Franklin is to be taken as a representative of the new America, then his conduct must be examined, and some of it will then appear to be just as 'brutal and cynical' as that of the most accomplished of European diplomats. One example of this is the use that was made by Franklin of the peace mission of Wentworth in the winter of 1777-1778. Wentworth, formerly an important government agent on American affairs and an expert on France's relations with the rebels, went to Paris to try to treat with Franklin and his colleagues. Franklin made very skillful use of Wentworth. He gave him just enough encouragement to keep the London government in hopes of a settlement; while in reality he was using the mission to frighten the French ministry that America might agree terms with Britain and turn on France. This was a very effective ploy, but it is not the type of tactics that are to be expected from a representative of the new and honest diplomacy of the new world.

Franklin's colleagues in Paris also offer scope for considering just how foreign to the Americans the ways of European diplomacy actually were. Arthur Lee, for instance, can hardly be seen as an example of that openness and candour that are so much prized by American writers. Lee distrusted everyone, not only the British and French but also his fellow envoys from America. Lee's suspicious nature in fact led to a curious circumstance. Dr. Edward Bancroft was chosen by Franklin and Deane to be their private secretary and secretary to the American delegation. Lee distrusted Bancroft, and was later shown to be quite correct to do so, because Bancroft was a constant source of information to

the London government. Lee refused to have Bancroft as his secretary and this, combined with Lee's suspicious nature led to his being left out of the main parts of the negotiations. Ironically, however, although Lee had refused Bancroft, the man he eventually chose as his secretary, Thornton, was also a British agent! Thornton was less important to the British, but this was only so because Lee was distrusted both by his own colleagues and by the French ministry.[22]

It is interesting to wonder whether Bemis in his harsh comments on the evils of eighteenth century diplomacy in his introduction to The Diplomacy of the American Revolution which he began to write on 4 July 1926[23] may [illegible] have been influenced by ideas current in America at the time. For this was the period of Woodrow Wilson and the ennunciation of the new doctrine of Open Diplomacy in which secret treaties were to be abolished and all international dealings were to be conducted with the cards firmly on the table. It was also a period in which America turned her back on the Europe of the period and withdrew into isolation, rejecting the plans of her President contained in the 1919 Treaty of Versailles, thus gaining for herself that 'comparative disentanglement from European convulsions' that Bemis speaks of as one of the aims of the American Revolution.[24]

To sum up then on American writers of history in this period, they can be clearly seen as suffering from several weaknesses. They tend to view their own countrymen and their own country as a world apart and as a world that is superior to the "old" world in Europe. They tend to see Britain in her worst possible light, and although this tendency is natural it should not be allowed to interfere with good historical judgement. Finally they tend to express views that are acceptable in the nineteenth or twentieth century and assume that they would also have been acceptable in the eighteenth century. The political world of the eighteenth century was supremely easy going, as Namier has said:-

> 'Men went there (to the House of Commons) to "make a figure", and no more dreamt of a seat in the House in order to benefit humanity than a child dreams of a birthday cake in order that others may eat it; which is in no way reprehensible'.[25]

There was no place in such a world for ideas of self determination of peoples or democracy, and this fact must be remembered when writing

the history of the period.

Now, finally, let us turn to look at those who have written on the history of Britain in this period. British historians are bitterly divided among themselves in their opinions on the period of George III's reign. As Valentine says:-

> 'No two men of our own century have contributed more to an understanding of Lord North's time than Namier and Butterfield, but any work praised by the followers of one is almost certain to be condemned by the disciples of the other'.[26]

The works of these two great historians, however, are really concentrated upon the internal conflicts of British Society in the late eighteenth century, and as such can only impinge marginally on a study of the diplomacy of the period. This overlap comes in the reflections that are cast in diplomacy and foreign policy by the internal pressures of domestic politics: for example, the degree to which the warlike Bedford group in the North government could determine the policy of the ministry, of which they were an essential part, but which they alone were incapable of replacing. In that sense the contribution of these historians is invaluable in enabling the twentieth century mind to grasp the complex world of checks and balances which is totally foreign to present day conditions. But as far as diplomatic history is concerned the writings of Namier and Butterfield are of little direct assistance. Neither are the writings of their latter day emulators, men like Ritcheson[27] an American writer on the internal affairs of Great Britain at this period; or Donoghue[28] a British writer on 'party politics', such as they were, at this era. These books which concern 'politics', deal rather with the shifting sands of parliamentary influence than with the grand strategy of foreign affairs.

Apart from books such as these, there has been, until recently, a dearth of books in this field; Lord Edmund Fitzmaurice's life of the Earl of Shelburne[29] is one notable exception. More recently there have been attempts to rectify this and to throw new light on several personalities of the time. Valentine has made two good studies in the period, one of Lord North, and one of Lord George Germain, both of whom have been sadly neglected.[30] George III has received sensible and sensitive treatment from John Brooke, a disciple of Namier.[31] However, apart from these books, the prominent personalities in the government of the day remain in

shadows that are quite unthinkable in these days of mass communication. Not all that many people, one may suspect, are even aware that Lords Suffolk, Rochford, Weymouth and Dartmouth were Secretaries of State in this period, and still less would they be aware of what the political affiliations of these men were or how far they influenced policy. These men have remained unstudied, and have suffered collective criticism for the loss of the American colonies. However, the changes which can be wrought have recently been illustrated by the case of Lord Sandwich, who had largely been disregarded and discredited as a womanizer and as an inefficient administrator. This situation has now been considerably altered by the publication of Sandwich's papers and of a biography of the Earl.[32]

The lesson to be drawn from this is that historians of Great Britain in this period have tended to concentrate on internal politics, or, incipiently, on biography, and have been reluctant to venture into the sphere of foreign affairs. This may well be caused by the apparent failure of British diplomacy, resulting in the loss of the colonies and the defeat of Britain in the war. That is to say the reluctance of Britain's historians to look at this subject may be seen as stemming from the same reasons that make it so popular with historians of France and America - success and failure.

"The Cabinet that lost America", this is how the ministry of Lord North is inevitably remembered; and although this is a true statement, it is also a simple one. Too often the cabinet is dismissed in this way with no thought being given to the difficulties that it faced.

The government was faced by inflexible attitudes on the part of the King. George III had a strong sense of his duty, as was only right and proper, and he does not deserve the sniping, to which he has frequently been subjected, as having opinions enough for both himself and North; or for over ruling the Cabinet, something that he scrupulously avoided on matters of major policy. As Brooke has written:-

> 'Sir Winston Churchill has said that he did not become Prime Minister in order to preside over the dissolution of the British Empire. Neither did King George become King in order to surrender the American colonies'.[33]

To an eighteenth century King, whether constitutional or absolute, the idea that his overseas possessions should be surrendered at the least sign of revolt was unthinkable. Another problem was that the Parliament was also of the King's opinion, and even the most critical opponent of the government did not go so far as to advocate independence until that was the inevitable result; Brooke again:-

> 'It was one thing to recognise American Independence in 1783 after seven years of war had failed to subdue the Americans. It would have been quite another in 1778... A nation can submit to defeat in war... But no nation can deliberately perform an act of humiliation except under pressure of overwhelming force'.[34]

Internally then, North and his colleagues faced difficulties in that they could not have abandoned the fight even had they wanted to. Externally their difficulties were even greater. They faced France, America, Spain and Holland as active enemies, and also the passive hostility of Prussia and the Baltic States. In the face of the hostility of almost all Europe, and having lost the main source of their naval timber and a major recruiting ground for soldiers and sailors, the cabinet of North, under great pressure at home, sustained a war for seven years and enabled the next government to secure a peace treaty that denied to France almost all her war aims save the restoration of her battered prestige. This is surely no mean achievement, especially when it is considered that, not long after, the Younger Pitt was forced to retire, exhausted, after fighting republican France for fewer years than North had withstood the combined hostility of Europe.

Criticism there certainly was at the time, both from inside and outside the ministry, and yet there was no constructive or credible alternative put forward by any of the critics. The opposition, even had its policies been of a realistic nature, had no chance of a majority, and furthermore it had no chance at all of assuming office because of the wide gulf which separated it from the King. It is of little use to criticise North for not having resigned, and of even less to criticise the opposition for not having forced him to do so, both events were equally impossible. Criticism must be made of, and judgement based on the policy which North chose, or was forced, to follow.

North had taken into his cabinet all the major talents of the opposition, even managing to include Charles James Fox for two brief periods. By means of these appointment he had, said Walpole, reduced the opposition 'to the last stages of consumption'.[35] In the light of this achievement it seems highly unreasonable to say that North ought to have stood down. He was, as nearly as any polician can ever be, indispensable; he was the only man who could have held together a cabinet composed of so many able and diverse men, and, above all, he was the only minister whom the King would trust, and it must be remembered that George III actually drew up a declaration of abdication to be used if the Americans were granted their independence. A Chatham or a Churchill might have succeeded in keeping America as a British possession, but this would not have been a long term solution. Besides Chatham was not prepared to fight the Americans, nor to grant them independence, a viewpoint far less realistic than North's. Rather then, than insist that North should have stood down, it seems that historians should concentrate on the factors which restricted his freedom of choice, and on the attitudes and opinions of the time which made it impossible for North to follow other courses of action which might have proved more fruitful. In addition, a greater attempt to look for the advantages of the government's policy should be made than has hitherto been the case. A delicately balanced game of diplomacy was being played out and for a long time the scales could have come down on either side.

Whatever the subject, there are always prejudices that will affect the writer of any book and therefore what he writes. This chapter has been an attempt to show some of the attitudes that historians have brought to this particular period. Bemis claims, in his introduction to <u>The Diplomacy of the American Revolution</u> that for the first time a writer has had full access to all the records, and writes that his 'endeavour has been to present ..... a balanced and somewhat condensed narrative of the diplomacy of the American Revolution'.[36] There have been many attempts to do this, but it seems this objective is not easily attained, because the subject is undeniably an emotive one, and inevitably attitudes are shaped by nationality and sentiment. I believe that the treatment that has been accorded to Great Britain has not been balanced, but often unfair and usually blinkered. Hitherto the interpretations of

events surrounding the American War of Independence have usually started from a standpoint that Britain's actions were either wrong, or dictated to her by the clever diplomats of France or even that they were downright stupid. Here, in what follows, it will be our concern to show that French diplomacy was not as clever as has often been made out to be the case; to examine the options that were open to the North government and to see why it elected to follow the courses that it did. It will also be shown that contemporary criticisms, though sometimes valid, were seldom practical, and that those of the historian have often taken advantage of hindsight and have been coloured by useless moral judgements totally inapplicable to the eighteenth century world.

FOOTNOTES TO CHAPTER I

Page No.	Footnote Number	Reference
1	1	Bancroft, G History of the United States.
1	2	Doniol, H Histoire de la Participation de la France à l'Etablissement des Etats Unis d'Amérique (Hereafter, Doniol, Histoire de la Participation..)
1	3	Corwin, E S French Policy and the American Alliance of 1778.
1	4	Bemis, S F The Diplomacy of the American Revolution.
1	5	Meng, J J The Comte De Vergennes: European Phases of his American Diplomacy.
1	6	Valentine A Lord North. Vol. i, p.v.
2	7	Pargellis, S & Medley, D J Bibliography of British History. The Eighteenth Century. p.50
5	8	Capefigue, B H R Louis XVI, son administration et ses relations diplomatiques. Vol. i, pp vi & vii.
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7	12	Doniol, Histoire de la Participation ... Vol. i, p 283.
7	13	Lacour Gayet, G La Marine Militaire de la France sous le Règne de Louis XVI.
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9	15	Merlant, J La France et la Guerre de L'Indépendence Américaine. pp 9-11.
9	16	Faramond, Admiral de. 'Les Fondements de L'amitié Franco - Américain.' In, Revue d'Histoire Diplomatique, 1933, p 36.
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12	20	ibid P 15

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13	21	see:- Miller, J C Triumph of Freedom. pp 273-278.
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14	22	Bemis, S F 'The British Secret Service and the French - American Alliance.' in A.H.R. xxix p 483.
14	23	Bemis, S F The Diplomacy of the American Revolution. p xi.
14	24	ibid. p 12.
14	25	Namier, Sir L B The Structure of Politics at the Accession of George III. p 2.
15	26	Valentine, A Lord North. Vol. i, p vi.
15	27	Ritcheson, C R British Politics and the American Revolution. 1763-1783.
15	28	Donoghue, B British Politics and the American Revolution: The Path to War. 1773-1775.
15	29	Fitzmaurice, Lord E Life of William Earl of Shelburne, afterwards 1st Marquess of Lansdowne.
15	30	Valentine, A Lord North. and: Lord George Germain.
15	31	Brooke, J King George III.
16	32	The Private Papers of John, Earl of Sandwich, First Lord of the Admiralty. 1771-1782 Ed Barnes, G R and Owen, J H
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CHAPTER II: THE BACKGROUND: BRITAIN, FRANCE AND AMERICA 1765 - 1774

Following the Seven Years War the political and diplomatic picture in Europe was dramatically changed. For most of the preceding century France had been seen as the chief threat to the peace and stability of the continent. But the events which followed the Diplomatic Revolution proved disastrous to French ambitions. Drawn into an exhausting war in Central Europe France had watched her armies march and counter march across Germany, achieving little or nothing that was of importance to French interests. This was due in large measure to the genius and resilience of Frederick the Great, but it was also due to the fact that France's essential interest was not in Germany.

If the land war in Europe was an error for France, then the world wide naval and colonial conflict with Great Britain was a catastrophe. The years between 1756 and 1763 saw the naval power of the French reduced in the eyes of contemporaries to negligible proportions, and also saw the loss of a large number of colonial possessions, the major item here being the vast territory of Canada. The loss of this largely unproductive area was to have a profound effect upon the political situation in North America over the next fifteen years.

The Seven Years War may be seen as a watershed in the history of the eighteenth century. It humbled the might of the French in Europe, and, in the place of that threat it raised a new one. This was the possibility of the domination of Europe by Great Britain. This new threat, although not so direct as that of France, was none the less a real and meaningful one, especially to the maritime nations, France, Spain, Holland and the Baltic States. To these States, the newly acquired total naval dominance of Britain appeared as a considerable threat to their trading rights.[1] It is worthy of note that the British claim of the right of search on the high seas was to be the cause of much hostility and resentment, and a major contributing factor in the formation of the Armed Neutrality at a later date.

If the Seven Years War had removed one threat from Europe only to replace it with another, its effect upon North America was altogether different. While the French had been the masters of the Northern portion of the continent, there had been a constant

threat that they would act against the British colonies and seize them. The British colonies, running in a narrow strip along the coast from the St Lawrence southwards were surrounded by French territory, Canada to the North, and the vast, largely unexplored, area to the West which was nominally in French hands. This area contained French trading posts, which allowed the French to contact the Indian tribes and to make use of them against the British. The Indians were generally better disposed towards the French because they came only to trade and to trap animals for furs; the British came to settle and plant the land.

This threat of attack and possible conquest had ensured the friendly disposition of the colonists towards the mother country, and had secured the support of the Americans for Great Britain in any war with France. The war of 1756 - 1763, which was fought on the American continent to prevent a possible French expansion there, was no exception to the rule, and the Americans rendered considerable assistance to Britain in the defeat of France. This fact was clearly demonstrated by Thomas Townshend when, in the debate on the Address on 31 October 1776 in the House of Commons, he pointed out that in the last war the American colonists had provided 12 - 13,000 men for the British navy.[2] In addition to manpower, it must be recalled that the American colonies were a major source of supply for shipbuilding timber. America had therefore played a considerable part in the overthrow of French power, a fact that throws light on the attitude of the Americans towards the French. There can be little doubt that the Americans disliked the French, and this should not be a cause for surprise. The Americans were fiercely protestant in religion and therefore disliked the catholic French; the French use of the Indian tribes to cause trouble for the colonists deepened this animosity, and it was completed by the knowledge of the colonists that the French colonial aims were even more oriented towards the benefit of the mother country than were those of the British.

The Seven Years War, by removing the French from Canada, also removed this threat to the British colonists. The removal of this threat resulted in a decline in the importance of British protection to the colonists, and this new found freedom from danger could soon lead to a new and independent spirit among the colonists.

At the same time as it had these effects in American, the war also had a marked effect on the national debt in Britain. Between 1755 and 1763 the total of the funded and unfunded debt rose from £72,505,572 to a monumental £132,716,049.[3] This increase is a measure of the financial strain imposed upon Britain by the war, and it also explains the strength of the desire for peace in 1763, which so disgusted Pitt.

The frightening level of the debt made the members of the government begin to look for new ways in which the administration could reduce expenditure or increase revenue, so reducing the Government's borrowing requirements. The possibility of cuts in expenditure at home was not overlooked, and as we shall see later the results of these cuts were far from helpful. However, an obvious drain on the finances was the payment for the defence of the colonies in America, and the feeling began to grow among the British political classes that the colonies should be made to pay for their own defence, or at least contribute towards the cost of it.

This was not a new idea. There had been taxes on the colonists in the past in the form of customs duties, indirect taxation that is to say; an example being the 6d molasses duty that had been imposed by Walpole. This tax and other similar ones were collected by the colonial governments in American, and the collection was highly inefficient. When George Grenville came to power he was shocked by this inefficiency and took steps to remedy the situation. He halved the duty to 3d, and tightened up the collection procedures in order to re-coup the loss of revenue incurred by the cut. At the same time, the money raised was clearly set aside to be used for American purposes. There was nothing objectionable in this. The British public was clearly behind the action, and the American colonists could find little to take exception to as the duty had been reduced and since it was still within the area of indirect taxation on trade which had traditionally been accepted.

In March of 1765, however, Grenville took a further step, which was to have far reaching results. He introduced into Parliament an Act which would impose a Stamp Duty on the American colonists. The Act was quickly passed into law, and was to be the cause of much trouble for the British government. To do justice to Grenville, he

had not wanted to impose this upon the colonists and so he had offered them the chance to put forward an alternative way of raising the same amount of money, and had said that he would accept their proposals. There were none, and so the Stamp Act was passed.

A Stamp duty had been a part of the British fiscal system for many years. But to the Americans it was new. Not only was it new, but it was also instantly disliked, and this despite the fact that the revenue raised by it was to be used to pay for the defences of the New World. The colonists resented the duty on two major counts. First they contended that the tax was an internal tax and therefore was traditionally outside the scope of the London government, and a break with precedent. Second they contended that such a tax ought to be raised by their own colonial governments and not by a minister in London who, they claimed merely wanted more posts as American tax collectors to use as patronage. The cry "No taxation without representation" was raised, and a campaign was mounted to discredit Grenville in the public eye. A storm was rising, but it was as yet only a breeze, and Grenville ignored it; the Stamp Act remained.

Grenville could ignore America , but there were factors in the political climate of Britain that proved too strong for him. George III had always loathed him, and had tolerated him only because there was no effective alternative. But in the summer of 1765 he was rescued by a coalition of the friends of the Duke of Newcastle, led by Rockingham and supported by the King's uncle, the Duke of Cumberland. Grenville was dismissed on 10 July 1765, and at his last audience, he told the King "as he valued his own safety, not to suffer anyone to advise him to separate or draw the line between his British and American dominions". By this Grenville meant that the King should maintain the rights of the British parliament against those of his American subjects.[4] In terms of political tactics what Grenville meant was that the Stamp Act should not be repealed, however hard the Americans might press for this, as long as it was supported by a majority of the members of Parliament. This is the start of the debate between the British view of the sovereignty of parliament and the American view of it. The Americans contended that, though they understood the

King's sovereignty over them, the concept of parliamentary power over them was not valid. How, they asked, could a representative body create laws which were binding upon those unrepresented in it?

The Rockingham ministry was a leaderless affair. Its true leader was Pitt, but he had refused to come in, and so the remaining leaders had to do their best without him. The ministers were generally agreed that the Stamp Act should be repealed, the more so since they felt the repeal would appeal to Pitt who had opposed the Act from the start. But the problem was that the majority of Members of Parliament felt that America ought to pay for her defense.[5] To extricate themselves from this predicament the ministers resorted to a compromise. They repealed the Stamp Act, as they had wanted to, but at the same time they passed the Declaratory Act which reaffirmed the right of Parliament to tax America. This Act was intended to save face in American and to appease the majority in Parliament.

Rockingham's cabinet had been weak to start with, and the death of Cumberland and the defection of several ministers ensured its fall. The new ministry was headed by William Pitt, who had now been created Earl of Chatham, and was intended to lift the nation's politics out of the factional struggles that had dominated them for so long. But Chatham, now old and in ill health, was no longer the man of earlier years. He soon retired to Bath with a severe attack of gout, and the ministry was left to drift. It had seemed that Chatham might have been acceptable to the American colonists, and indeed there was considerable rejoicing in the colonies when Chatham came to power. Had he not criticised the Stamp Act as an instrument of slavery and had he not said 'I rejoice that America has resisted ....'?[6] However, as Earl of Chatham, Pitt failed to live up to the expectations of the Americans, and the principal contribution of his ministry to American affairs was to exacerbate rather than mollify the anger of the colonists. In the early months of 1767, the Chancellor of the Exchequer, Charles Townshend, under great pressure from the opposition, introduced a measure that imposed import duties on lead, glass, paper, painter's colours and tea sent from Great Britain to the colonies. This event aroused 'a colonial agitation against all forms of taxation for English

revenue, including indirect taxation'.[7] The Townshend duties were ill-conceived and had unfortunate consequences. Townshend had felt that as customs duties, these would be acceptable to the Americans, where the Stamp Act had not been; this was not the case, and they merely served to harden American opinion further.

From 1767 onwards British policy towards America drifted. 1768 saw the arrival in the ministry of the Bedford group in the ministry, and their influence resulted in increasingly hostile policy decisions in the American sphere. 1768 also witnessed the creation of the third secretaryship of State, with special responsibility for colonial affairs. This move can be seen as a practical attempt to acknowledge the fact that administration of the colonies created too much work for the conventional scheme to cope with efficiently; alternatively it can be seen as an attempt by the Bedford group to increase their power in the ministry by wresting this important area from the grasp of Shelburne, Chatham's closest disciple, who was seen by the Bedford group as a friend of the colonists. Most probably the creation of the new office was due to a combination of both these factors. Without the extra work created by the colonies the Bedford group would have had no case to create the new post. Later indications, however, show that the move may not have had such beneficial results for the Bedford group as they had hoped, for they were reluctant to grant the third Secretary an equal share of power with the Secretaries of ancient foundation.[8]

The new Secretaryship was given to Lord Hillsborough, a man who was to show himself far from sympathetic to the American cause. This appointment, together with the political situation in general, was far from the intentions of the Earl of Chatham; his ministry was as much a prisoner of political faction as any of its predecessors had been. Chatham resigned in disgust, and Shellburne followed him. This left the Duke of Grafton to lead a ministry that was now composed almost entirely of Bedford friends, the two major exceptions being Grafton himself and the Chancellor of the Exchequer Lord North. In 1770, North replaced Grafton as chief minister, and at the time it was widely felt that North was merely a caretaker leader until the Bedfords could find sufficient support to assume power. If this was the intention of the Bedford group, they had miscalculated badly, North's

government was to last for twelve years, and at the beginning it seemed to herald a return to more moderate policy towards the colonies. This impression was strengthened by the removal of Hillsborough from the colonial Secretaryship and his replacement with North's half-brother Lord Dartmouth in 1772, and also by the removal of all the offensive import duties imposed on the colonies except that on tea, which was retained as a sop to British public opinion.

The background to the internal politics of Britain has been dwelt upon at some length in order to show the difficulties that were faced by the London government. Essentially these problems remained the same for the duration of the American question up to 1783. The pressures on the government in dealing with the colonists were great and were brought to bear by people inside and outside the ministry, inside and outside Parliament.

Parliamentary pressure came from the county members who still felt that the Americans should be made to pay for the cost of the defence of their lands and posts. Pressure also came from the merchants in those ports which dealt extensively in trade with the American colonies, such as Liverpool and Bristol. These ports suffered heavily from the breaks in trade which were the American response to the Stamp Act and the Townshend duties, and were anxious to ensure steady and regular trade links. The King too had firm ideas on the American question. We have already seen the King being warned by Grenville that he must not give way to American pressure; and yet under Rockingham he agreed to repeal the Stamp Act. This decision was only taken by the King very reluctantly because of great pressure brought to bear by the ministers. George III had favoured a middle course on the Stamp Act, he wanted to see the parts that were objectionable to the colonists removed if there were good grounds for doing so. But Rockingham informed him that there were only two choices available; either to repeal the Act or to use military methods to enforce it on the colonists. Faced with this choice the King declared in favour of repeal rather than use force against his own subjects. This action, he later became convinced, was a mistake, and he wrote of 'The fatal compliance of 1766 ....'[9]

If the King was hardening his heart towards the Americans, the

ministry was by no means decided. Throughout the years between 1763 and 1774 there had been divisions of opinion that made it impossible for a firm policy to be adopted and pursued; the differences of opinion had also led to frequent changes of administration. Among the groups responsible for this situation were the Bedfords; not a sufficiently large group to create a ministry of their own, but powerful enough to dominate any ministry in which they were included. Their views on the American situation were harsh and were probably representative of the opinions of a majority of the members of the governing class in Britain. Concession was not a word favoured by this group. Another powerful group was gathered around Lord Rockingham, and this section was prepared to compromise with the colonists. But the Rockingham group clung to the principle outlined by the Declaratory Act, that Parliament had the right to raise taxation from the colonists. Their devotion to this concept weakened the Rockingham faction in two ways; it caused them to lose credibility with the Americans, and it kept a distance between the Rockingham group and the followers of Chatham, who was in favour of conciliation of the colonists, though he was not prepared to see them reach independence. Hovering uneasily between these groups were to be found North and Grafton. North's views were generally thought to be moderate, and there were suggestions that Grafton had stayed on in the Cabinet under North to try to modify violent measures that the Bedford group might try to push through. On 18 March 1770, Franklin, who was then still in London, could write to a colleague in American after the repeal of the Townshend Duties:-

> 'though the Duke of Grafton and Lord North were and are, in my opinion rather inclined to satisfy us, yet the Bedford party are so violent against us, and so prevalent in the Council, that more moderate measures could not take place'.[10]

Hence the formation and execution of a consistent and sustained policy towards the colonies was impossible due to factional interests and frequent changes of ministry.

However, throughout the period between 1763 and 1774 the question of the American colonies was not the central issue for British politicians, and very frequently British leaders were far more concerned by domestic affairs. This is a point of vital

importance, and though it is often made by historians it seems to be taken as a side issue, whereas it is surely central to the entire issue. Both ministers and people in these years were preoccupied with such issues as the reduction of the national debt, the creation and maintenance of a stable government, the reduction of the land tax from its high wartime level; these were the important issues to the politically powerful sections of the community in Britain. General warrants, the Middlesex elections, the letters of Junius and the Gordon Riots; these were issues that threatened the established order and therefore caused concern to the ruling class. By comparison to these domestic matters, petty squabbling over taxation in far away America must have appeared to be very trivial. As late as 1774 and well into 1775, the majority of the King's letters to his ministers have nothing to do with the American situation, and this ought to come as no surprise to those who are familiar with the ideas of the functions of government that were generally held in the eighteenth century. But even when feeling was aroused in Parliament, it usually burnt itself out in counter-productive measures. Tax, protest, repeal; tax protest, repeal, the process repeated itself with the Stamp Act and with the Townshend Duties, and it was likely that it would continue to repeat itself until a stable government could be formed which could conceive the need for an "American policy" as such, and could put such a policy into practice in a consistent attempt to solve the problem. For this to be a possibility there had to be a cessation of factional groupings in Parliament, or at least a stable majority for the minister which would enable him to overcome any opposition to his measures.

However, even granted a situation such as this, there is no guarantee that the American problem would have been tackled any earlier or any more decisively. The reason for this is to be found in the apathy of the members of Parliament of the period. The reasons for which these men went to Parliament (as described by Namier, see above page 14) meant that they were unlikely to take action about America until it was brought home to them as an issue of importance.

These two conditions needed to be fulfilled if there was to be a determined effort to resolve the American problem. But

unfortunately, when a stable and lasting ministry was formed, as was the case under North, its leaders lacked energy to tackle the problem; and indeed in the years between 1770 and 1774, the American issue itself was less active than at almost any time in the previous six years. In these conditions therefore, the problem of America remained out of sight and out of mind.

For the most part, British politics at this time were not animated by general issues, and it is interesting to note that Burke, who had grasped the importance of the American issue earlier than most in Britain and who was the agent in London for two of the colonies, had great difficulty in arousing any enthusiasm for, or interest in, American affairs in his Bristol constituency in the general election of 1774. This apathy on the part of the electors of Bristol is the more surprising since the electors could have been excepted to have an interest in the matter because Bristol was one of the major ports for trade with America. However, since the earlier crises of trade over the Stamp Act and the Townshend Duties, the merchants of Britain had begun to look elsewhere and this had changed their political views:-

> 'the relative importance of American trade to English mercantile interests was declining with the result that English merchants were less willing to demand capitulation to the American point of view'.[11]

Commenting upon the government's easy victory in the debate on the bill presented by Alderman John Hayley on 23 January 1774, and on two similar bills presented on 25 and 26 January, the same author goes on to say that after these attempts 'the Rockinghams' efforts to arouse the English mercantile classes petered out feebly'.[12]

This same argument which bases the lack of support given by the English merchants to the Americans on the decline in Anglo-American trade is stated by another writer in the following terms:-

> 'between 1771 and 1775 British trade with the colonies had declined by over 25 per cent ... When merchants realized that the colonies wanted, among other things, free trade with the non-British world, their disaffection deepened'.[13]

Thus we can see that by means of non-importation agreements, free-trade demands and other such trading demands, the Americans had succeeded in alienating the support of that group which had always been loudest in its demands that the government should compromise with the demands of the colonists.

With the alienation of the trading interest, the Americans left themselves with few supporters in England. At no time in the late 1760's and early 1770's were there more than about sixty Members of Parliament who could be counted upon to vote regularly against the government on American measures. These were sometimes assisted by a roughly equal number of independent Members, but none the less it was only rarely that the opposition could muster more than eighty or ninety votes in a division, and frequently their strength was down as low as fifteen or twenty.[14] In addition to the handicap of low voting strength in the Commons, the opposition was further hindered from effective action by the fact that its leaders were bitterly divided on certain issues. A major stumbling block here was the Declaratory Act, which Rockingham felt had to be retained at all costs, but which Chatham saw as insignificant. Yet another hindrance was the fact that all the major political figures in Britain, including Chatham and Rockingham, were unanimous in the opinion that America could not be allowed to become independent. This meant that the opposition's disputes with the government could only be on matters of detail.

In all this talk of 'government' and 'opposition', it has to be recalled that the distinction between the two was generally very vague. Almost all groups could be tempted into the government lobby if the price offered to them in places and influence was right. Idealogical issues had really faded from the scene, and the administration of the country was generally run on very similar lines whichever group held power. As a symbol of this unanimity all politicians in the mid-eighteenth century would have called themselves whigs, the tories having been discredited by the Jacobite link. General agreement on policy was a feature of the politics of the period, and, perhaps surprisingly; this led to difficulty in obtaining a stable government, because there were no issues about which groups differed strongly, it was an easy step to change sides.

The American issue was to change this. Here was a decisive question the likes of which had not been seen in England for many years. Because English politicians had become accustomed to a relatively calm life, the American issue remained unrecognised for some considerable time. It was not until 1770 that Lord North declared to the House of Commons:-

> 'The Contest ..... is now for no less than sovereignty on the one hand, and independence on the other. Will any minister dare give up the sovereignty of this country over her colonies? Or will any minister venture to declare open war upon the last extremity, to maintain her sovereignty?'[15]

This statement was made early in 1770 while Grafton was still head of the ministry; it shows an early realization of the problem that was to confront Britain at a later date. In 1770 neither the majority of the House of Commons nor the majority of the American colonists would have accepted this analysis of the situation, which seemed to be fairly calm at the time. But it is a clear statement that no minister could willingly give up the American colonies, while at the same time to declare war upon them would be a move that would be far from popular. That North was early in seeing the problem can be shown when we see that it was not until 1774 that the King wrote to North in terms which showed that he had now come to the same conclusion:-

> 'The New England Governments are in a State of Rebellion, blows must decide whether they are to be subject to this country or independent ...'

In a further letter of the same day he wrote:-

> 'We must either master them or totally leave them to themselves and treat them as aliens ..... I am for supporting those (measures) already undertaken'.[16]

Lord North was early in seeing the problem which faced the government and this might have been an advantage to Britain; however many of the speeches he made on the subject, and the punitive actions of the government against America created an image in the minds of the colonists of Lord North as a firm opponent of American aspirations. He was, it is true an opponent of independence, which he felt would be fatal to Britain's position as a world power. But, by comparison to some

of those who were to hold ministerial office in this period North's views were notably moderate. We have already seen Franklin drawing attention to North's moderation (see above page 27), and this impression of North as a moderate is further substantiated by the following passage from Valentine in which he comments upon Grafton's attempt to restrain government policy by remaining in Cabinet:-

> 'Neither his (Grafton's) capacities nor his position enabled him to alter the policies insisted upon by Gower, Rochford, Sandwich, Suffolk and the King'.[17]

This list of those favouring tough measures does not include the name of North, and thus removes him from the ranks of the hard-line opponents of America, and would tend to place him with the moderates, Grafton, Dartmouth and Lord Barrington, who was Secretary at War, and who was a firm opponent of a land war in America.[18]

Despite the many pressures on the ministry, and despite the many important figures who felt the colonists should be given harsh treatment from the start, there were few men in England who seriously felt that the Americans would undertake open resistance to the authority of Parliament. The result of this was that domestic and European issues continued to overshadow America as the focus for debates in Parliament. In April of 1774, just after the passage of the Boston Port Act, Edward Gibbon, who was a government supporter, could write to a friend:- 'with regard to America, the Minister seems moderate and the House obedient'.[19] The affairs of America were still not an issue in British politics.

If the years between 1763 and 1774 were largely years in which the American issue was seen in Britain as a side issue, the situation in France was very different. 1763 had been a nadir in the international situation of France. She had been reduced to these depths by her traditional enemy, and for the next twenty years, with only one short break of three years, her foreign policy was to be directed towards obtaining revenge for the humiliation of 1763.

Choiseul, who had managed to escape from the disasters of the Seven Years War with his reputation still intact, was to be the director of this policy. From 1763 until his dismissal

in 1770 he concentrated almost the whole of his considerable energy upon this aim. He was almost obsessed with this idea a fact reflected by the following description of Choiseul's attitude:-

> 'Que Choiseul se soit laissé hypnotiser par l'idée de la revanche contre l'Angleterre est certain; il sacrifia toute à cette pensée'.[20]

In this desire for revenge, Choiseul concentrated upon a reconstruction of the armed forces of France. He found the army badly disorganised after the war, and the navy in a catastrophically weak condition. He reformed both services. The most dramatic effects of this reform were to be seen in the navy, which Choiseul appreciated had to be strong before another war could be undertaken against the British. He set targets of 80 ships of the line and 55 frigates, and by the time he fell from power in 1770 the French navy possessed 64 ships of the line and 50 frigates; a naval strength quite sufficient to pose a serious threat to Britain. In the process of these reforms, Choiseul also improved French port facilities, set up new naval training schools and created new harbours and arsenals.

Choiseul was also early to spot the threat to Britain from colonial troubles. Verdier again:-

> 'Choiseul avait compris quelle menace pesait sur l'Angleterre: la Rebellion des colonies d'Amerique lui paraissait devoir se produire tot ou tard et il entendait bien en profiter; on sait qu'il ne se trompait pas'.[21]

Although Choiseul made it very clear in his memoire of 1765 that he was intent on revenge on Great Britain, he was also determined to exploit the American situation to its full potential. His hope was that the American colonies would deal a crippling blow to Britain by removing their trade and support from Britain, and transfer these to France. This would, Choiseul thought, create a situation in which France could flourish and Britain would no longer be a threat. In addition to these hopes, Choiseul was further determined that there should be no war between Britain and France until the armed forces of France were in a fit state to undertake such a struggle with every possible hope of success.

Choiseul's policy was carefully planned. He needed to have accurate information on the state of opinion in America, because he was well aware that anti British feeling in America did not mean that the Americans would be prepared to involve themselves with the French. He also needed an accurate assessment of the state of British preparations for a war. To obtain this information spies and agents were sent by Choiseul to America, to encourage colonial discontent, and to Britain to observe British preparations in the ports and to discover favourable sites for the landing of invasion forces in the event of a war. But the information received by Choiseul was far from encouraging. Baron de Kalb reported to his master that the Americans, even though they were very discontented with the British, were still far from the point at which they could be expected to ally with the French. His arguments appear to have convinced Choiseul, for he wrote to Louis XV:-

> 'There will come, in time, a revolution in America - but we shall probably not see it - which will put England into such a state of weakness where she will no longer be a terror in Europe... The very extent of the English possessions in America will bring about their separation from England, but as I have said, this event is yet far off'.[22]

The Comte de Broglie also noticed the potential danger to British power from America. In a lengthy memoire directed by him and presented to Louis XV, in the closing months of his reign, he drew attention to the 'imminence of a schism with the colonies' as one of the weaknesses in Britain's situation at the time. In addition to this he pointed to the size of Britain's national debt in urging Louis XV to launch a war against Britain in the near future.[23]

Louis XV however had seen enough wars which had produced unfavourable results for France, and he was not to be persuaded by the arguments of the war party. He would not go to war even in 1770 when his ally Spain was apparently being humiliated by Britain and Choiseul and his colleagues were preparing for war. The King stepped in and dealt briskly with the situation by writing, on 21 December 1770 to the King of Spain: 'My ministers would have war but I will not'.[24] Choiseul was dismissed from office and never held power again. This move, together with the resignation of Lord Weymouth in London, enabled peace to be preserved.

The period from the fall of Choiseul until the death of Louis XV in 1774 marks a strange interlude in Anglo-French hostility. At Versailles the Duc d'Aiguillon headed a ministry whose foreign policy was one of co-

operation with the London government of Lord North. Within France the government was pre-occupied with a programme of domestic changes including the reform of the Parlements, and attempts to curtail expenditure which were directed by Terray the Controller-General. The resultant peaceful foreign policy was one that received an enthusiastic welcome in London, where the government was keen to economise also in an attempt to reduce the debt which was still a problem even eight years after the end of the last war. One major area in which expenditure could be reduced was to avoid large scale payments to the armed services, and this could only be achieved if French policy appeared to be pacific, a rare occurrence in the second half of the eighteenth century.

However, despite these weighty motives for a peaceful co-existence between the two countries, the real basis for the friendly attitude of France in these years was the aversion of Louis XV to the idea of another war. On his death in May 1774 it was almost inevitable that French policy would change, and feeling in Britain was that this change would be for the worse. Such feeling was expressed by Lord Stormont, Ambassador to Versailles, when he reported on 8 May 1774 that there was no hope that Louis XV would recover, and commented: 'There can be no doubt that this catastrophe will occasion a fatal change of scene'.[25]

Eventually the political situation in France began to become clear after the inevitable intrigues had run their course D'Aiguillon, who had shown signs of trying to retain his position, was dismissed at the beginning of June, and on 7 June 1774 Stormont reported to London that his successor was to be the Comte de Vergennes. The changes following the death of Louis XV had therefore brought to power a monarch who was reputed to hold anti-British views and a minister who was prepared to seek out and take advantage of methods of attacking Britain. The change of scene appeared to have been every bit as fatal as Stormont had feared, although it would certainly have been worse had Choiseul been recalled to power.

Unlike his predecessor, Vergennes was not obsessed with the idea of gaining revenge on Britain. However we are left in no doubt that he blamed Britain for France's weak position in the world and that he was no friend to England, from the terms of the memoire he submitted to Louis XVI at the start of his reign.[26] His hostility to England becomes even clearer in another memoire which he submitted on 8 December 1774 in which he describes Britain as 'plus jalouse de la prosperité de ses voisins

que de son propre bonheur'[27], and later in the same document it is made very clear that Vergennes is contemplating a war:-

> 'Les Ministres qui parlent au roi ne sont pas loin d'entrevoir un jour où l'honneur autant que l'intérêt politique commanderont de souhaiter cette guerre'.[28]

From 1774 onwards then, France was one again looking for ways and means to obtain revenge for the humiliation of 1763, and this time she was in a position to take advantage of any opportunities that arose due to the reforms of the armed forces that had been undertaken by Choiseul. The search for opportunities was once again begun, and the eyes of the French administration turned again towards the American colonies. Beaumarchais was sent to London and was there for almost a year before we find the first reference to America in his correspondence with Vergennes; one can be certain that Beaumarchais would have used that year to establish contacts with the colonial agents in London[29]. The French spy network in Britain, largely neglected under D'Aiguillon, was revitalized; the House of Commons was infiltrated and a Secretary at the Colonial Office was bribed to furnish information to the French embassy, thus giving the French ministry a finger on the pulse of political opinion in England and a detailed knowledge of reports coming in from the colonies.[30] Furthermore in November 1774 a gentleman known as the Sieur Frontier was sent to Britain to watch and report on preparations and activity in British ports. As one of the spies who had operated under Choiseul, Frontier would have been experienced in this type of work, and we may be sure that the information the French government received from him would have been accurate.[31]

The questions that must be asked for the purpose of this study are to what extent the problems that the British government faced in regard to its American colonies were a cause of tension in the relations between France and Britain, and whether the interest of the French in America as a means of destroying Britain's position as a world power had a similar effect. All the signs are, however, that America was not in any real sense a cause of tension, or that there was any degree of alarm among British politicians at the possibility of exploitation of Britain's difficulties by the French, during this entire ten year period. The correspondence between the Ministry and its ambassador in Paris for the year 1774 - that is to say the year in which French interest in a war was reawakening - was not concerned to any significant degree with America, and well into 1775

there was only scant coverage of the American issue until rumours of arms trafficking became widespread. The dispatches up to this date were chiefly concerned with other matters: the removal of d'Aiguillon, the likelihood of a return to power by Choiseul with the aid of the new Queen's influence, the attitudes of Louis XVI towards Britain, and the usual round of ambassadorial duties such as freeing British subjects who had been imprisoned in France and protecting the trading interests of British merchants. At a later stage there was considerable speculation on the possibility of a general european war resulting from the Spanish quarrel with the Portuguese over their colonies in South America. Such were the matters that dominated the correspondence between London and Paris in these days which were later to be longingly recalled by Stormont, when one despatch would cover all necessary business.

The Correspondence of King George III contains no reference to any connection between France and the Colonies, or even to the possibility of any such connection, until even later. The first real reference to a threat from France is to be found in a Cabinet minute of 20 June 1776, when as a result of 'the late intelligence received relative to Armaments in the Ports of France and Spain' the government took measures to prepare the Navy.[32] The cause of these preparations in the Bourbon ports is not made clear, but is likely that they had more to do with the Spanish quarrel with Portugal than any events in the British Colonies of North America. But whatever the cause, this was the first mention in the King's letters of any threat, and it was written at a much later date.

The whole of the King's correspondence in the period prior to 1775 was apparently unconcerned with the prospect that his brother monarch at the Court of Versailles might be planning to join hands with the thirteen rebellious colonies in order to humble the might of Great Britain. This was an attitude that was all too common among British politicians at the time. For example the Earl of Sandwich's correspondence did not show any signs of alarm until the beginning of 1776 when Sir Hugh Palliser wrote to him in the following terms:-

> 'I have taken notice of the several articles in the foreign mails relative to armaments in Spain and France which your Lordship has; and am constantly thinking (when other matters that require immediate attention do not possess my mind) what would be the best plan to adopt upon any sudden alarm from those quarters, whilst we have so many seamen in almost the whole of our frigates employed at such a distance and

> such a body of our troops in such a situation. Indeed a plan of measures to be adopted in case of such an event is necessary, and I hope is prepared against it may happen'.[33]

There are two interesting points to be drawn from this. First that even Sandwich, who was to show later that he was more aware than most of the threat from France, had not taken it into account until 1776. Second that this letter shows the sorry state of British planning, for Palliser, who was Sandwich's right hand man and who would be the effective director of a naval war, had only just started to consider this possibility, and was, if his letter is to be believed, ignorant as to whether or not a plan existed to meet a threat from France. This must be taken as a clear indication that prior to this time French involvement in the struggle between Britain and America had not received serious consideration.

Outside government circles, such opinions were also commonly held. Lord George Germain, soon to replace Dartmouth as Secretary of State for the Colonies expressed the feeling among the political classes with regard to France when he wrote to his friend General Irwin on 21 June 1774

> 'The French King will have enough to do at home for his amusement, and he will not make war with us till he has established economy in the different branches of government, and has taught morality to the bishops and the people, I shall hope for peace in my time.'[34]

Such opinions were commonly held and reflected something of the complacent mood in Britain following the crushing defeat of France in the Seven Years War. This attitude was sustained by the bland assurances of the Government made to Parliament through the medium of the King's Speech at the opening of each session of Parliament. As an example, the speech of 13 January 1774 stated that 'other foreign powers continue still to have the same pacific dispositions with myself'[35] and went on to promise that in the light of this the ministers would have 'full leisure to attend to the improvement of our internal and domestic situation'[36], a promise which shows the great extent to which domestic matters dominated the political scene. These assurances of peaceful relations with foreign powers were accepted by Parliament with hardly any serious opposition and continued to be so for some time.

Throughout these years then, Great Britain was hardly concerned by the prospect of an alliance between France and the American colonists.

This perhaps is not surprising in the light of the fact that few Americans themselves had seriously thought that their troubles with England would lead to open war in the period prior to 1774:-

> 'In 1774, very few Americans, however, seriously contemplated a complete break-away from Britain, and many were strongly opposed to the radical and rebellious attitudes of men like Samuel Adams'.[37]

If there were few Americans who had contemplated such a step it is perhaps hardly surprising that few Englishmen had thought of such a step; as the same author puts it in his very next sentence; 'Even fewer Englishmen believed that the colonists could separate from England even if they would'. An alliance between France and America seemed unlikely to the minds of most Englishmen either on account of a general belief that France was internally too weak, as expressed by Germain above, or else for reasons based on the personality traits of Louis XVI who, Stormont appeared hopeful, would be as great a force in favour of peace as his grandfather had been:-

> 'His passion for Oeconomy, and dread of expence, give room to hope, that he will not wantonly, or hastily, plunge into a War with England, to which the nation in general is certainly averse.'[38]

Stormont himself was convinced that the chances of preserving peace were fair as long as neither Choiseul nor Broglie were called to power.

It seems unreasonable therefore to expect an eighteenth century government, confronted by this apparently quiet scene abroad and by pressures at home to reduce both the level of taxation and the National Debt, to have foreseen that this situation could soon turn into one in which Great Britain would be involved in a war of world wide proportions. It is even less reasonable that we should expect the British, unsuspecting of danger from their traditional enemy, to have realized the extent of the danger which threatened them from the far side of the Atlantic. The Boston Tea Party had been like the cloud the size of a man's hand on the horizon. But this incident, news of which was received in London on 13 January 1774,[39] did not make Britain aware of the strength of American feelings: rather it was seen as merely another protest which needed harsh treatment. It must be remembered that to the sophisticated Londoners of the age, the reports of a group of colonists, disguised as Indians, throwing tea into a far distant harbour, would have appeared to have an amusing, even ridiculous, side to it. The

Tea Party indeed, may have had the effect of making British politicians even more sceptical of the serious nature of American feelings. Such an attitude of complacency was shown by North when he summed up the debate on the Boston Port Bill and said 'It will be enough to show that Great Britain earnest'[40], reflecting a feeling among British leaders that if Britain were to crack the whip, the colonists would come swiftly to heel. Even the Opposition seems to have shared this opinion for Barré, speaking of the same Bill said that 'he liked it, harsh as it was; he liked it for its moderation.'[41]

Although the train of events leading from the Stamp Act to the Declaration of Independence may appear inevitable to the twentieth century observer, it is unfair to expect the same degree of insight of the politicians of the eighteenth century. To them the events in America were merely colonial troubles: the American protests were viewed as isolated responses to individual acts, and would not have appeared as a concerted movement. There had been colonial troubles before, and these had always been dealt with more or less easily. Sometimes a compromise had been worked out, but there was no doubt in anyone's mind that if a revolt was to break out, it would be treated as such and that strong measures would be taken to put it down. The Boston Tea Party was an overt act against a piece of Parliamentary legislation, and as such, there was general agreement in Parliament that action would have to be taken. The response of government, in closing the port of Boston and curtailing the powers of the government of Massachusetts was certainly in line with eighteenth century ideas. It is not practical to argue, as Valentine does, that the government ought to have stopped the sending of the tea, nor is it useful to use phrases which are deliberately derogatory to the British Cabinet:- '... it was too late for the ministers to have prevented the arrival of the tea at the American ports, even had they been wise enough to do so.'[42] Previous trouble had been calmed down by compromises, or had been suppressed or had simply blown over in time; who was to say that the troubles arising from the Tea Act would not soon fade into insignificance as well?

Britain was not the only country to have colonies, nor was she the only one to experience difficulties with them. We have already noted that Spain and Portugal almost come to war over colonial disputes; previously the Corsicans had revolted against the French. In such instances it was not uncommon for a third party to aid the rebellious colonists against

their mother country. Britain had in fact given limited help to the Corsicans in their revolt. But it was only in extreme cases or for some ideological reason[43] that such aid was given to the point of helping the colonists to achieve independence. In the eighteenth century such aid was used as a way of distracting and weakening rival powers. This is the type of situation that Britain must have felt she was facing in these years between 1765 and 1774, a colonial disturbance which was a nuisance, but which was hardly likely to become serious. Unfortunately for Britain the American problem was to become so serious, so serious in fact that it probably does deserve the title 'Revolution' that has sometimes been denied to it.[44]

FOOTNOTES TO CHAPTER II

Page No.	Footnote Number	Reference
20	1	Miller, J.C. Triumph of Freedom p.264
21	2	The Parliamentary History of England, from the earliest period to the year 1803. Ed. Cobbett W. vol.xvii, p.1415. (hereafter Parliamentary History...)
22	3	English Historical Documents. Gen. Ed. Douglas D.C. Vol. x, 1714-1783. Horn D.B. & Ransome M. (eds.) p.337
23	4	Brooke J. King George III (London, Panther Books, 1974) p.280.
24	5	Steven Watson J. The Reign of George III 1760-1815. p.115
24	6	ibid. p.116
25	7	ibid. p.127
25	8	See Bayse A.H. "The Secretary of State for Colonies" in A.H.R. xxviii pp. 13-23
26	9	Brooke J. King George III (London, Panther Books, 1974) p.281.
27	10	Valentine A. Lord North vol.i, p.200 (hereafter: Valentine, Lord North)
29	11	Donoghue B. British Politics and the American Revolution: the Path to War. 1773-1775. p.148
29	12	ibid. p.248
29	13	Kaplan L.S. Colonies into Nation: American Diplomacy 1763-1801. p.75
30	14	Donoghue B. British Politics and the American Revolution: the Path to War. 1773-1775. pp. 127-133
31	15	Valentine, Lord North vol.i, p.184
31	16	The Correspondence of King George the third from 1760 to December 1783. Ed. Sir John Fortescue. vol.iii, pp. 153-154. (hereafter: Correspondence of King George III... Ed. Fortescue).
32	17	Valentine, Lord North. vol.i, p.222
32	18	Ritcheson C.R. British Politics and the American Revolution. 1763-1783 p.199
32	19	Valentine, Lord North vol.i, p.123
33	20	Verdier H. Le Duc de Choiseul. La Politique et les Plaisirs. p.178
33	21	ibid. p.134

FOOTNOTES TO CHAPTER II (CONT'D)

Page No.	Footnote Number	Reference
34	22	Van Tyne C.H. 'French Aid before the Alliance of 1778' in A.H.R. xxxi. p.27.
34	23	Segur L-P. Comte de., Politique de tous les Cabinets de l'Europe pendant les règnes de Louis XV et de Louis XVI. vol.ii, p.32. (Hereafter: Segur, Politiques de tous les Cabinets...)
34	24	Valentine, Lord North vol.i, p.210
35	25	P.R.O. State Papers 78, 292. Stormont to Rochford, 8 May 1774.
35	26	Segur, Politique de tous les Cabinets... vol.ii, pp. 196-202
36	27	Doniol, Histoire de la Participation... vol.i, p.19.
36	28	ibid. vol.i, p.23
36	29	Kite E. Beaumarchais and the War of American Independence vol.ii, pp. 31-32.
36	30	Van Tyne C.H. 'French Aid before the Alliance of 1778' in A.H.R. xxxi, p.31
36	31	Doniol, Histoire de la Participation... vol.i, p.73.
37	32	Correspondence of King George III... Ed. Fortescue. vol.iii, p.380
38	33	The Private Papers of John, Earl of Sandwich, First Lord of the Admiralty, 1771-1782. Ed Barnes, G.R. and Owen J.H. vol.i, p.90. Palliser to Sandwich, 1 January 1776. (Hereafter; Sandwich Papers... Ed. Barnes and Owen).
38	34	Hist. MSS. Comm. Stopford Sackville Papers vol.i. p.133 (9th Report, Appendix X)
38	35	Parliamentary History... vol.xvii, p.936
38	36	ibid. p.937-938.
39	37	Valentine, Lord North vol.i, p.310
39	38	P.R.O. SP/78. 292. Stormont to Rochford 18 May 1774
39	39	Valentine, Lord North vol.i, p.313
40	40	Parliamentary History... vol.xv, p.1171
40	41	ibid. p.1169
40	42	Valentine, Lord North vol.i, p.305
41	43	For example the assistance rendered by Elizabeth I to the Dutch Protestants which played a considerable part in helping them gain independence from Spain.
41	44	Brook J. King George III (London, Panther Books 1974) p.270

CHAPTER III: THE PROBLEMS: 1775 and 1776

During the years 1775 and 1776 the problems that were to be posed to the world of the mid-eighteenth century by the War of American Independence were to become more clearly defined to the men of the time than they had hitherto been. It was soon to become evident that the conflict between Britain and America over this issue was to cause problems to France and Spain and was to involve most of the other countries in Europe. Many of the difficulties that arose were matters of simple practicality. How, for example, could a European nation help the colonists in distant America? How could a nation with no naval forces enter into commercial relations with the Americans?[1] How could a nation in Europe suppress a revolt in colonies that lay over 3,000 miles distant? How could one colonial power justify giving aid to the rebellious subjects of another? Equally, many of the problems arose from a consideration of the possible effects of the various courses of action that could be followed. Would the subjects of a power which helped the rebels catch the infection and rebel themselves? Or would such a power be ostracised by her fellow nations in Europe? These were issues that were very much alive for each nation that had a role to play in the coming conflict.

At the start of the active struggle, which may be dated as the middle of April 1775, the rebels were certainly beset by problems. They were short of powder, weapons, uniforms for their troops, and most importantly of a military commander of high rank, reputation and experience. In addition to these serious deficiencies they lacked a unified political structure and were comparatively inexperienced in the art of government. In consideration of the colonies during the early stages of the war it must always be remembered that they had previously been thirteen individual colonies and not one unified nation. Each of the colonies had been governed by a separate governor and administration, and, apart from the Protestant faith, the colonies had little in common. These widely differing and previously self contained units had now to create in a short space of time a cohesive governmental unity if they were to confront the forces of a major world power such as Great Britain with any chance of success. The problems of such a hurried union would have been immense had all the colonies not been wholeheartedly behind the movement for independence. However, despite British hopes of support for the Royalist

cause in certain areas, notably North Carolina, none of the Colonies wavered from support of the rebellion, and the Government's troops were met almost everywhere with hostility.

The newly formed Congress had to face all the problems that would be expected by a body formed to create unity out of disorganization. There were wrangles over the control of taxation, the raising of troops, the command of the troops once they had been raised and many other teething troubles. As a result of the slow procedures of the Congress, George Washington was often forced to wait in inactivity while the politicians argued in committees. But this should not be seen as a source of surprise. A greater cause for wonder is that, despite all these wrangles and debates, Congress took decisions that were often shrewd, and which did not hamper Washington to such an extent as to render his actions useless. Remembering the disputes that arose in the early stages of the NATO alliance over the issue of a European army, one can only admire the unity of purpose that is reflected in the manner in which the American Congress faced its difficulties.

Much more serious in the immediate sense was the grave shortage of the necessities of war which faced the Americans. Here, they lacked two things in particular, first, the basic munitions of war, especially gunpowder; and second, a navy. The shortage of powder was especially acute at the beginning of the war. In raids the Americans managed to seize approximately 80,000 lbs of gunpowder, but this was soon squandered in reckless actions by enthusiastic but untrained troops. In the period prior to the Autumn of 1777 the colonists produced, from locally extracted saltpetre, a total of approximately 115,000 lbs of powder, but this went only a little way towards making up the required quantity. In fact the supply of powder completely failed in January 1776, and Washington was left without any for almost two months. We have seen above that the Americans had approximately 200,000 lbs of powder which they either made with their own resources or captured from the British; this quantity, although it sounds impressive, was totally inadequate for their needs. In fact, however, the colonists had far greater supplies than this at their disposal:- in the period before the surrender at Saratoga they had in fact 2,347,455 lbs of gunpowder available. It can be seen therefore that 200,000lbs was a mere drop in the ocean here, and the question arises as to where the rest of the powder came from. The vast majority of it was imported into America in the form of usable gunpowder

(approximately 1,500,000 lbs) while the rest was brought to America as saltpetre and turned into powder by the colonists themselves.[2]

As for the navy, there was little that the colonists could do immediately. It took both considerable time and considerable expertise to construct large naval sailing vessels. Therefore the Americans had need of a foreign alliance. This was the case because the naval supremacy of the British gave them the ability to move their troops up and down the Atlantic seaboard of America with almost complete freedom. The only power bloc that could seriously challenge the forces of Britain at this time was the Bourbon alliance of France and Spain. As we have already noted, France had re-structured her navy under Choiseul and it now had sufficient strength, when combined with that of Spain, to challenge the forces of Great Britain on terms of near equality. The French were the natural choice for the Americans to approach in their quest for ways of evening the balance between the British forces and their own. The fact that the French were also hostile in their attitude towards Britain at this time was a stroke of good fortune for the Americans.

Despite the fact that France might have seemed an obvious ally, the Congress sent envoys to all the major powers of Europe. These envoys were well received only in Paris,[3] and so it was that moves towards an alliance were initiated in earnest. It should be noted that there was opposition in Congress to the mission to France, especially from Adams[4]. Indeed such a mission appeared, on the surface to be quite hopeless:-

> 'Here indeed was a spectacle to delight the Gods -
> Smooth Ben, Sleek Silas and suspicious Arthur
> trying to sell revolution to the most absolute
> monarch in Europe and a highly sophisticated court'.[5]

In fact the mission was by no means as hard as this appraisal would make it appear. In token of this lack of difficulty it should be noted that the vast majority of the imported powder and saltpetre which the rebels received before 1777 came from France.[6]

The timetable of events which led to secret aid being sent from France to America and which finally resulted in the open alliance of 1778 is somewhat confused. However it seems almost certain that the first approaches were made by the Americans. Through their agents in London they made overtures to the French chargé d'affaires in the British capital, with a view to possible assistance. This approach was reported to Vergennes by Garnier in a despatch of 19th November 1774.[7] This was, it should be noted, well in advance of the creation by Congress of the

Committee of Secret Correspondence, which did not take place until November of the following year.[8] If the approaches were a matter of necessity on the part of the Americans, the majority of whom disliked France and all she stood for, the situation in France itself was rather different. The imaginations of the French people had been caught by the Americans' struggle with Britain, and quite beyond any considerations of power-politics, the French wanted to help the colonists.[9]

If the French as a nation were strongly in favour of the rebels, the government was a good deal more cautious in its approach. However in September of 1775 a certain Achard de Bonvouloir was sent from France to America by Vergennes. He was not armed with any official powers, but he was to glean information about the Americans' determination to win their independence and was also to encourage the colonists by giving them unofficial assurances of the friendly disposition of France.

There is among the Dartmouth papers an interesting report entitled 'Information obtained from two French Officers, August 1775', and endorsed 'Rec'd 6th August.'[10] The report is not signed, dated or addressed, but is worthy of note as it concerns a person who is referred to as 'M le Comte de Beauvouloir' and another unnamed officer. These two gentlemen, it appears, were closely questioned by the writer of the report. It appears that they have both already been to America, were present at Lexington, and were offered £40 per month by the rebels if they would stay in America. They also spoke of the rebels being in need of powder, and said that seven French vessels had come into American ports while they had been there, and that these had been carrying supplies of powder. Later on in the report the following paragraph appeared:-

> 'By stimulating the pride of M le Comte de Beauvouloir in the moment that some vin de champagne produced the desired effect on his prudence, he told me that he had had two audiences of Le Comte de Guines; that his Excellency had made him great offers of service.... My opinion is that the two French officers are at this instant in the service of the Rebel Americans, and are paid by them; that they came over either with proposals to the Courts of France and Spain... and that they mean to return to their employers by means of some English ship... (they) appeared well informed of every particular relative to the affairs of America.'

It seems likely that the 'Comte de Beauvouloir' of the report was in fact none other than Achard de Bonvouloir, and various other items of information point in this direction too. Two further letters in the same volume of papers are of interest in this connection. These were

written by a person who was known simply as 'A.V.' to someone called 'Mrs Tolver', though both of these may well be pseudonyms. The first letter was dated '1775 Novembre 22', and stated that A.V. had been informed that Count de Bonvouloir had set out, by one of the last boats, fully authorized by the Court of France. The second letter, dated 9 Decembre 1775'reported that Bonvouloir had set out in October aboard the 'Charming Betsy'. It seems probable that 'A.V.' was a French agent in England, and that these letters were reports that were intercepted in the mail and so ended up in the papers of Lord Dartmouth, although they are not marked as intercepts as are some other letters in the same volume. In addition to these indications, it seems likely that Bonvouloir had been in Britain since 28 July 1775,[11] probably because a boat from England was the easiest and safest way to get to America.

There can be no doubt that the French people were becoming interested in the cause of the American colonists, and that the French government was beginning to show a cautious interest too. But it was the enthusiasm of the French people that was to cause problems for both the British and the French governments. We have already noted that Stormont had given his opinion at the start of Louis XVI's reign that the French 'nation in general is certainly averse' to war with Great Britain. (see above p39 However, in early December 1774, Rochford who was then Secretary of State, wrote to Stormont that Shelburne had stated in the Lords that the French were planning a war, and asked for the ambassador's opinion on the subject.[12] In his reply, written five days later, (i.e. immediately he received Rochford's despatch) Stormont gave a succinct and detailed expose of the problems that were to face the two courts in their dealings with each other in the next three years. He wrote:-

> 'I will not, My Lord, trouble you with a Detail of the Reasonings of Our Wits, Philosophers, and Coffee House Politicians, who are all to a Man warm Americans.'

But despite this statement, he then went on to do exactly that for a full page and a half. Such men, he reported, saw the Americans as a 'brave people' who were struggling to protect their freedoms against 'violent and wanton Oppression'; he went on to say that this was typical of the way the French talk with 'complacency' of the things that 'they least understand, making up in petulance what they want in knowledge.'

He then drew attention to another section of the public:-

> 'There are Men of quite another Turn, who tho' they in general admit that our right is clear, believe or pretend to believe, that it would be wise in us to

> wave it and rather give way... than bring on a Contest, by which we must be losers in the End.'

Those who put forward these views think that the London government has acted foolishly. By its past weakness to the colonists it has added to the Americans' will to win. Now, by trying to conquer the spirit that their past weakness has helped to create, the British can only increase it and

> 'by our own fault accelerate that fatal period, which upon every Principle of Political Wisdom, it should be our utmost Endeavour to retard.'

So far then we can see that Stormont's impression of the feeling of French public opinion has changed to a considerable degree, for neither of these groups he has described could be considered as having a high opinion of Britain, while the open sympathy for the colonists expressed by the first group could well turn into a desire for war with Britain. But he then turned his attention to the attitude of the French ministers themselves:-

> 'As to the Ministers, My Lord, they are I believe pretty cautious in the Language they hold upon our American Disputes. They never mention them to me...'

Nevertheless, Stormont had a clear impression that the French government did feel that the colonial problem would cause Britain 'a good deal of disagreeable occupation.' Finally he summed up his feelings on the whole problem as follows:-

> 'I never have, yet, been able to discover any Traces of a secret Intelligence between this Court and the Bostonians, and am inclined to think, upon general reasoning that such a Manoeuvre is less to be apprehended from the present Ministry than from the last. However, My Lord, this general Reasoning is no security and... it is wise... not to forget that whenever and wherever they can wound, they will.'[13]

This letter is significant as it shows that Stormont was in touch with all levels of political opinion in France, from the frequenters of the coffee-houses, through the thinking classes of people and up to the ministers. He was evidently aware of the wave of pro-American sentiment among the French people in general, as British Ambassador it is likely that the populace would have made the feeling clear to him. But the letter also shows us that Stormont was wary of trusting the enthusiasm of the ordinary French people to be a reliable guide as to the policy that was likely to be pursued by the French ministry. Shelburne appears to have been convinced that because the people favoured the colonists,

so would government policy: Stormont realized that government policy in France was even less susceptible to influence by public opinion than was the case in Britain, and he therefore felt that the important thing to be assessed was the attitude of the ministers.[14]

In his assessment of this, Stormont was very careful. He 'believes' that the ministers were 'pretty cautious in their Language', but was far from certain as to what their actions would be, if indeed they took any. The uncertainty was clearly expressed in the last sentence quoted from the despatch. He warned that his reading of the situation was based merely on a general appraisal, and he made it clear that he had no concrete evidence about any course of action likely to be pursued by the French ministry. As a further cautionary note, he closed this hesitant final paragraph with a telling reminder of the traditionally hostile attitudes of France towards Great Britain.

However, it must be recalled that this despatch was written before there was a general acceptance of the possibility that France might aid the rebels. It must also be remembered that there was no real currency at this early date of any rumours of arms traffic between the colonists and the French. Finally it is of interest to note that this is the only despatch from Paris during the entire year of 1774 that refers to the disputes between Britain and the colonists; and that it was written in reply to the only request for information that was made that year. It would not seem unfair to assume that an ambassador as alert as Stormont would have reported any developments which he considered worthy of note and also that, had the British government been seriously worried by the possibility of French action, they would have made further requests for information.

Unfair as it may seem, there were serious attacks made by the opposition against both the ministers and the ambassador in Paris during Parliamentary debates. Stormont was attacked as the dupe of the French ministers, and the British ministers were brought under fire for believing the reports that came from their ambassador. One of the most serious of these attacks came during the debate on the King's Speech in October 1776, when both the Duke of Manchester and Lord Shelburne flayed the government for lack of information and inactivity. Shelburne even went so far as to claim that it was common knowledge that France and Spain had been arming for months, and that they had been aiding the rebels to the limit of their power.[15]

The situation which the opposition outlined in their attacks was in fact an oversimplification of the realities. Although it was true to say that there had been considerable shipments of aid - especially gunpowder, as is shown in Dr. Stephenson's article quoted above - from France to the colonists by October of 1776, there was as yet no proof that this aid was coming from the French government. It must be remembered that smuggling was a common occurrence in the eighteenth century, and that the French government could, and did, take advantage of this fact to claim that it was beyond its power to control every French merchant who took advantage of the situation to make a handsome profit on a shipment of arms or powder to the colonists. This presented a knotty problem for it was hard to call the private actions of traders a casus belli between two great powers in the eighteenth century, especially when neither power involved was anxious to see such a war break out. (War had broken out between Britain and Spain in 1742 over such an issue but then both sides had been in warlike mood).

The problems facing both sides in this matter can be made a good deal clearer by understanding the difficulties of the French situation. There could be no doubt that, sooner or later, France would have to act to restore her position which had been shattered by the British victory in the Seven Years War, and in this respect the American revolt offered an apparently golden opportunity. But there were reasons that militated against the seizing of this chance, as well as some that made it appear to be an opportunity that France could not afford to lose.

The arguments in favour of taking the chance were obvious and powerful. First, the American revolt was a considerable drain on Britain's resources. Ships, men and money were needed in profusion to wage a successful war on the far side of the Atlantic in a country the size of even the small section of North America that was then populated. Second, the forces which the Americans had placed at Britain's disposal in the Seven Years War were now not only withdrawn from the British side of the scales, but were actively thrown onto the opposite side of the balance. Why then with such powerful advantages for her in the prevailing situation did France hesitate?

Just as there were powerful reasons for seizing the opportunity so there were weighty ones for not doing so. There were both internal and external considerations that made the French ministers hesitate before they decided to join the conflict. Within France the most obvious argument stemmed from financial

weakness. France had suffered even more heavily in the Seven Years War than Great Britain, and the strains which had been caused by her heavy commitments in that war were still very evident. In the spring of 1776, Turgot, in his reply to a memoire from Vergennes recommending clandestine aid to the rebels, argued very strongly that although there was no doubt that the money could be found for a war if France was forced to enter one, such a step should not be taken lightly. To embark wantonly on a repetition of the Seven Years war could be the ruin of the French financial situation by delaying the much needed reforms.[16] Such an argument could well have been one which would have obtained a sympathetic hearing from the economy minded Louis XVI.

A second factor which would have influenced the French ministers to hesitate before they embarked upon a war was that both her armed services were in the process of reform. At the end of 1774 Stormont wrote to Rochford:-

> 'I send Your Lordship an Ordonnance pour la Marine, the principal object of which is to undo all Mr de Boines did whilst he held that Department, to which he was every way unequal. It seems beyond doubt that He left the French Marine in a very bad state, ... Everybody is convinced of Mr de Sartines' Zeal and Integrity, yet I understand the Navy are by no means partial to Him.'[17]

The reform of the Navy was soon accompanied by a reform of France's senior service, the army. At the close of 1775 a despatch from Stormont to the new Secretary of State, Lord Weymouth, reported the plans of the French Minister of War for a reform of the army. The aim of St Germain's measures was stated by Stormont to be to put France on a military footing that was at least equal to Austria and Prussia instead of her current position as only the third-ranking military power in Europe.[18] The need for these reforms will be further discussed in the next chapter, but as a factor in deterring the French from active involvement in the American war the fact that these reforms were taking place cannot have been negligible.

There were then two very practical restraints upon French freedom of action in the shape of the above two weaknesses of her position. In addition to these there were other factors. To begin with, at the start of a new reign there was bound to be a period of political instability. Such instability was a constant theme of the despatches that were sent from Paris in the first years of the new reign. Stormont wrote repeatedly of the atmosphere of the Court as being dominated by

'Cabal and Intrigue', and his despatches showed that he was constantly alert to the shifting political fortunes of the new ministers. His constant fear was that Choiseul would return to power, and he kept the ministers in London well informed of any developments that threatened to hasten such a return.

Stormont's concern, the quantity of information which he collected and the details of the very complex situation which he reported to London may be best illustrated by some examples. At the start of the reign, Stormont was critical of Maurepas. In May of 1774 he reported that Louis XVI had summoned Maurepas, but went on to dismiss him with the cool phrase 'too old to think of being Minister'[19]. In June, Stormont was still not impressed with Maurepas. He reported that Maurepas was only concerned in minor matters and that his friends were arbitrarily dismissed from their offices, a fact reflecting badly upon Maurepas' influence.[20] In November it was Vergennes' position that seemed to be crumbling, and it was Stormont's fear on this occasion that Vergennes would be replaced by Breteuil, a man whose attitude towards England was far from amicable.[21] By March 1775 the situation had altered again. St. Paul, who was made Chargé d'Affaires during Stormont's absence, wrote:-

> 'M. de Maurepas continues to enjoy the same degree of power and favour, and M. de Vergennes is thought little more than the ostensible Minister and totally subordinate to him.'[22]

Maurepas was now seen as the dominant influence, whereas Vergennes was apparently regarded as little more than a front for Maurepas' influence on foreign affairs. In September, Maurepas' position was seen as being even more powerful:-

> 'M. de Maurepas continues in high favour,... M. de Vergennes and M. de Sartines are known to act solely by the influence of M. de Maurepas'.[23]

Then, quite suddenly, Vergennes appeared to assert himself and improve his position in the ministry. St. Paul wrote that he had heard

> 'from a very good quarter that he gains ground every day in the Fr(ench) King's Opinion..... I am told likewise that he is lately come into great favour with M. de Maurepas.'[24]

It was not, however, until May 1776 that Maurepas received a clear mark of royal favour. In that month he was created Chef du Conseil des Finances; although this did not give Maurepas a dominant role in

the Ministry, it was an indication of his importance and gave him pecuniary advantages.

Thus it can be seen that there was a long period when it was far from clear who was the most powerful figure in the politics of Louis XVI's reign. In addition to this unstable situation, there were disputes as to the nature of the policy which France ought to pursue towards the rebellious colonists, and so towards Britain. We know already that Vergennes was basically hostile in his view of Great Britain (see above pp 35 and 36), although he was not perhaps so violently so as were many others among the French governing class. His opinions however were not shared by all his colleagues in the French government, and this was a factor which was to make it harder for France to make a clear decision on the question of whether or not they should aid the colonists.

It seems certain that both Maurepas and Turgot were far from keen to see a war. Their opposition to war had nothing to do with feelings of friendship for Britain, but stemmed rather from the fact that they saw the dangers of a war at that point as far outweighing the advantages. The Abbé de Véri, in his journal for October of 1777, stated that Maurepas had resisted the pressure for a war for more than a year, but that he had now decided to give way. Veri recounted a discussion between Maurepas and himself in which they considered the reasons in favour of avoiding a war, and he reported that they found these reasons to be of considerable weight. According to Veri, who knew Maurepas well, the Minister was afraid to shoulder the burden of responsibility for events on his own.

The reason why Maurepas was alone at this stage was that Turgot had been dismissed in May of 1776. This dismissal had taken place at least partly because Turgot was opposed to the plans for giving secret aid to the colonists. A question which springs to mind is why did Maurepas not fight to prevent Turgot's dismissal when this would weaken the anti-war faction in the ministry? The answer to this question is to be found in Veri's journal where he recorded that Maurepas was jealous of Turgot's intellectual power. This jealousy appears to have grown into dislike, and Maurepas later admitted to Veri, speaking of Turgot 'Il était trop fort pour moi'. According to Veri, Maurepas did all he could to bring about the fall of Turgot[25]. It is interesting to speculate upon the possibilities for the anti-war faction in France had

these two ministers been united in their opposition to an aggressive policy. Further, it is of interest to note the attitude of the Americans to Turgot. Lee wrote to the Committee of Secret Correspondence thus:-

> 'The desire of the Court of France to assist may be depended on; but they are yet timid and the Ministry unsettled. Turgot, lately removed, was the most averse to a rupture with England; his removal is of consequence.'[26]

The other important members of the French ministry were Sartines, the Minister of Marine, and St. Germain, the Minister of War. Of these two, Sartines remains something of an enigma. He recreated the French navy as an efficient fighting-force after several years of neglect and he showed considerable energy and ability in doing so. Yet despite this work which would make it seem that Sartines would be in favour of a war, St. Paul could still report to Weymouth that he had heard on good authority 'that both M. de Maurepas and Sartines are most strongly inclined to peace.'[27] Doniol, however, argues that Sartines was in agreement with the reasoning set out by Vergennes in the memoires known as the Réflexions and the Considérations during the debate on secret aid that took place among the members of the administration during the spring of 1776. According to Doniol, St. Germain was also in agreement with Vergennes[28]; this created a situation where Turgot and Maurepas were indeed in a minority, and that minority became even smaller with the dismissal of Turgot.

However, even on his own, Maurepas was still a force to be reckoned with, since he was the confidential minister and it was through him that most business was conducted. Another powerful factor in his favour was that those who were in favour of aiding the colonists appear to have had considerable difficulty in persuading the King of the justice of their cause. Although this was a help to Maurepas, it created another problem for France. For, even if we do not credit Louis XVI with the role of policy maker, he was certainly the final arbiter, and if he did not approve of a measure it was most unlikely that it would be put into practice.

Louis XVI's position on this matter is far from clear to the historian. There is little direct evidence to show that he was either in favour of aid to the rebels or against it. The indications are that he was opposed to direct intervention on the colonists' behalf, and

that he was not over enthusiastic about the sending of secret aid. In the first place, Stormont believed that Louis XVI was opposed to war. He reported that he had had a conference with a confidant of Maurepas who had told him that Maurepas was being pushed, by the war-party and by his own fears of a repeat of the surprise attack made by Britain in 1756, towards acceptance of a war. Stormont wrote that Maurepas' irresolute nature and his age

> '... prevent him from taking Manly ground and standing firmly upon it, which would be the easier for him to do, in this Respect, particularly as the King his Master is naturally very steady upon this point. He is averse to War and averse to it from motives that do him honour.'[29]

Shortly after this Stormont wrote again to London with a report of the proceedings at a French council meeting. Stormont wrote that Maurepas had argued against any involvement with the rebels; he went on:-

> 'His Most Xn Majesty, not only adopts M. de Maurepas' Reasoning, but has always had a strong leaning against the Rebels and their cause, as thinking that all sovereigns are interested in the support of Legal Authority, and that whenever they assist Rebels, to invade the Rights of Sovereignty, they endanger their own'[30]

If it can be argued that Stormont, despite the excellence of his information services, is not the best person to refer to for evidence of the opinions of the King of France, there are further pieces of evidence to support the impression that Stormont had received. First, we can see that the ministers who favoured war had to put a good deal of effort into persuading Louis XVI that they were right. Many of the arguments that they put forward were one-sided, while others were based on premises so false that it must have been obvious that they were so. Vergennes concentrated on lines of attack which he thought would appeal to Louis XVI:

> 'Si Sa Majesté, saississant une occasion unique que les siècles ne reproduiront peut être jamais, réussissait à porter à l'Angleterre un coup assez sensible pour faire rentrer sa puissance dans des justes bornes, elle maîtriserait pendant bien des années la paix....'[31]

This is Vergennes at his most appealing. He offers Louis XVI a golden

opportunity to secure a lengthy period of peace and security, not by crushing Britain, but by constraining her within 'fair limits'. Vergennes knew that the idea of crushing Britain would not appeal to Louis XVI, but nevertheless the phrase 'fair limits' was open to a wide variety of interpretations, and it is probable that Vergennes, Louis XVI and the British people would have had three very different opinions as to what 'fair limits' were.

Vergennes' entire object in all the arguments he put forward appears to have been to find those aspects of the case which would most appeal to the King. Another argument which he frequently used in this same vein, was that it was inevitable that the British would attack the French and Spanish possessions in the West Indies. Since the British would attack the West Indies French national interest demanded that the islands should be defended, and the best form of defence was attack. The fact that the idea of such an attack on the French and Spanish possessions in the West Indies was not mentioned by anyone in Britain during the entire course of the American dispute up to 1778 did not concern those who used this argument in France. The inevitable conclusion to be drawn here is that this argument was used simply to persuade the King, for the object of those who advanced it was not defence, but aggression.[32]

This highly improbable idea of an attack by the British on the French islands in the West Indies appears to have germinated first in the fertile mind of Beaumarchais, and then to have been taken up by Vergennes at a later date.[33] This leads us on to the final factor which suggests that Louis XVI was reluctant to aid the colonists. This is simply the length of time that it took to persuade Louis XVI to take the decision and the strength of language which was used by Beaumarchais, directly to the King, in his attempts to force the issue. For a King with a reputation for weakness of will, Louis XVI resisted the forces that were pushing him towards war for a long time. Beaumarchais first wrote to the King, as we have just seen, before September of 1775 (see note 33), and from that time onwards for a period of over two years he bombarded the King with pleas, and, more often, demands that he should help the rebels. In February 1776 he wrote 'Au Roi Seul' that the maintenance of peace depended upon one proposition alone, 'il faut secourir les Americains'.[34]

There were then considerable difficulties within France which

prevented her from taking an early decision on the American issue. There were also substantial problems in the external field, which were mainly centred upon two issues. First, France was allied to Spain, an alliance which was broadly accepted as the cornerstone of all French moves in foreign policy. The Spanish were, at this time, involved in a fierce dispute with the Portuguese over the question of colonial boundaries in South America, and they wanted to involve France in this. The French resisted this Spanish pressure, and so avoided the general european war which would almost certainly have followed if they had backed Spain. However, the roles were about to be reversed, and France was now going to try to persuade the Spanish to enter a war against Britain. The Spanish had no more love for Britain than the French, but they were reluctant to join the French for several reasons. First, the French had just refused to help them, and this had wounded the pride of the Spanish. Second, the King of Spain regarded himself as the senior partner in the Family Compact since the death of Louis XV, and so he was unwilling that Spain should merely toe the line laid down by France. Third, and most important, Spain was the European power that had the most to lose if a movement for colonial independence should take root and spread: to support such a movement seemed to the Spanish like a refined form of national suicide. Therefore there were considerable doubts as to whether the Spanish could be induced to join the struggle. At the same time, the French knew that the Spanish possessed a considerable navy which could create a situation for the Bourbon powers in which their fleets outnumbered those of Great Britain. This problem of the attitude of Spain was one of considerable complexity, and it gave considerable pause to those Frenchmen who were attempting to secure active French participation in the war.[35]

The second major problem for France, this time even further away from her control, was the reliability of the colonists themselves. They were essentially an unknown quantity. Although some Americans had fought during the Seven Years War on the British side and so had some military experience, they were a doubtful proposition as an ally. They might simply crumble when faced with the disciplined troops sent by Britain; they might decide to give up the struggle when they saw that Britain was really in earnest; or, worse still, they might just appear to be tough enough to lure the French to declare their hand, and then collapse leaving the French to face a Britain already mobilized for war. If this last event were to happen, there was a considerable

chance that France would find herself in a worse position after the war than she had been in before it. Thus there was a continued emphasis in all the proposals which advocated secret aid, that the Americans must have given a convincing demonstration of their determination to succeed before any alliance was formed. In the Reflexions it was stated that no alliance would be formed until '... leur indépendence soit établie et notoire', although arms and money could be sent before that.[36]

Thus there can be no doubt that the situation facing those at the head of affairs in France was fraught with difficulties. Some of these stemmed from their own internal problems, others would have faced them in any case. There was, of course, one way in which all those problems could have been avoided, and that was for the French to have refrained from any involvement in the struggle. However, the point to grasp here is that there were two factions involved in this dispute, one favouring aid to and eventual alliance with the Americans, the other favouring a policy of inactivity in the hope that the colonists would do the work of weakening Britain without any assistance from France. These two groups struggled to have their views accepted for more than two years until the events at Saratoga decided that France would enter the war.

The aim of this detailed study of France's position and the difficulties that she faced was to throw further light on the problems that were faced by Great Britain in attempting to formulate a policy towards France. The fact is that the long period during which the French were uncertain about their attitude to America was a period when it was difficult, if not impossible, for Britain to make a fair and reasonable policy decision about her attitude towards France. It was easy enough for the opposition at Westminster to state categorically that France was planning war against Britain, but the fact is that for a considerable period of time, the French government was not certain what its policy would be, and it seems they were not planning war until late 1777. If we remember Lee's letter of June 1776 (quoted above p.53 he described the French court at that date as 'timid' and 'unsettled', hardly what the Americans would have wanted to hear, so we may suppose that it was an accurate assessment. In the light of this evidence, it would appear that Shelburne's attacks on the government, relayed to Stormont in December 1774, were very premature.

This uncertainty on the part of the French was one very real problem for the British government at this time, but it was by no means the only one. It has to be remembered during any discussion of this period that of the three nations involved in the events, Britain was the one with the least choice. While the colonists continued on a path of rebellion it was the duty of the government to try to put down that rebellion, and this would remain the case until the war had been won or lost, or the colonies decided to give up their demands. It was politically impractical to suggest that Britain should concede to the colonists' demands, and so, in respect of America the hands of the British government were tied. In regard to France, Britain's position was no easier. For the French there was at least a choice, either they would join in the war or they would not do so. If they chose not to join the war then their problems were at an end. For Britain there was no such easy option. If France were to join the war Britain would have to fight her too; above all, Britain had to be ready to fight France if the need arose. Everyone in England with any knowledge of politics knew that, and the members of the government were more aware of it than most. The difficulty was to tread the delicate line between being prepared to fight France on the one hand, and on the other, driving the French into declaring war by undertaking preparations in British ports that were too great or too hurried. To drive France into the war did not seem to be a course that could serve British interests at all.

There can be no doubt that the war was the major problem that faced the British government at the time. It was a war of a type that was almost unknown - a nationalist war. Simply because the lessons of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries have shown us what a powerful force nationalism is, we should not expect the politicians of the eighteenth century to be aware of this. The Durham Report, India, Aden, Cyprus, Mozambique and Angola were long in the future, and it should come as no surprise that it took the British government some time to realize that this was a serious war and not just another colonial disturbance. Before we judge North and his colleagues too harshly, we should remember that with all the examples of the past 150 years at their disposal, and with all the technological aids at their command, present day governments still find nationalism a difficult force to combat, and very often their efforts meet with little more success

than did those of North.

If it was the case, as we have seen, that France was beset by problems in making policy decisons at this time, it is rapidly becoming clear that Great Britain's position was even worse. In both the domestic and foreign spheres, Britain's position was one of danger. Strangely, one of the factors that had weakened Britain was the Seven Years War. The effort involved in winning this resounding victory over France had cost Britain dear. The financial strain had been so great in fact that Britain, like France was still recovering in the 1770's. George Grenville even believed that Britain had been more severely damaged than France. He wrote 'France, bankrupt France had no such calamities impending over her'.[37] He felt that there were difficult times ahead for the administrators of Britain's financial affairs.

The heavy financial strain on Britain, the vast increase in her national debt, and the desire of the government to avoid any raising of the levels of taxation led to a period of economy. A popular target for cuts in expenditure, since it was one of the major drains on revenue, was the armed services. With France adopting a more peaceful approach in the early 1770's the trend towards cuts in expenditure on the navy increased. These economies, combined with the negligence of officials led to a drastic weakening of Britain's fleets. As one historian, G. S. Graham, has written:-

> 'The unpardonable fault ... lay in the neglect of the navy during many years since 1763, and the condition of impotence to which it had been reduced made it impossible to fit out effective ships, or even when fitted, to man them.'[38]

Graham blames peace time economies directly for the navy's weakness, and claims that they, rather than traditional eighteenth-century 'corruption' were at the root of the matter. According to Graham the Navy estimates were reduced by about one half between 1766 and 1769, and he goes on:

> 'Fear of costs held back repairs and construction and commissioning even during the three years preceding the declaration of war with France.'[39]

These reforms in matters of expenditure can be seen to have had a very deleterious effect upon the British navy. The Falkland Island crisis of 1770 exposed the weakeness to view, and as a result, the

administration of the navy was changed. But even despite this, Graham appears to be arguing that the trend towards economy continued even after this.

If we can see that both Britain and France were faced with financial weakness and with difficulties in regard to their armed services, the similarities between the two extend also to the political situation. For, as was the case in France, there were deep divisions among the politicians in Britain over the course of action which should be adopted in the crisis which confronted her. We have already seen in chapter two the nature of these divisions in the cabinet, with Gower, Sandwich, Suffolk and Weymouth, (later joined by Germain) in favour of harsh measures, being opposed by North, his half-brother Dartmouth, and the Duke of Grafton; of these three who were in favour of moderation, Dartmouth and Grafton did not remain in the ministry for long. Despite the fact that a majority of ministers were in favour of harsh policies towards America, they were unable to implement their desires, for North, whether alone or assisted, was sufficiently powerful to be able to dilute their aggressive intentions. Thus the peace proposals of 1774, and the peace commission of 1776 were approved by Parliament almost solely on the initiative of North and by means of his energy and initiative in the House of Commons.

North's position is analogous to that of Maurepas. Both men were the key figures in their respective ministries, which is to say that they were both the confidential ministers of their masters. The correspondence of George III is, for by far the greater part, addressed to North; there are only a few letters addressed to other ministers, and the majority of these are to Lord Sandwich about naval matters. As well as being the most important figures in each government, the two men were of similar disposition; both were indecisive. We have already seen that this was so in Maurepas' case, and we have ample evidence that North too was hesitant. But Maurepas' hesitant nature probably had more opportunity to influence policy than did North's, for Louis XVI was young and impressionable and was not anxious to plunge his country into a war; George III, on the other hand had no doubts about the just nature of his cause. For the British King, the Americans were rebels, and rebellions had to be crushed. His energy and conviction never wavered. Even after the disaster at Saratoga he was not dispirited. He wrote to Lord Sandwich 'If others will not be active, I must drive'. In fact, one of

the activities to which the King devoted considerable energy was his attempts to raise North's spirits from the frequent bouts of gloom to which the minister gave-way. At about the same period as his letter to Sandwich he wrote to North: 'I do not despair that... the provinces will even now submit.'[40]

However, despite the fact that North's moderate views often disagreed with the King's ideas, and despite the fact that North appeared to have doubts about the ability of the British to win, the position which North had carved out for himself was one of near indispensability. He had succeeded in rescuing the King from the opposition, and in so doing he had stripped the opposition groups of many of their most talented figures; Burke wrote that North had 'picked out all that was worth taking' from the opposition factions 'and that nothing was left to us but the chaff'. In addition to this, North was probably the only man in Parliament who could have led and held together a cabinet of men that was drawn from such disparate groups, and even he was only able to do this by means of tireless energy in the Commons. Between 1768 and 1774 North addressed the House 904 times, that is to say almost twice as often as any other member save the Speaker.[41] A further testimony to North's indispensability comes when we see the tremendous reluctance of George III to countenance any suggestions of resignation by North, frequently though the Minister asked to be allowed to retire. 'You are my Sheet Anchor and your ease and comfort I shall in the whole transaction try to secure'[42], he wrote to North in a frequently quoted letter. The King was prepared to consider including anyone in the ministry if it would strengthen the government's position, but he was adamant that North should remain as the confidential minister. He would even contemplate Shelburne or Barré 'who personally perhaps I dislike as much as Mr. Wilkes'.[43]

Perhaps it is surprising, in view of his strong support for North, to find that the King favoured harsh measures towards the rebels, and that he threw his influence behind Lord George Germain.[44] His unswerving intention had always been to subdue the revolt. In early 1775 he had written:-

> 'Where violence is with resolution repelled it commonly yields, and I own, though a thorough friend to holding out the olive branch, I have not the smallest doubt that if it does not succeed then once vigorous measures appear to be the only means left of bringing the Americans to a due submission to the mother country, the colonies will submit'.[45]

Again, in August of 1776 he wrote that if his proposals to start recruiting in the early summer had not been rejected by the cabinet, then the army would have been 'two or three thousand men stronger at this hour'.[46]

However, if the cabinet was divided against itself and the opinion of the King on the American issue was different to that of his chief minister, the King and the cabinet were united on one question at least. This was their total rejection of the way in which the opposition wanted to treat the situation.

The opposition was numerically weak and had only a few leaders with experience of ministerial office, but intellectually they were quite a formidable group, including such men as Chatham, Burke, Fox and Shelburne among their numbers. The factions which made up the opposition were caught in an unenviable dilemma by the war with the Americans. On the one hand they loathed the government and distrusted its policy, but on the other, they could not blind themselves to the fact that the majority of the nation wanted to see the revolt put down. Thus the government's policy was also a policy supported by King and country. To oppose a policy which was so generally felt to be desirable would have been a very dangerous step for any group that hoped to gain power. This dilemma hampered the effectiveness of the opposition to a considerable degree.

They were further hindered by the fact that their aim was essentially the same as that of the government. Both wished to retain the colonies under British sovereignty; but they differed widely about the best way in which to achieve this aim. The government, divided between those who favoured harsh measures and those who did not, adopted a half hearted policy of military coercion, watered down at intervals by attempts at conciliation which always seemed to offer too little too late. The opposition, while they agreed that

> 'The moment the independence of America is agreed to by our government, the sun of Great Britain is set, and we shall no longer be a powerful or reputable people'.[47]

wanted to see a policy which was centred upon conciliation. The difference might be expressed thus:- the King wanted to reduce the colonies to obedience, while the opposition wanted to raise them to it. What the opposition envisaged was a situation in which the Americans would be a self governing unit with power to control all affairs except trade, customs duties and defence which would be reserved to the mother country. The reasoning behind the opposition's desire for a conciliatory policy was based upon fear of France. This in turn stemmed from the fact that Chatham, who was the leading light of the opposition, was obsessed with the danger that threatened Britain from the far side of the Channel. He argued that this opportunity was too good for France to pass up, and therefore, since Britain was too weak to fight both America and France, it was the government's duty to come to terms with the colonists so that Britain could renew her struggle with France on equal terms.

However, there are powerful factors which suggest that this policy was less realistic than the government's. First, the Americans rejected all attempts at conciliation which were made. They showed no inclination to accept the proposals of 1774 which allowed them to raise their own taxes, and they were to reject the peace commission of 1776. How realistic was it to suggest that the colonists should leave trade and customs duties under the control of the British goverment? Second, it has already been made clear that the French were not prepared to commit themselves to an alliance with the colonists, or to open war with Great Britain, until the rebels had shown that they were determined to achieve their independence, and that they were capable of doing so. If, therefore, the opposition's plan had been pursued, and the colonial struggle had been terminated, at any price short of total independence, there would have been no war with France because the French were not prepared to fight Britain without the American distraction. Thus, had such a policy been adopted, Britain would have surrendered vital rights in America on account of a threat of war with France, and this threat would not have been carried out.

It is also worthy of note that if a war did break out between Britain and France, the scales were likely to be heavily weighted against Britain. Not only would the support of the American colonies be lost, but also whereas in 1756 Britain had possessed a powerful continental ally in the form of Prussia, she now had no ally in Europe except Portugal. Thus the entire burden of war would fall upon Britain, a prospect that was far from appealing to a country whose financial and military situations were both weak.

The effects of this period on the state of affairs at home was far from fortunate for Lord North's government. It is sometimes the case that a period of strain such as this has the effect of strengthening determination and creating a feeling of national unity. In this instance, however, this was not the case. The effect was rather to divide the nation further and more deeply as the conflict became more serious. The bitterness that had been created during the struggle was clearly to be seen when North's government came to an end and his followers were routed with a ruthlessness that was far from usual in the eighteenth century.

If it is true to say that the war with the Americans was the basic problem which underlay all the difficulties faced by the government in this period, then it is also true to say that this basic problem was greatly enhanced by the attitude of the French. During the entire period between 1775 and 1777 there was no clear indication of which way the French decision on this matter would go. The indications which could be obtained from the French government seemed to suggest that France would not take any decided or definite part in the dispute. But at the same time it was clear that the French people at all levels, were wild with enthusiasm for the American cause. This enthusiasm was what led Shelburne and the opposition to claim that the French were planning to attack Britain. However, the reality of the situation was that it was the French government which would decide whether or not France would to to war, and throughout the years up to 1777 it remained the case that the statements which that government put out to the British envoys in Paris were pacific, often strongly so. These repeated assurances can he represented by one example at this stage. In October 1775, Maurepas assured Stormont of France's peaceful disposition in the following terms:-

> 'Be assured we do not and will not, directly or indirectly give them (the American colonists) any sort of assistance'.[48]

Such assurances were so repeatedly and strongly made that they might have been convincing had it not been for another complicating factor. This was that during 1776 evidence was discovered by the British government of a definite and sustained arms traffic between France and America. This led to awkward parliamentary clashes with the opposition. In the King's Speech at the opening of Parliament in October 1776 the government announced that they were in receipt of friendly assurances from the continent, which was true; but they also announced their intention to put Britain in a state of preparedness to meet all possibilities. The opposition seized upon this. Why, they wanted to know, did the government want to take defensive measures when Europe was peacefully disposed towards us? North, who as usual bore the brunt of the attack, replied that although the government had full confidence in the assurances they had received, they could not vouch for the situation in six months time. Barré pounced on this statement. The ministry, he contended, ought always to be able to forsee the intentions of France for at least six months in advance.[49]

However, although this was undoubtedly a telling point to score in debate, it was not the least bit realistic. The plain fact of the matter was that it was quite impossible for anyone to predict French intentions six months in advance at that stage, because the French themselves had not made a decision as to what actions they would take. We have already seen Lee describing the French as wanting to help the rebels but afraid to do so. In this situation it was prudent of the British government to prepare for all eventualities. To have embarked upon full scale preparations could have brought on a war that might have been avoided; to have done nothing would have been exceptionally foolhardy. It can be convincingly contended that the attitude adopted by the government, of cautious preparation, was eminently sensible in a very dangerous situation. It obtained for them an advantage which they would have lost had they provoked an immediate conflict - time. Given the state of the British fleet, that advantage was crucial. Whether the government put the time to good use will be discussed later.

The point to be grasped at this juncture is the enormnity of the problems which faced the British government. The government was aware, in Stormont's words, that France would wound Britian whenever and wherever she could. Yet the government was aware at the same time of its own weakness, and was also bound up in a semi-civil war at long range that was already proving to be a strain on its resources. It is this background pressure on Britain that must be taken constantly into account when looking at the policies adopted by her government.

FOOTNOTES TO CHAPTER III

Page No.	Footnote Number	Reference
42	1	Haworth P.L.: 'Frederick the Great and the American Revolution' in A.H.R. ix p.463
44	2	For a detailed discussion of the supply of gunpowder to the rebels see: Stephenson O.W.: 'The supply of Gunpowder in 1776' in, A.H.R. xxx pp. 271-277.
44	3	Alden J.R.: History of the American Revolution Britain and the loss of the thirteen colonies p.370
44	4	Morrison S.E., Commager H.S., & Leuchtenburg W.E.: The Growth of the American Republic vol i, p.192
44	5	ibid.
44	6	Stephenson O.W.: 'The Supply of Gunpowder in1776', A.H.R. xxx p.279.
44	7	Bemis S.F. The Diplomacy of the American Revolution p.19
45	8	Miller J.C. Triumph of Freedom 1775-1783 p.265
45	9	Kite E. Beaumarchais and the War of American Independence vol.ii, pp. 34 & 35
45	10	Hist. MSS. Comm. Dartmouth Papers, 14th Report Appendix X, ed. Stevens, B.F. pp.366-367.
46	11	See Doniol H. Histoire de la participation... vol i, p.154
46	12	P.R.O. SP/78 294. Rochford to Stormont 2 Dec. 1774 (Secret and Confidential)
47	13	P.R.O. SP/78 294. Stormont to Rochford 7 Dec. 1774 (Most Secret)
48	14	Corwin E.S. French Policy and the American Alliance of 1778. p.2.
48	15	Details of this attack may be found in: Parliamentary History... vol. xviii pp.1371 and 1389-'90.
50	16	Segur, Politiques de tous les Cabinets... vol ii, p.215
50	17	P.R.O. SP/78 294. Stormont to Rochford 30 Nov 1774 (Separate)
50	18	P.R.O. SP/78 297. Stormont to Weymouth 13 Dec 1775
51	19	P.R.O. SP/78 292. Stormont to Rochford 12 May 1774
51	20	P.R.O. SP/78 292. Stormont to Rochford 8 June 1774
51	21	P.R.O. SP/78 294. Stormont to Rochford 9 Nov 1774

FOOTNOTES TO CHAPTER III (CONT'D)

Page No.	Footnote Number	Reference
51	22	P.R.O. SP/78 295. St. Paul to Rochford Apr 1775
51	23	P.R.O. SP/78 296. St. Paul to Rochford 6 Sept 1775
51	24	P.R.O. SP/78 296. St. Paul to Rochford 13 Sept 1775
52	25	de Witte J. 'L'Abbé de Veri et son Journal' in, Revue d'histoire Diplomatique. xxxix, pp. 131-137.
53	26	Revolutionary Diplomatic Correspondence of the United States. Ed. Wharton F. vol.ii, p.95
53	27	P.R.O. SP/78 299. St. Paul to Weymouth 8 May 1776
53	28	Doniol H. Histoire de la Participation... vol.i, pp. 280-284.
54	29	P.R.O. SP/78 301. Stormont to Weymouth 29 Jan. 1777 (Very Secret)
54	30	P.R.O. SP/78 301. Stormont to Weymouth 5 Feb 1777 (Most Particular)
54	31	Dumaine A. 'Le Comte de Vergennes et l'Indépendence des Etats Unis' in Revue d'histoire Diplomatique. xxxvii, p.437
55	32	For a detailed discussion of this question see Corwin E.S. French Policy and the American Alliance of 1778 pp. 7-12. An opposite view may be found in Van Tyne C.H., 'Influences which determined the French Government to make the treaty with America, 1778' in, A.H.R. xxi, especially pp. 533-537 and p.539.
55	33	Beaumarchais Correspondence Ed. Morton B.N. vol.ii, p.137. To the King, dated (avant septembre 1775) by the editor.
55	34	ibid. p.172 (29 Feb 1776)
56	35	For discussions of the negotiations see: Phillips P.C. The West in the Diplomacy of the American Revolution pp. 35-42; Doniol H. Histoire de la Participation... vol.i, chapter IX; and Rousseau F. 'La Participation de l'Espagne à la Guerre d'Amérique, 1779-1783.' in, Revue des questions Historiques, lxxii, see pp 444-452.
57	36	Doniol H. Histoire de la Participation... vol.i, p.284.

FOOTNOTES TO CHAPTER III (CONT'D)

Page No.	Footnote Number	Reference
59	37	Jarrett D. The Begetters of Revolution p.50: and see above p. 25 for the increase of the National Debt.
59	38	Quoted in Graham G.S. 'Considerations on the War of American Independence' in, Bulletin of the Institute of Historical Research xxii, P.26.
59	39	ibid. p.28
61	40	Brooke J. King George III pp. 323-324 (London, Panther Books, 1974)
61	41	Valentine A. Lord North vol.i p.329
61	42	Correspondence of King George III... Ed. Fortescue vol.iii p.278.
61	43	ibid. vol iv pp.56-57
61	44	Valentine A. Lord George Germain p.107
62	45	Correspondence of King George III... Ed. Fortescue vol.iii p.175
62	46	Brooke J. King George III (London, Panther Books 1974) p.294.
63	47	Fitzmaurice, Lord E. Life of William, Earl of Shelburne, afterwards 1st Marquess of Lansdowne vol.iii p.18
65	48	P.R.O. SP/78 297. Stormont to Rochford 31 Oct 1775 (Separate)
65	49	Parliamentary History... vol. xviii pp.1425-1426.

CHAPTER IV: THE ARMED FORCES

This Chapter is not essentially concerned with the familiar aspects of the military history of the American War of Independence, that is the history of Strategy, tactics and events on the American mainland. The reasons for this are, first because these aspects have already been studied exhaustively elsewhere, and second because they are not strictly relevant to the subject under discussion. Our aim is to study the policy of Britain towards the alliance between the French and the Americans, and so events in America can only be of interest to us in so far as they affected the ability of Britain to meet the threat of war from France. Two questions have to be answered. First, were the forces of Britain sufficient to support the addition to her burdens of a war with France? Second, if they were not sufficient for such an eventuality, what steps were taken to put them in a state of readiness?

One must define the scope of this enquiry, and this definition will involve a consideration of exactly what is to be examined under the heading 'armed forces'. The answer here may lie in a consideration of the different ways in which France could effectively attack Great Britain. There were three ways in which this could be done. Firstly she could attack Britain indirectly by means of an attack on Hanover. This policy seemed unlikely to find favour, partly because it would involve France in a land war in Germany, and thus would probably incur the wrath of Frederick the Great, and partly because Hanover was now of less importance to Great Britain. While George I and George II had been born in Hanover and were strongly tied to the Electorate, George III had less feeling for it; so an attack in this quarter would have considerably less effect upon him than upon either of his predecessors.

The other two modes of attack that France could adopt were largely dependent upon naval power. The first was a direct invasion of the British Isles, while the second was an attack upon British colonies and trading posts throughout the world. In the event, both these strategies were attempted, and neither was to result in complete success. In either event the key to success or failure was to be found in the relative naval strengths of the two nations. To mount a successful invasion of Britain it was essential for France to achieve

dominance in the English Channel, while the importance of sea power in a colonial war is self-evident.

Thus, if there was to be a war between Britain and France it would be of a different nature from their previous encounters. France would have made a conscious choice to take on her old enemy in a war which would be decided in the specialist sphere of her rival. Therefore this would be a break with French tradition because whereas she had primarily been a land power, she would now be attacking the dominant naval power of the age at sea. Britain would be faced with a new situation because she would be required to adjust from a colonial war fought on land to a new conflict which was to be fought at sea in all the oceans of the world.

Before we pass on to a detailed examination of the developments of the Franco-British situation, it is important to note the increased strains that were imposed upon the British fleet by the demands of the American conflict prior to 1778. In spite of the fact that the commanders on the spot always complained of the inadequacy of the forces at their disposal, considerable efforts were made to increase the numbers of ships on the American station in these years:

TABLE I

	IN NORTH AMERICA		TOTAL IN PAY	
	SHIPS	MEN	SHIPS	MEN
December 1774	24	2,835	103	17,731
June 1775	30	3,435	110	16,301
January 1776	51	7,555	146	23,914

By the summer of 1776 when Lord Howe took over as the naval commander in America, this number had further increased to seventy vessels.[1]

This table clearly demonstrates that in the eighteen months between December 1774 and June 1776 there had been a determined effort to increase the British naval strength in American waters. However it also reveals two alarming aspects of the defensive position at home. Firstly the total numbers of men in pay were nowhere near sufficient to man the ships in home waters. (See note A .

at the end of this chapter). Even more alarming was the fact that the total number of men in pay actually fell in the first six months of 1775. Since it was during these months that it became clear that the Americans were in full scale revolt, this was a development which should have given rise to concern. However there were, as we shall see, political and financial motives behind this cut, though whether these were an adequate justification of it, must remain doubtful.[2]

Before we turn to the naval affairs of France and Britain, we ought to look briefly at the British Army. After all, the withdrawal of many troops from Britain to fight in America rendered the position of the navy of paramount importance in the defensive strategy of Britain itself. In 1775 the total of Britain's land forces was just over 48,500 men. These forces were scattered throughout the world. 15,000 were stationed in England, Scotland and Wales; 12,000 were stationed in Ireland; there were about 8,000 in the whole of North America, while the remaining 13,000 were divided among Britain's other overseas possessions such as the Carribean islands and Gibraltar. But by 1777 the position had changed dramatically. There were 40,000 British troops in the American colonies and a further 3,000 in Canada.[3] It seems clear that many of these troops must have been drawn from the units that had been stationed in the British isles, despite considerable efforts to raise fresh troops both at home and by means of agreements with foreign rulers for the supply of mercenary armies.[4] Thus we can see that the British government made substantial efforts to raise troops, and to fit out, equip and send further naval forces for service against the Americans. This effort was to create new strains for the government, both in its relations with the opposition and in regard to relationships between individuals within the ministry. France's attitude during the years between 1775 and 1778 was to be a factor that constantly added to these tensions.

It has already been noted that the most likely method of attack for the French to adopt was by sea, and thus that the burden of defensive action was bound to fall upon the Royal Navy. The strain of this knowledge fell especially hard upon Lord Sandwich, then First Lord of the Admiralty. He was under constant pressure, both from the opposition in parliament who charged that the French were preparing war and that Britain would be unable to respond, and from

the naval commanders in American waters who were always demanding reinforcements. His position was rendered more difficult still by the fact that his demands that all ships sent to America should be replaced by fitting out others at home, were consistently refused by the King and Lord North. This refusal, which was made on grounds of economy and for diplomatic reasons - (to avoid pushing the French government into a war that might yet be averted) - made Sandwich's position exceedingly difficult.

Sandwich had been brought to the Admiralty after the Falkland Island crisis, which had revealed serious weaknesses in the Navy. He had been brought in with the task of recreating an efficient navy, a task which most people at the time agreed that he was well qualified to undertake. Horace Walpole wrote of him:-

> '... his passion for maritime affairs, his activity, industry, and flowing complaisance endeared him to the profession... No man in the administration was so much master of his business, so quick or so shrewd...'[5]

From 1774 onwards, Sandwich was assisted at the Admiralty by Vice-Admiral Sir Hugh Palliser, who has been described as 'a man of real capacity'.[6] These two men had overall control of the British navy, and thus much attention will be given to them in our attempt to evaluate its strength.

This attempt at an evaluation presents several difficulties. First, there is a considerable difference between the figures for naval strength that were given by the ministers in parliament, and those which they gave in letters and despatches. Second, there was a great difference between the paper strength of the navy and its actual fighting strength. G. S. Graham has written that, even after the start of the American War, Britain still

> '... retained a delusive 'two power' supremacy on paper. Official figures for 1777, gave a total of 102 ships of the line, but actually only about 40 were fit for sea'.[7]

Graham also makes the point that all Britain's frigates, totalling 60, were in foreign waters, which left 'only some twenty sloops and other small craft which could be gathered in European waters'. This meant that the entire burden of domestic defence fell upon the force of ships of the line, vessels which were far from suited to chasing the fast sailing American privateers. The third difficulty in

evaluating the strength of the navy is that there often seems to be an element of doubt as to whether a ship should or should not have been included among those on the active list.

Let us begin by examining the proceedings in Parliament. Here, as we saw in the previous chapter, the government was under attack from the opposition because it had increased the precautions it was taking against attack from France, while at the same time it had assured Parliament that the European powers were all peacefully disposed towards Britain. Under questioning from the opposition, the government remained evasive and tried to rely on vague assurances to calm parliamentary fears, while giving as few figures as possible.

However, on the occasions when the government was forced to state figures, these showed considerable variations. On 21 January 1774 Lord North stated in a debate on the Navy Estimates that there were '70 ships of the line in good repair, and12 more would be launched in the course of the year'.[8] From that date until 1777, the government was not tempted to give overall figures, although they did give figures for the American station. This was done on 12 December 1774 when there were stated to be 19 vessels in American waters, and again in November 1775 when it was announced that Admiral Shuldham was to have command of 78 ships of all sizes.[9]

It was only on 18 November 1777 that the government was again induced to give a figure for the total strength of the fleet at home. In reply to harsh criticism of the state of the navy by the opposition, Lord Sandwich stated that Britain had 42 ships of the line in commission, and that 35 of these were manned and fit for service. He concluded:-

> 'My Lords, from what I have now submitted to you, I am authorized to affirm that our navy is more than a match for that of the whole House of Bourbon.
>
> 'I should, My Lords, be extremely sorry... if I permitted at any time the French and Spanish navy united to be superior to the navy of this country'.[10]

Apart from these occasions, the government sheltered behind its large parliamentary majority, and relied upon that majority to avoid having to answer the opposition's questions too precisely. The government's tactics were to make general statements which played up British naval strength while making light of the extent of French naval preparations. For example, in October 1776 Sandwich blandly assured Parliament that Britain could put a force to sea that was

'fully sufficient for our defense and protection.'[11] This statement, as will shortly be made clear, was sharply at variance with the tone of Sandwich's own letters to the commanders in American waters. It was also misleading to Parliament.

These statements were designed to allay fears and to eliminate the danger of further searching questions. The success of this tactic can be seen by the fact that the government had little difficulty in persuading Parliament to adopt its proposals on defense, and by the fact that the opposition had little success in sowing doubt in the minds of the government supporters. But, although the government had little difficulty in retaining the support of Parliament, these victories in the debating chamber merely hid the realities of the situation. The fact was that the condition of the navy was very weak indeed. That this was the case can be seen from an examination of several sets of documents, but most clearly and reliably from the papers of Sandwich himself. He was, as he should have been, in close touch with the condition of Britain's naval defences; and at the same time the Admiralty spy network kept him informed as to the development of the French navy. It will soon become apparent that Sandwich was considerably disturbed by what he knew of the condition of both fleets.

The first indication of a lack of preparation came in a memorandum from Palliser, written in July 1775, in which he showed that the number of ships in American waters was clearly inadequate. At the time, Admiral Graves had twenty seven vessels under his command in America, but Palliser estimated that Graves needed fifty ships to perform his duties efficiently. If the war were to spread to new areas in America, then Palliser felt that this force of fifty ships would need to be increased 'considerably'.[12] In fact, as we have noted, the force was raised to fifty by the winter of 1775-76, and again to seventy by the summer of 1776.

But, if action was promptly taken to remedy the deficiencies of the fleet in American waters, this served only to increase the strain on the resources available at home. These increased strains are clearly shown in the letter which Palliser wrote to Sandwich in January 1776 (quoted above pp37&38) in which he referred to the desperate situation which Britain would face if she were attacked

> 'whilst we have so many seamen in almost the whole of our frigates employed at such a distance, and such a body of our troops in such a situation'.

The letter also made it clear that Palliser did not know whether or not a plan had been drawn up to deal with a possible attack by the French while Britain was involved in America:

> 'Indeed a plan of measures to be adopted in case of such an event is necessary, and I hope is prepared against it may happen'. [13]

Since Palliser was the man who was responsible for the day to day running of the war, we may be sure that his statements accurately reflected the position. This letter makes clear the strains of the American situation upon Britain's naval resources, and also betrays the fact that little or no consideration had been given by the Admiralty to the possibility of a war with France, up to the beginning of 1776.

However, from this time on, the actions of France and Spain were to play an increasing role in the thinking of the Admiralty, and Sandwich himself became quite alarmed. Late in 1775 he twice wrote to Lord Howe, the commander in America, refusing Howe's requests for more ships of two gun-decks. In his first letter we find him promising to send more ships in the spring, and blaming his inability to send any at that time on the French and Spanish preparations. He wrote:

> '... it is much to be wished that all our line of battle ships should be kept at home'.

In the second letter, this consideration still concerned him:-

> '... the conduct of France and Spain is so mysterious that it is impossible to say what demands we may have for line of battle ships in the course of the winter.' [14]

Sandwich's refusal to comply with the demands of Lord Howe annoyed Lord George Germain, now Secretary of State for the Colonies, and for many months to come these two ministers were to be on bad terms. In fact, in August of 1777, Sandwich appears to have thought that he was about to be dismissed at the instigation of Germain, for Robinson wrote to him:-

> '... I am confident that every thought of your being sacrificed to the intrigues of Lord George Germain is totally groundless'. [15]

Here we can see the difficulties of the Admiralty's situation which stemmed from the possibility of a Bourbon threat. Had this not existed, greater naval forces could have been sent to America; but after the start of 1776 Sandwich was aware of the possibility and so restricted the numbers of ships made available for American duty. Conversely, had he been able to send more ships to America, relations between himself and Germain would have been easier, and competition for support in the cabinet between them would not have existed. However, we must now turn to an examination of the steps which Sandwich took to try to meet this danger.

To begin with, Sandwich urged a precaution that was eminently reasonable in the circumstances. He endeavoured to have every ship that was sent to America from the home fleet replaced by the commissioning of another ship of the same strength. But this attempt was resisted by North who feared that the French would become anxious over the increase of Britain's naval forces, and further expand their own. North was worried that such a situation would provoke a war which might be avoided by a more tactful approach from Britain. However, Sandwich did get important and powerful support on this issue from the King, at an early stage; in July 1775 George III informed Sandwich that he had instructed North that the crews of all six of the 50 gun ships that were to be sent to America had to be raised afresh since no further men could be spared from the establishment at home.[16] This step was taken even before the reality of the French threat became apparent.

Barnes and Owen state that from the start of 1776 Sandwich was

> '... more anxious about what was going on in the ports of Brest, Toulon and Cadiz than he was about the course of events in North America'.

but that

> 'Lord North flinched from the cost of preparation, he also thought of its effect on the minds of the ministers in France and Spain, fearing lest by meeting the danger face to face we should bring it nearer'.[17]

By June of 1776 Sandwich knew that France was preparing a force of 18 ships of the line and 12 frigates at Brest, and that registered seamen were being called to the port. In addition to this report from an admiralty spy, the government was also informed by Stormont

that the French were preparing 23 ships of the line at Brest with a further 7 at Toulon. At the same time he reported that Spain had at least 10 ships of the line in commission. Although these reports do not tally exactly they were a clear indication that the Bourbon powers were making preparations. The exchange of letters between Sandwich and North on this subject clearly displayed the former's anxiety about this state of affairs. Sandwich wrote to North:

> '... I dread the consequences, and cannot help thinking we shall have much to answer for if they are allowed to have a fleet of 50 sail in Europe ready to receive men, when we have not above half that number in the same degree of preparation'.

This passage again stresses the weakness of the home fleet, and shows that Sandwich was well justified in refusing to send further ships to America without assurances that he would be given replacements. North's reply to this letter took the form of an attempt to allay Sandwich's fears

> '... Lord Suffolk and Lord Weymouth seemed to think the Assurances of M. de Vergennes satisfactory'.

This was not what Sandwich had wanted to hear at all, and he wrote again to North:-

> 'The declaration of M. de Vergennes seems to me to mean nothing more than to tell you that they do not mean war but must put themselves in a condition to go to war if the circumstances require it; if they have a fleet ready for service double to ours, their advantage and our danger will be such as I tremble to think of it'.

He added:

> 'I am sure your Lordship will forgive my troubling you so much upon this important business but I know so much of the state of the fleet from want of preparation at the time of the dispute about the Falkland Islands that I think it my duty, as a firm friend to your Lordship's administration, to point out the danger of again being taken in the same situation'.[18]

These letters not only show Sandwich's anxiety about the situation, but they also show the great difficulty that he experienced in getting a response to his anxiety from North; Sandwich expressed himself very forcefully in these letters, and there is perhaps even

a hint of a threat of resignation in the last quoted passage. Another point to note about these letters is that they clearly give the lie to the bland assurances of British naval superiority which were served up by the Ministers in Parliament.

These assurances are again shown to have been false by another very significant letter written by Sandwich, just over a year after the previous exchange, on 3 August 1777. This letter began by expressing Sandwich's agreement with the idea of sending some ships of the line to the West Indies; an idea which had been put forward by North. But, although Sandwich agreed that the idea was a good one, he went on to insist that any ships that were to be sent under this plan should be immediately replaced by commissioning other ships of a similar type. He justified this by setting out his basic principle, which was that Britain should have a fleet which was at least equal to the combined navies of France and Spain. He then summarized the position of the British home fleet as follows:-

> '... 36 Ships of the line (are) in commission and fit for service, but some men (particularly marines) are wanting to make them all complete to their establishments; and as some of these ships must always be in harbour for cleaning, I should think that upon a sudden emergency we should not be able to get more than 30 of them at once to sea'.

The Bourbon powers, by contrast had a fleet that Sandwich placed at

> '... at least 36 of the line, all commissioned and ready for service'.

As France and Spain had only six ships away from Europe they would be able to put a force of 30 ships of the line to sea with little difficulty. Sandwich was made more anxious still by the fact that he believed that the French and Spanish had as many vessels in the category 'ready to receive men' as Britain had, but that in this department the French and Spanish had an advantage because they could raise the men for these ships more quickly than could Great Britain. Therefore, Sandwich concluded that to send further ships abroad without replacing them would leave Britain in 'a defenceless situation at home', with our army almost entirely in America, and our fleet crucially weakened. He further contended that:-

> '... nothing in my opinion would be more likely to invite an attack, and be more unpardonable in those who are apprised of the danger, than to leave this country open to such a calamity'.[19]

Despite the strength of the language he used in these letters, Sandwich made little progress. In December 1777 he was still vainly writing to North trying to impress upon him the strength of the French and Spanish position.[20]

We have already noted that these letters are in stark contrast to the calm assurances that were given by the ministers when they were in Parliament. It is clear that the ministers were misrepresenting the facts to Parliament, as there can be no doubt that they were aware of the real situation. There can be no excuse for Sandwich, apart from the explanation that he was the victim of the lack of attention to the fleet of his predecessors, and that any admission on his part would have worsened the situation. But in the case of Lord North, the position appears to be rather different. It can be argued that he was partly responsible for the weakness of the fleet because he refused to heed the repeated warnings that were sent to him by Sandwich. However, his position was more complex. It seems to have been the case that North was not only misleading the House of Commons, but that he was also misleading himself. This can be seen by the fact that on 2 March 1778, barely more than a fortnight before the formal declaration of war between Britain and France, he could write to Sandwich:

> 'If the French mean to go to war with us it will be in the Spring, and we ought to be prepared'.

North ended the letter by saying that he was totally pre-occupied with the raising of a new loan. The tone of this letter seems to suggest that even at this late stage, North doubted the intention of France to join the war. He seemed totally uninterested in making any preparations for such an eventuality. Such preparations should be settled in a cabinet meeting which, he wrote, 'ought to be held soon', but he proposed no date for such a meeting.[21] Thus North appears to have been guilty of ignoring facts of which he was well aware, to such a degree that he could almost be accused of 'fiddling while Rome burned'.

Finally, a comparison of the information from the Sandwich papers and from the King's correspondence provides us with some interesting, if conflicting statistics. In the Sandwich papers there are lists of the relative strengths of the navies of Great Britain, France and

Spain in the early months of 1778 (the figures for Britain are taken for 1 January, while those for the Bourbon powers are for 10 March). These figures confirm that Sandwich was totally justified in the concern and anxiety which he showed about Britain's naval position. The figures are summarized in the following table:-

TABLE 2

	BRITAIN	FRANCE	SPAIN
Ships of 60 guns and over	58	62	59
Ships of between 20 and 50 guns	89	54	32
Other ships (Sloops, bombs, cutters etc.)	109	95	53
Total	256	211	144

From this table it is evident that, at the outbreak of the war, the British fleet was superior to that of France and to that of Spain, individually; but when the Bourbon fleets were taken as one, the British navy was heavily outnumbered. It is also clear that Sandwich was right to demand replacements for any line of battle ships sent to America or the Carribean, as in this department both the French and the Spanish outnumbered Britain. Finally this table also makes it quite plain that Sandwich had utterly failed to achieve his objective of ensuring that the British fleet was equal to the combined strength of the Bourbon powers.[22]

If we turn now from the Sandwich papers to the King's correspondence, we find a picture that is almost as confused as that reflected in the parliamentary debates. At the end of the correspondence for 1775 a document is to be found entitled 'Ships in Ordinary, a list in the King's Hand'. This shows, under the heading 'Active Strength', that the navy was made up of 84 vessels of more than 50 guns, and 54 vessels of less than 50 guns, making a total of 138 naval craft of all kinds. However, the accuracy of this list must be in doubt because a comparison with the figures in Table 2 shows that, two years later, there were only 58 ships of 60 guns and over, while the information from which the Table is compiled shows that there were a further 12 ships of between 50 and 60 guns. Therefore in 1778 the total of vessels carrying 50 or more guns was a

mere 70, 14 less than in 1775. Following the list of 'active strength' there is a list entitled 'Ships building and repairing', which totals 40 vessels. But this second list includes 6 vessels which also appear in the list of 'active strength'. So, when we add together these two lists we have a total naval strength of 172 ships. Finally the document went on to state that there were 19 'Guardships' - that is to say ships of 64 guns or over which were fit for sea and three fifths manned. However, it fails to make it clear whether these ships have been included in the figure given for active strength; if they have not been so included the final total was 191.

But, whether the total was 191 or 172, several conclusions can be drawn from these figures. First, whatever the King understood by the term 'active strength', it is evident that the effective force was confined to the Guardships, and therefore the 'active' figure of 84 ships of 50 guns and over is misleading. Second, the figure for ships being built or repaired is a very high one, for it amounted to approximately one fifth of the total. This was a large proportion of the navy to have in dock on the eve of a war which was to require a greater naval effort than Britain had ever had to make before.[23]

It is also quite evident that this list is a gross oversimplification of the facts. Apart from the contrast that we have already noted with the figures in Table 2, other comments made at the time point to this. In October of 1776 Sandwich proposed a series of eleven very radical measures, including a general "press", which would bring the navy up to a state of readiness. He estimated that if these measures were immediately put into effect, Britain would have the following forces available: 23 guardships in commission, 2 ships of the line in America, 1 ship of the line in the East Indies, and 1 ship of the line in the Mediterranean; which made a total of 27 ships ready for service. To this total there could be added a further 12 ships of the line that were ready to receive men but which were as yet unmanned; 27 on the 'Serviceable list', 12 which could be made ready within a year, and 5 which could do foreign service 'in an emergency'. When all these figures are added together they make a total of 83 ships of the line. But it is quite clear that many of the vessels included here were far from 'active', indeed this list, which was compiled by Sandwich nearly a year after the King had drawn up the list quoted above, shows that, even if Sandwich's

eleven proposals were immediately adopted, the real strength of the navy in home waters was made up of the 23 Guardships, to which 12 more vessels could be added when crews had been raised to man them.[24] In the light of the fact that Britain knew that France alone had a fleet of 27 ships of the line in preparation in June of 1776[25], it is again plain to see that Sandwich had not only failed to give Britain an over all superiority in every type of ship to the combined forces of France and Spain, but that he had also failed to ensure that Great Britain had more capital ships ready for action than the Bourbon powers. The failure of Sandwich's attempts to build up the strength of the home fleet can be demonstrated by Admiral Keppel. On his arrival at Portsmouth in March 1778 to take command of a Squadron which, he had been assured, would number 35 vessels, he wrote irately that he had found only 'six ships fit to meet a seaman's eye'.[26] Even when allowance has been made for the fact that Keppel was a political opponent of the government's policy towards the American rebels, this is a telling criticism.

There are also some figures that are of interest which are to be found among the North papers. These relate to ships that were being built in naval dockyards up to the outbreak of the war, and also to the expenditure of the British government on the navy in these years. These figures have been expressed in Tables 3 and 4 below, and those which relate to expenditure have been compared to some figures for France which have been drawn from various different sources[27]:-

TABLE 3

Ships Building in Naval Dockyards

DATE	TYPE OF SHIP, CLASSIFIED BY NUMBER OF GUNS CARRIED														
	100	90	80	74	70	64	60	50	44	30	28	20	SLOOP	BOMB	ANNUAL TOTAL
1769	-	5	-	4	-	4	-	1	-	1	-	-	1	-	16
1770	-	2	-	5	-	6	-	-	-	2	-	-	2	-	17
1772	1	3	-	6	-	5	-	1	1	-	-	3	-	-	20
1774	1	2	-	6	-	6	-	1	1	-	2	1	-	-	20
1776	1	4	-	7	-	5	-	-	-	-	-	4	4	-	25
1772	1	4	-	6	-	5	-	2	-	-	-	2	4	1	25

TABLE 4

Naval Expenditure

DATE	BRITAIN (£)	FRANCE (LIVRES)
1769	282,413	-
1770	283,687	-
1772	286,804	-
1774	274,828	27,500,000
1776	293,951	35,000,000
1777	296,239	-
1778	-	101,153,000
1779	334,426	156,639,840
1780	-	168,998,500
1782	-	200,000,000

From these tables it can be seen clearly that neither ship building nor naval expenditure underwent any considerable increase in Britain during these vital years. Indeed naval expenditure was actually reduced in 1774. This again tends to show that Sandwich failed in his efforts to convince his cabinet colleagues of the danger of an attack from France. In the French figures, however, we can see a marked increase in the money that was devoted to naval purposes as Sartines began his work of reform. This in turn makes two things very clear: first, that the French were paying a great deal of attention to their navy, thus justifying Sandwich's alarm; second, it proves that the British effort to improve their navy in these years was far less concentrated than the effort being made by the French.

It is of course possible that France needed to make considerable efforts to put her navy into a condition to go to war with Britain with any real prospects of success. It is often suggested that France was deliberately preparing for war in this period[28], and indeed the figures for their naval expenditure would seem to justify this. However, it must be remembered that Choiseul had reformed the French navy between 1763 and 1770 but that this reform had not led to war: it could have been argued that there need be no war following Sartines' reform. Therefore we must now examine the French preparations to see whether they really did furnish grounds for fear in Britain.

There are two questions which must be answered about the French navy. First, why was it that the navy was in need of further reform so soon after Choiseul had completed his restoration of the fleets, and why was this new reform necessary on so large a scale as is indicated by the six-fold increase in naval expenditure in the years between 1774 and 1779? Second, with a navy thus strengthened, why was it that the French failed to derive a greater advantage from their strength and Britain's weakness?

We saw earlier that Choiseul had increased the number of ships of the line and frigates in the French navy and also that he had established new ports and training schools, why then was this new reform needed? It is usual to explain Sartines' reforms as a result of the neglect of the fleet by his predecessor Bourgeois de Boynes between 1770 and 1774. However, even allowing for the damaging effects of neglect upon timber built ships it seems possible that Choiseul's reforms may not have been as effective as has sometimes been thought.

If we allow this to be the case, then we must now look at the effects of Sartines' reforms. Choiseul left behind him in 1770 a fleet of 64 ships of the line and 50 frigates, an impressive total. Yet, by 1778, in spite of vastly increased expenditure, France possessed only 60 ships of the line, and by 1780, when Sartines was dismissed, this figure had only risen to 79. So in terms of simple numbers, Sartines' expenditure appears to have achieved little (see note B at the end of this chapter). But when the French and Spanish fleets were united they possessed approximately 30 more ships of the line than Great Britain.[29] Hence, the French fleet was numerically strong, and perhaps represented a more serious threat to British naval power at this time than ever before. Nevertheless, it is possible to find indications that the French fleet lacked training and preparation. In 1777, Joseph II of Austria paid an incognito visit to France and visited the ports. He wrote to his brother Leopold:-

> 'Brest est un grand port... mais les magasins sont vides et les navires mal armées'.

While of Toulon he wrote:-

> 'C'est le plus beau port que j'aie vu,... Malgré cela, je ne sais ce que c'est, mais la marine française ne m'inspire aucune confiance. Ses équipages sont mauvais et mal exercés...'[30]

These comments by the Emperor, are in stark contrast to a letter from du Chaffault, the commander at Brest, who wrote at the time of Joseph's visit that his fleet had been ready to sail 'il y avait huit mois'.

These are critical comments and provide serious cause for doubt as to whether the French navy was in a condition to fight a war with Great Britain. Such doubts are increased by some comments made by Maurepas and recorded by the Abbe de Veri in his journal. In October 1777 Veri recorded that he discussed with Maurepas the reasons for avoiding war with Britain. Maurepas gave the opinion that there were weighty reasons for avoiding such a conflict, particularly he questioned the capacity of the French armed forces to win such a war. He expressed doubts about the ability of the army's commanders and turned his attention to the navy. Here he had doubts as to whether the French and Spanish fleets were either sufficiently well trained or numerically strong enough to undertake a war against Great Britain. He then went on to say that while France had grown richer in the previous three years and Britain had been impoverished by colonial struggles, this need make no difference in a war:-

> 'Cela n'empêche pas que la haine Anglaise contre la France ne puisse encore faire faire à la nation, pendant deux ans des efforts d'argent très supérieures à ceux que le roi pourrait exiger en France de tout l'opulence de ses sujets'.

Maurepas concluded his gloomy summary by casting grave doubts on France's ability to win a war at all. If the means of waging war were weak, he said, they were weakened still further by the men who would command them.[31] Maurepas' opinion is of weight, not only because he was the Chief Minister, but also because he had been Secretaire de la Marine earlier in his career. Not only was he in a position to influence events at the time, but he was also familiar with naval affairs. Therefore his opinion may be assumed to have been an informed one, and it is evident that he was entirely pessimistic about the French chances of victory.

If we accept that the French navy was not as strong as it has often been made out to be, this helps us to explain why it failed to make more gains in the war than in fact it did. However, the reasons for its failure may also lie elsewhere. The attitudes and expectations of the French were wrong. They entered the war in a state of

uncertainty; they were embarking on a war in the naval sphere, a sphere in which they had always had the worst of any struggle with Britain. The opinions of Maurepas, cited above, are a good illustration of such 'defeatist expectations'. This anxiety and lack of confidence was not only expressed in conversations such as this, and in the anxiety of the French that Britain might again launch a surprise attack as she had done in 1756, but was also to be found in the controversy about the peace treaty. The French navy performed quite satisfactorily in the war, achieving successes in the Far East as well as off the coasts of North America where their presence proved decisive at Yorktown in 1781, but it lacked the confidence to continue the war and press home the advantages it had gained. The failure of the invasion attempt of 1779 was a blow to their confidence, and Admiral Rodney's victory at the Battle of the Saints swept away any lingering thoughts the French might have entertained about continuing the war. But there were many in France who regarded the Peace of 1783 as a humiliation for France and as bringing only poor rewards for the effort of the war. In the council, this faction was led by Castries, who had replaced Sartines, and by Segur who had replaced St. Germain as minister of war. Lack of confidence and lack of finance forced France to a peace treaty which did not do justice to the success of her navy.

The British also had expectations. Just as the French had become accustomed to defeat by the British navy - so the British had come to expect success. Sandwich and Palliser were both well informed of the state of both the British and French navies[32], and thus their moods, as we have seen, were far from confident. But the expectation of the British people that the navy would defend them successfully, made it hard for Sandwich and Palliser to bring home to the British the extent of their danger and even harder for them to admit to the weak condition of the navy. This mood of confidence was well reflected by a letter from Suffolk to Sandwich of June 1777. He wrote that it would be greatly to Britain's advantage to preserve the peace with France until the end of the year, by which time he hoped that Burgoyne's campaign would have been successful, thus putting more cards in Britain's hand. But he went on to say:-

> 'The event, however, does not entirely depend upon us, for if our natural enemies are determined upon war, they need not declare it to force us to fight: a nation like an individual, may be made to fight notwithstanding his mild temper and earnest wishes to the contrary. If such shall be the fate of England, it is a comfort to reflect on the state of the fleet; it constantly has had your diligent attention, and when the hour of trial comes, I am sure this will appear'.[33]

Such bland confidence makes one wonder whether the letters from Sandwich to North pointing out the weakness of the navy had any effect at all.

Enough has been said here to give an impression of the balance of naval forces between Britain and France. We can see that the British fleet was undoubtedly weak and that Sandwich's pleas for action to remedy the situation went largely unheeded. In France, however the navy was in a strong position, and though it was not perhaps as strong as has sometimes been thought, it is probable that the French had a greater chance of successfully challenging the British navy at this period than at any other. Thus it can be concluded that the British made poor use of the time they gained by ignoring the French aid to the rebels; the reasons for this, and the influence of the relative strengths of the two navies upon policy, will be considered in the next chapter.

Note A

This may appear a strange deduction to make when viewed mathematically. The average crew of each ship in America works out at just less than 120 men in December 1774 and June 1775, and has risen to approximately 150 men per ship in January 1776. Therefore if one manned the 103 ships in pay in 1770 with 120 men each the total number of men that would be required in pay would amount to only 12,360, a smaller figure than that actually given.

However, it must be borne in mind that the majority of the ships in America were small vessels - frigates, sloops and cutters - requiring less men than the ships of the line, which were mainly at home. Thus, Graves in June 1775, had 27 ships under his command of which only 3 were line of battle ships and one a 50 gunned ship. The proportion of ships of the line in the home fleet would have been much greater,

and so the manning requirements would have been higher too. The gradual increase in the numbers of capital ships in American waters accounts for the slow rise in average crew size. A ship of the line would have required nearer 500 men for a full complement than 150.

Note B

Sartines' expenditure upon the navy seems excessively high in proportion to the results which he achieved. While it is possible that the money was spent on other things than ship-building - e.g. training and port facilities - there may also have been another explanation for the high level of expenditure by the ministry of marine.

Although no direct evidence has been found, it seems possible that Beaumarchais may have drawn his funds through the ministry of marine. He had been associated with Sartines during 1774[34], and when he was sent to London in 1776, his "cover" was that he was working for Sartines[35], what then would have been more natural than for him to have been paid by Sartines?

FOOTNOTES TO CHAPTER IV

Page No.	Footnote Number	Reference
68	1	These figures are drawn from Sandwich Papers... Ed. Barnes and Owen i, pp. 42 and 45-56.
69	2	See the debates on the Navy Estimates and the Budget in 1774 and 1775 in Parliamentary History... vol.xvii, pp.945, 1330-1341; and vol.xviii, pp.54, 55 and 305-306.
69	3	The figures here are drawn from Valentine A. Lord George Germain p.124. (There are some figures in Parliamentary History vol. xvii, p.948, which give a different impression for 1775).
69	4	Despite Frederick II's ban on troops passing through Prussia to fight for Britain in America, many German soldiers did fight in America. The ban was lifted in 1777. See Haworth P.L. 'Frederick the Great and the American Revolution' A.H.R. ix, p.472
70	5	Sandwich Papers... Ed. Barnes and Owen, vol.i, p.xiii.
70	6	Graham G.S. 'Considerations on the war of American Independence'. in Bull. Inst. Hist. Res. xxii p.27.
70	7	ibid. p.25
71	8	Parliamentary History... vol.xvii, p.945
71	9	ibid. vol.xviii, pp.54 and 841.
71	10	ibid. vol. xix, pp.376-378.
72	11	ibid. vol. xviii, p.1380, and see Palliser's statement of 11 March 1777 in vol.xix, p.97.
72	12	Sandwich Papers... Ed. Barnes and Owen vol.i, p.65
73	13	ibid. vol.i, p.90
73	14	ibid. vol.i, pp.160 and 163.
73	15	ibid. vol.i, p.239.
74	16	ibid. vol.i, p.63.
74	17	ibid. vol.i, p.201
74	18	ibid. vol.i, pp.213-216. All three letters written on 21 July 1776.
76	19	ibid. vol.i, pp.235-238.
77	20	ibid. vol.i, pp.242-245 and 327-335.
77	21	ibid. vol.i, p.347
78	22	ibid. vol.i, Appendices A & C, on pp.422 and 426. It should be noted that the British figures are taken from the column headed 'At Sea', although it seems highly unlikely that such numbers would have been at sea, or seaworthy, in the light of the above letters. It should also be noted that letters accompanying the French and Spanish lists say that these may be exaggerated to give an impression of greater strength.

FOOTNOTES TO CHAPTER IV (CONT'D)

Page No.	Footnote Number	Reference
79	23	Correspondence of King George III... Ed. Fortescue, vol.iii pp. 306-311.
80	24	ibid. vol.iii p.396
80	25	ibid. vol.iii p.380
80	26	Graham G.S. 'Considerations on the war of American Independence' in Bull.Inst.Hist.Res. xxii, p.27
80	27	Figures for British shipbuilding and expenditure are drawn from North MSS in the Bodleian Collection, B.49-55. Those for French expenditure are drawn from various sources, as follows: Figures for 1778, 1779 & 1780 from Lacour Gayet G. La Marine Militaire de la France sous le règne de Louis XVI. p.60. Figures for 1776 and 1682 are drawn from Graham G.S. 'Considerations on the war of American Independence'. Bull.Inst.Hist.Res.xxii p.29. Figures for 1774 are quoted in Lacour Gayet, op.cit., p.15 from Turgot's report while he was Secretaire de la Marine.
81	28	Graham G.S. 'Considerations on the War of American Independence', in Bull.Inst.Hist.Res.xxii, p.29.
82	29	ibid. p.29 (But see also, Lacour Gayet G. La Marine Militaire de la France sous le Règne de Louis XVI. p.56, where he states that the French and Spanish have only 18 more ships of the line).
82	30	Lacour Gayet G. Op.Cit. p.7.
83	31	'L'Abbé de Veri et son Journal' Ed.de Witte J. in Rev. d'Hist.Dipl. xxxix pp. 134-135.
	32	The figures in Sandwich Papers... vol.i, p.245 agree exactly with those in Lacour Gayet G. Op.Cit. Appendix III pp.609-611.
85	33	Sandwich Papers... vol.i, pp. 226-227.
86	34	Morton B.N. (ed.) Beaumarchais Correspondence vol.i, p.xiv.
86	35	Doniol H. Histoire de la Participation... vol.i, p.377.

CHAPTER V: BRITISH POLICY

Up to this point we have examined the circumstances that surrounded the period under consideration and the problems which faced Britain, France and America, to see how these problems affected the attitude of each country towards the American Revolution. In doing so, attention has been drawn to the great dangers which faced Great Britain, and to the fact that, by ignoring the signs that France was preparing for war, Britain gained time to put her own armed forces in order. However, in the last chapter it was found that Britain took few steps in this direction, and it was also noted that, on the eve of war, the chief minister appeared to be unaware that the danger to Britain was real and immediate.

It is now time to turn to a detailed examination of the policy of Great Britain towards the alliance which was signed between France and America in the early months of 1778. We have already noted that Britain faced great danger should such an alliance be formed because the majority of her army and a large proportion of her navy were engaged in America. The hostile attitude of France, still seeking revenge for her defeat in the Seven Years War, only served to increase British difficulties. The attitude of the French towards Britain at this time is frequently expressed in contemporary documents, but there is no more cogent example, than the following quotation, which is drawn from the 'Réflexions', the first of three documents written at the beginning of 1776 to urge the French King to attack Britain while the colonial dispute was still in progress:-

> 'L'Angleterre est l'enemi naturel de la France, elle est un enemi avide, ambitieux, injuste, et de mauvaise foi; l'objet invariable de sa politique est, sinon la destruction de la France, du moins son abaissement, son humiliation et sa mine'.[1]

French policy towards the American Revolution has been fully studied, and as a result we can define the objectives of French policy quite simply. They had two aims which were, in order of importance; first, to regain the prestige which France had lost in the years since her defeat in the Seven Years

War. To achieve this the French saw it as necessary that Britain's prestige should be reduced, and they felt that the operation would be most effectively performed if France was responsible for that reduction. France's second aim was commercial gain. The French realized that it would be futile to try to gain territory in North America, but it was hoped that, after France had assisted the colonists to gain their independence, the Americans, who would need a trading partner in the old world, would turn to France. As in the case of prestige, this would be a doubly effective blow, as it would both diminish British power and increase that of France.[2]

Thus the French were looking to Britain's colonial difficulties to provide them with the opportunity to take revenge for their defeat in the last war. They were not, however, prepared to give open assistance to the colonists until the latter had shown that they had both the will and the ability to resist the British forces with some hope of success. This attitude on the part of the French is to be found clearly stated in the third of the three documents written at the beginning of 1776, entitled 'Reflexions sur la necessite de secourir les Americains et de se preparer a la guerre avec l'Angleterre'. No alliance was to be concluded with the rebel colonists, according to this memorandum.

> 'jusqu'à ce que leur indépendence soit établie et notoire'.[3]

Therefore we can sum up the policy of France very simply. She was prepared to give clandestine aid to the colonists, which was secretly encouraged by the government, but which had to be publicly disavowed; the continuation and possible growth of this aid was dependent upon the success of the colonists in their struggle with the British. It was also the case that, knowing how powerful Great Britain was, the French were extremely anxious to avoid a situation in which they were left to fight Britain alone. This is the reason why the French refused to declare their support for the rebels until the latter had shown their determination to break with Britain. It is also the reason why the French were so quick to conclude the alliance with the Americans after the news of Saratoga reached Europe. They saw

that at Saratoga the colonists had shown their determination and they also realized that the Americans had an opportunity to make a favourable peace with Britain. Were this to happen, the opportunity for France to achieve her aims would be lost. This determination of the French to achieve their aims is shown by the fact that they refused Joseph II's offer of the Austrian Netherlands if they would assist him in Bavaria, prefering to undertake a naval war against Britain.

Britain's position was far more complex than that of France. The size of the national debt, the long-range war with the American rebels, and the fact that this war was not popular with the nation as a whole, all meant that Britain had to tread very warily in foreign affairs; this inspite of her position as the most powerful country in Europe after her recent defeat of France. Our task now is to examine the policy adopted by Britain towards the French, and towards their growing involvement in America, during the period between 1775 and 1778.

In contrast to the situation in France, where the historian has ready evidence of French intentions in those three documents from early 1776 and in the letters from Vergennes to the French ambassadors in Madrid, there is no clearly defined statement of policy in Britain. The historian who wishes to find the British attitude, has to rely upon inferences drawn from the documents of the period, rather than upon direct exposition of policy. It is possibly due to this situation that the British government has received such scant attention, and has been assumed to have no policy at all upon this matter.

First of all an attempt must be made to find out exactly how well informed the British government was about the aid which France sent to the Americans. On this matter, the records are very plain, and it is evident from study of the despatches from Paris in this period that the British ministry had every indication it could have required that the French were assisting the colonists. Lord Stormont, the British ambassador in Paris at the time was only absent from France for two short periods: first from March 1775 to October 1775 and second from March 1776

to late June 1776. During these absences the British Embassy was left in the hands of Mr. Horace St. Paul. Both these men were diplomats of skill and experience, and their reports kept the ministers at home well informed of developments in France.

However, as was noted in Chapter III, the problems which they faced in assessing the intentions of the French ministers with regard to America were very great. Not only was the position of the ministry, at the start of a new reign, unstable, but there were also conflicts about the policy which should be adopted. These conflicts took place within the ministry, between those who favoured involvement and those who did not, and between the ministry as a whole and French popular opinion which was far less cautious in its approach than any member of the ministry. The problem of giving an accurate assessment of French attitudes was as clear to Stormont as it is to us. Late in 1775 he wrote:-

> 'I am well aware, My Lord of the difficulties of my situation here - no Foreign Minister ever stood upon more dangerous ground. If I am too hasty to catch, and give an Alarm, I may with the best intentions do essential mischief; if on the other hand I am lulled into security, by the Professions of this court, which never were more friendly, and any Blow should be struck of which I had not forewarned you, I should necessarily stand exposed to the Imputation of that easy credulity which in this Profession is so great a disgrace'.[4]

A little over three months later, Stormont again wrote to London outlining the difficulties of his situation:-

> '.... I will assure your Lordship it would be much easier to fill volumes with all one hears than to select a little truth from the Multiplicity of Falsehood with which it is blended'.[5]

As Ambassador, we can see that Stormont was well aware of his role as the transmitter of information about the attitudes and opinions of the French to the government in London. He was the expert on the spot, and as such he was not only expected to report the facts but also to give an expert opinion on them, especially upon matters which affected Britain. In this role, both Stormont

and St. Paul were extremely conscientious, and we can see that Stormont was certainly aware of the heavy weight of responsibility which lay upon his shoulders in the taking of British policy decisions towards France. He knew that, as the official channel of information, with access to the French Ministers, his information was liable to be given most weight in the deliberations of the British government. To be misled either into believing every wild rumour or into a false sense of security could lead equally to disaster for his country and for his own reputation. It is possible that this knowledge led him to temporize more often than he should have done in his despatches: to balance the opinions of the French public against those of the ministers; to give greater weight to the opinions of the ministers than was justified by the facts of the situation. It is also possible that this tendency to temporize failed to make the danger of the situation sufficiently clear to the London government, despite the fact that the majority of Stormont's advice was cautionary.

There were two major items about which the envoys in Paris had to keep the British government informed. First, the French Navy; any increase in activity in the naval dockyards, especially those at Brest and Toulon, could generally be interpreted as representing a threat to Britain. Second, they had to report on any activity in French ports which showed that assistance was being sent to the rebel colonies in America. These two items were of great importance, and together they occupy much of the correspondence between London and Paris in the years between 1775 and 1778. It is perhaps surprising to note, in view of the evidence produced by Dr. Stephenson,[6] that the British government and its envoys were more concerned about French naval preparations than they were about the possibility of aid being sent to the Americans.

From the very beginning of Louis XVI's reign, naval activity was on the increase in French ports. In contrast to the rather lax administration of Bourgeois de Boynes in the last years of Louis XV, Sartines brought a new enthusiasm to the Marine. This new approach, and the speed with which Stormont became aware of it are reflected by two letters, both

written on 21 September 1774, approximately a month after Sartines' appointment. In the first, Stormont reported a large quantity of shipbuilding material recently arrived at Toulon; he went on:-

> 'This Intelligence if true .....sufficiently shows that France now means to pay great Attention to Her Marine, which certainly was much neglected ... I do not think this is done with any immediate hostile view'.[7]

In the second despatch, he wrote:-

> 'For my Part, I must own that I cannot but wish that Maurepas' Ministry may continue, as I am persuaded it will be gentle, moderate and pacific, not unsimilar to that of Cardinal Fleury .... (except that) great and constant Attention will be given to Naval Affairs. Since this is to be the case,..... it is fortunate that it happens at a Time when our attention and activity will at least keep Pace with Theirs'.[8]

Stormont's attitude remained the same throughout much of his correspondence with his superiors in London. In spite of the naval preparations which he knew full well were being undertaken, he still remained convinced that France did not intend to embark on a war with Great Britain. This attitude persisted as late as 1776 in a series of despatches from Paris to London. These began when St. Paul reported that orders had been sent on 3 June 1776 to Brest, Rochefort and Toulon for the preparation of a fleet of fifteen ships of war.[9] It is possible that these orders may have been connected with the quarrel between Spain and Portugal, but whatever the cause, these events were not regarded as threatening. St. Paul reported to Weymouth that Vergennes had, as usual, stated that these orders had been issued with a view to restoring the French fleet to a proper state of repair. But St. Paul did add the following warning:-

> 'I will not pretend to say, My Lord, that all this is a Blind, But I beg leave to express my apprehensions that there may be some hostile design in these Preparations, tho' according to the nearest calculation I understand that very few ships could be got in readiness to put to sea till towards the end of August'.[10]

Even this warning was of the mildest kind and attempted to play down the danger as much as possible.

In a letter written from Dunkirk five days prior to the above despatch, Captain Frazer, the resident British Commissioner there, wrote on the same subject. He drew attention to the extraordinary demands that were being made for naval workmen to be sent from Flanders to Brest. But even he could find no fault with this. He wrote that he felt this was due to the neglect of the French navy in recent years, and that there was nothing to 'indicate Warlike Preparations'.[11]

Lord Stormont returned to his post in the midst of this alarm, and it seems that he investigated it in considerable detail. He eventually wrote an immensely long report on the subject, which ran to sixteen manuscript pages, in which he attempted to take a balanced view of affairs. He had found that the naval preparations were being pushed forward with great energy, indeed they 'could not be pushed with more Vigour at the Eve of a War'. But, inspite of these preparations, the other signs seemed to point away from a war. Stormont's friends in the diplomatic corps informed him that France was not capable of undertaking a war. In addition there were no signs in society or from the trading companies that a war was likely. Stormont's difficulties were further increased by the fact that he was constantly receiving peaceful assurances from the French Ministers, and that he was aware that France was financially and militarily weak. These factors together with the apparently unambitious personality of Louis XVI appeared to make a war unlikely. At the end of his report, Stormont tried to form a balanced opinion from the pieces of conflicting evidence:-

> '....if the Intention of France should be to protract the War in America, by Raising the Hopes of the Rebels, and alarming us, if we are hasty in catching the alarm, we help her to work the very mischief she designs. Perhaps a Middle Way may be found, by preparing in secret for the worst that may happen, and by using every endeavour to discover the exact state and progress from Day to Day of these Armaments of which I can never hope to send you more than General Information'.[12]

The correspondence from Paris is full of despatches such as this, which contained large quantities of information but which failed to come to any definite conclusion. In fact, when it came to the point where Stormont felt obliged to give an opinion, it was almost always the case that he concluded that France had no hostile intentions towards Britain. We must now, therefore try to find out why this was the case, when, looking back on these events, it seems evident that France was planning war and was preparing her naval forces for it.

The first and most important factor which affected the views of the British envoys in Paris was the constant and very strong assurances, which they both received from Vergennes and Maurepas, that the court of France had no aggressive intentions towards Great Britain. Examples of these assurances and their effect upon the attitudes of the envoys can be found throughout the period.

After a naval scare in April of 1775 which was reported by St. Paul[13] he went on to report that Vergennes had assured him 'sur son honneur' that France was preparing nothing but a small squadron of frigates.

> 'All he (Vergennes) could say, was, that they had no intention whatsoever to arm any ships of the line and that I might be persuaded of His Most Christian Majesty's pacific dispositions'.[14]

After the naval scare of June and July 1776 (see note 13) the same type of assurances were given to the British envoys. On this occasion the despatch was from Lord Stormont, who had just returned to France. He reported that he had been to an audience with Vergennes and had been impressed by his 'appearance of openness and cordiality'. Vergennes had told him that he hoped Britain would not be alarmed by the idle reports in the newspapers; Stormont's report of their conversation continued:-

> 'Be assured My Lord, said he, that you find us in the same pacific disposition in which you left us, and that what we are doing in our ports has no hostile view'.

Vergennes also assured Stormont that France was 'making no armament', and he went on to say 'positively that the King his Master wished and meant Peace'. These assurances so impressed the British ambassador that he concluded his report as follows:-

> 'There Seems to me no sufficient Reason to believe that France has ordered or means to order any great immediate Naval Armament neither do I think that the present French Ministry have formed any design of disturbing the public Tranquility by a wanton unprovoked attack upon Great Britain'.

But again Stormont could not trust himself sufficiently to leave this as his final word. He went on to hedge this statement about with qualifications. He did not mean that France would never attack Britain, nor that she would not take advantage of circumstances to do so; but he did feel that, in the present situation, and granted the continuation of the present ministry, France would not attack Britain without a reason.[15]

Such assurances that France was not anxious to disturb the peace of Europe continued unabated into 1777 and were very desirable from the point of view of the British government. These declarations of peaceful intent were especially useful in the domestic sphere as a counter to the opposition's accusations that the government was badly informed about the intentions of the French ministry. Indeed as early as 1774 the Secretary of State wrote to Paris with a request for information on the intentions of France, giving the reason for his request:-

> 'As the scene of the new Parliament is now opening where the Discussion of the American Affairs will be brought on, I have only to add at present that I shall be glad to be informed from your Excy of the Language that is held upon them at the court where you reside'.[16]

In a second despatch which was sent shortly after this, Rochford again requested information and detailed the claims that had been made by Shelburne when he had said that France was preparing war. Stormont's reply, of 7 December 1774 (quoted above pp 46 & 47 formed the basis of the government's reply to these accusations; it was upon such reports from Paris that the government depended in order to be able to counter the opposition attacks.

Apart from these strong and sustained assurances from the French ministers, what other factors persuaded Stormont and St. Paul that France had no hostile intentions towards Britain? The second reason for this conviction was the apparently hostile attitude of Spain. During the early part of the period the Spanish appeared to be more threatening to England than the French, and Stormont and St. Paul both seem to have been convinced that any hostile moves on the part of France were only undertaken at the instigation of the Spanish. Thus it seemed that the French were the reluctant partners in this aggression and therefore that any justified anxiety ought to be directed at Spain.

Indeed there was some evidence for this during the period when Spain and Portugal were in dispute over their South American colonies, and Spain had been very keen to draw France into the dispute. However, at that stage, a war would not have served French interests at all, and they refused to become involved. This refusal had the effect of persuading the British envoys in Paris of the peaceful intentions of France, because she had restrained the belligerent Spanish from plunging Europe into a general war. This impression was played upon by the French to good effect. In July of 1776 Vergennes declared to Stormont

> '..... with a very grave Look and Melancholy Tone of Voice, I wish to God that the General Tranquility may continue until it is disturbed by you or us. Ce n'est ni de vous ni de nous que J'ai peur'.[17]

Vergennes was expressing fears for the continuation of peace because he felt some third power might cause a war: in the context of the time such a third power could only have been Spain.

In addition to these factors, Stormont and St. Paul were further convinced of the bellicose nature of Spanish policy by the personality of the Spanish ambassador in Paris, D'Aranda. D'Aranda's approach was indeed aggressive, and he would have liked nothing better than to see France and Spain fight a war against Britain.[18] But he was often out of sympathy with the feelings and intentions of the Spanish government in Madrid. Under Grimaldi's leadership Spanish policy moved very slowly, and after his fall in February 1777, the policy of the Spanish government drifted away from D'Aranda's approach. Indeed under its new leader, the Count of Florida Blanca, the Spanish ministry was hostile to any schemes for open involvement with the rebel colonists in North America.[19] Spain was certainly no friend to

Britain, but she did not, under the new ministry, want to go to war. Her intention was to humble Great Britain by giving encouragement to the rebels in secret, thus prolonging the war and causing exhaustion to both Britain and the colonies. Such a result would have served Spain well, by humiliating Britain and by demonstrating to colonial areas how hard a struggle it would be to win freedom.

The third factor which prevented the British envoys in Paris from reporting French intentions accurately was that everything in the internal situation of France suggested that a war was far from desirable for her. France appeared to be financially weak, militarily disorganized and, as a colonial power herself, it seemed unlikely that she would openly sympathise with the rebellious colonists of another. It has already been noted (see above pp 38) that these ideas had influenced the thinking of some politicians at home; they were also expressed in the despatches from Paris. In the early months of 1776 St. Paul wrote to Lord Weymouth that he was hopeful that the French government had decided in favour of peace. He based this opinion on the facts that St. Germain was in the process of reforming the army; that the financial reforms of Turgot would require some considerable time to take effect; that the sum of 8, to 10,000,000 livres which would be needed to prepare a fleet was more than France could afford; and lastly that the officers of the French navy were very poor:-

> 'I declare I do not know they have six sea officers capable of commanding three ships'.[20]

The internal situation of France certainly did appear to indicate that France would not wish to become involved in a war; however this was an appearance which was to prove deceptive. There can be no doubt that, especially in the earlier part of the period, the British envoys in Paris did tend to be too re-assuring in their reports to the British government.

If the majority of despatches from Paris contained re-assuring phrases about French intentions, there were two occasions, as we have already noted, when fears were expressed that a war was about to break out. These took place in April 1775 and June to July 1776 and we must now look to see how the British government reacted to these alarms. There are three major sources which we can consult to discover these reactions. First, the reports of Parliamentary debates will show whether the government showed signs of anxiety in public,

whether they informed Parliament of the armaments in France and whether the opposition was either aware of these alarms or more concerned by them than the government. Second we may look to the King's correspondence to see whether this showed concern on the part of the King or Lord North. Thirdly we may examine the Sandwich papers to see what moves were made by the Admiralty to take account of these reports.

The news of the naval armament of April 1775 which was reported by St. Paul hardly caused a ripple on the calm surface of Parliamentary debates. The only occasion on which the possibility of a danger from France was discussed in the Spring of 1775, was during the debate on the Navy Estimates which was held on 13 February, some two months before St. Paul reported the French armament. In this debate the government requested permission to raise an additional 2,000 men to enable them to enforce the measures which they had planned for America during that year. In reply to this, Captain Walsingham for the opposition, agreed that the force in America was insufficient, but he contended that if a large enough force were sent the coast line of Great Britain would be derived of defences. He said he was reliably informed that France had 75 ships of the line, more than half of which were armed, and in that situation he felt that all the ships Britain possessed in the world would not 'defend us at home should we rush blindly into a civil war'.[21] Although this was a speech which was made to oppose the government's policy towards the Americans, it is notable that it did so on the ground of the dire consequences which would follow at home. Fear of France was the basis of this objection, but Walsingham failed to make any effect on the Members of Parliament with this speech, and the motion was passed without so much as a division.

During the second naval alarm of June and July 1776, Parliament was in recess, and so there was no opportunity for the opposition to attack the government at the time. However, although the government was aware of French naval preparations, there was no mention of them in the King's Speech which closed the Parliament in May, nor in that which opened the new session in October. In May the King was pleased to announce:-

> 'No alteration has happened in the state of foreign affairs since your meeting; and it is with pleasure that I inform you that the assurances which I have received of the dispositions of the several powers in Europe, promise a continuance of the general tranquillity'.[22]

In October the general tone of the Speech remained re-assuring, but a cautious note was sounded in the section which related to foreign affairs:-

> 'I continue to receive assurances of amity from the several courts of Europe..... I think nevertheless that, in the present situation of affairs it is expedient that we should be in a respectable state of defence at home'.[23]

Although this Statement avoided any reference to a specific threat, and although the precaution which it advocated was certainly a sensible one, it provoked a storm of protest during the debate in the House of Lords on the address of thanks to the King. The opposition brought their full weight to bear on this Statement. The Dukes of Manchester, Richmond and Grafton and Lord Shelburne all attacked the government in the strongest possible terms. The Duke of Manchester began the attack:-

> 'His Grace remarked on that passage in the Speech relative to assurances of amity said to be received from the several courts of Europe, in a very pointed manner. He said it contained the most improbable information that could well be conceived, unless we supposed that the framers of the speech, and those who advised the present naval armaments, thought differently on the same day or were not the same persons. If, he said, such assurances were given and could be depended upon, why were we resorting to a "Press" to man the Navy? If on the other hand, those assurances of amity were not to be relied on, why deceive the public and Parliament in so gross and flagrant a manner? Why delude them into dangerous repose? Why tell them on the eve of a rupture that we were in a state of perfect tranquillity?'

Manchester then went on to point out that France was widely rumoured to be carrying on an open commerce with the rebels, which, he felt, proved that she was in the first stages of open enmity with Great Britain. In addition he pointed to the hostile intentions of Spain towards Portugal, and concluded that whether Spain attacked Portugal or France allied with the Americans, the result would be the same, namely that Britain would be at war with the House of Bourbon.[24]

The Duke of Richmond spoke next and he reiterated many of the points which had already been made, but he also gave a more detailed analysis of the situation which might face Britain. He envisaged a time when Britain would be involved in a war with the colonies and a war with France and Spain and he also drew a bleak picture of the domestic political situation:-

> '..... our only natural defence at the mercy at this instant of our enemies, an accumulating debt divided councils, and a distracted people on the verge of despair'.

Richmond's solution to this apparently desperate situation was to effect an immediate reconciliation with the colonists 'upon any terms'.[25]

To this speech Lord Sandwich felt duty bound to reply. He said that less than half the men in the navy were serving in America, and that the naval forces in home waters were quite sufficient for the defence and protection of Britain's coasts. He also asserted that Britain had received the fullest assurances of peace from France and Spain, but that the government felt it would be wise to prepare for the worst. He utterly rejected Richmond's proposal

> 'recommending a reconciliation with America upon any terms, even upon grounds of admitting their independency, he could not endure the thought ... he would risk everything rather than accede to it'.[26]

The Duke of Grafton then joined the attack on the ministry, but he pursued rather a different line. After he had drawn attention to the positive information which he had received about the naval preparations at Cadiz and Brest, he went on to blame the present weak position of Great Britain on the lack of information furnished by the ministry to Parliament. He felt that the nation had been lulled into a false sense of security and that if the naval forces at present in Britain were too small, then the nation had been misled. However, Sandwich replied to this protest by saying that the squadron at Brest consisted of only six ships of the line and that even had it been larger, Britain was ready for it.[27]

Lord Shelburne then launched the most vehement assault of all upon the government. He claimed that it was commonly known that France and Spain were planning war; that there was a formidable squadron fitting out at Brest; that the French and Spanish ports were openly used by the American privateers, both in Europe and the

West Indies; that supplies of arms were sent every day from France to the colonists; and finally that three representatives from the rebels were now in residence at Versailles; He laid the blame for this state of affairs at the door of the minister who was responsible for knowledge of French affairs because he had failed to procure accurate information.[28] From this evidence, Shelburne told the Lords, he was forced to come to the conclusions 'that we do not continue to receive assurances of amity' from European courts, and that it was foolish to tell Parliament to rely upon such assurances even if they had been received.[29] However, inspite of this prolonged and bitter attack, the House of Lords accepted the speech and approved an address of thanks which declared that they were well satisfied with the assurances which the ministry had given them.

Thus in the Parliamentary context the government was concerned to play down the potential danger of which, as the despatches from Paris show, they were well aware. At the same time the ministers were anxious to give the impression that they were well in control of the situation at home and that all the necessary measures were being taken to combat any possible dangers from the Bourbon powers. It is also plain from these exchanges that, by October 1776, the opposition had become aware of the threat that loomed from across the channel, and that they were doing their best to make the British aware of it. Before we turn to an examination of the reasons why the opposition failed to convince the British of their danger, and an examination of the government's hopes and intentions, we must now look at the King's correspondence and at the Sandwich papers

In the King's papers we would expect to see a measure of concern at the disturbing news which the Secretary of State had received from Paris. However, it is surprising to find that the naval scare of 1775 does not receive any attention in the letters written to the King or by him until after it was over. On the 18 April 1775 St. Paul reported that the rumours of the armament were groundless and it is not until 20 April that the first reference to this alarm appears in the King's papers. On that date Lord North wrote to the King:-

> 'Lord North begs leave to return to his majesty his most grateful acknowledgements for the communication of the good news from Paris. He came to town this morning, after reading Mr. St. Paul's dispatches very melancholy, and almost convinced that it would be necessary to set speedily upon preparations for our defense'.[30]

Lord Rochford, who was still the Secretary of State at that time, wrote the next day. He appeared to have doubted whether the French had ever been arming, and gave it as his opinion that an agent should be sent to France to discover whether the French were preparing for war or not; if they were arming, then Rochford's opinion was that this was likely to be at the instigation of Spain and with hostile intentions towards Portugal. Whatever the realities of the situation, Rochford was convinced that no steps should be taken until the agent's report had been received.[31]

The same day as Rochford wrote this letter, North wrote to the King a second time. It is evident that, by this time, North had completely recovered his nerve. He wrote, with a good deal of self-satisfaction, that he could not help but 'commend myself for having deferred taking any steps until the former bad account should be confirmed'.[32] These three comments are all the attention that was given to this naval alarm in letters to the King. The King himself does not appear to have written on the subject. Therefore, although North was somewhat disturbed by the first reports, it is evident that he quickly recovered his nerve, and this particular scare passed away without causing any real or prolonged anxiety among the British ministers.

The crisis of June and July 1776 shows a different pattern of events. This was first reported by St. Paul in a despatch to the new Secretary of State, Lord Weymouth on 12 June 1776. He wrote that orders had been sent to Brest on 3 June, for the preparation of 15 ships of the line. This despatch would have reached London on approximately 17 June. However there are no letters from either North or Weymouth to the King at this date. Instead we find letters from Sandwich in which he was trying to obtain approval of measures to strengthen the navy. There appears a document, written on 20 June, entitled 'Remarks on the State of His Majesty's Fleet', in which it was stated that there were at that time 29 ships of the line fitted as Guardships (see note A at end of chapter) which could be got to sea in two weeks with the aid of a "Press". In addition to these there was one other 74 gunned ship being prepared. Later in the document it is stated that in the event of a war 20 ships of the line could be counted as fit for service within a year of their receiving orders to fit out, assuming that men could be found for them. The

document concluded by making a list of six recommendations as to the actions which Britain ought to take if it should be felt that the preparations of France and Spain demanded attention. First, an extra guardship should be fitted out at each of the ports. Second, immediate orders should be issued to prepare a further 12 ships of the line: this would put Britain on an equal footing with the fleet at Brest although France would still be at an advantage because she could raise crews more quickly. Third, the workmen in the yards should be allowed to work double tides. Fourth, the Marines should be increased from 90 to 100 per company. Fifth, volunteer seamen should continue to be raised. Sixth and last, though this measure was eventually to cause most difficulty, secret preparations should be made so that a "Press" could be put quickly and effectively into action if the answers that were received from foreign powers were not satisfactory. The document ended by drawing attention to two unpopular consequences of adopting these measures. Firstly the number of seamen voted by Parliament would be exceeded; secondly considerable expenditure would be caused.[33] Although this document is not signed it seems evident that it must have been drawn up by Sandwich, or by one of his staff, to impress upon the King the weak condition of the navy, despite the appearance of strength on paper.

That it was not only within the Admiralty that there was considerable alarm is shown by the fact that a cabinet meeting was held on the evening of that same day. At this meeting it was agreed that five of the six measures put forward above should be put into operation; the exception was the third proposal in regard to the workmen in the ship yards. This decision, it was recorded, was taken as a result of

> 'the late intelligence received relative to the armaments in the Ports of France and Spain'.[34]

Further indication of warlike preparations in the French and Spanish naval bases must have reached London shortly after this meeting in a document printed in the King's correspondence under the title 'A paper of Intelligence', dated 20 June 1776. This document, which was compiled from information which had been received from Rotterdam and other sources, stated that the French had sent orders to their ports that great preparations were to be made, and for a squadron to be sent to the East Indies, while military reinforcements were to be sent to

the West Indian islands. Spain also was reported to have undertaken a considerable programme of preparations. This paper came to the conclusion that France and Spain had, or soon would have, more ships in commission than Great Britain unless steps were taken to keep pace with their preparations.[35] This paper, which must almost certainly have arrived after the cabinet meeting would have served to strengthen the convictions of the ministers that the actions they had ordered were correct. If it should have been read before the meeting, it would have acted as a further spur to the taking of precautions.

This crisis was evidently treated much more seriously than that of 1775, and, bearing this in mind, it is surprising to find no written comments by either the King or Lord North on this matter. The succeeding eight documents printed by Fortescue have no relation to either France and Spain or America, but are concerned with discussions between the King and North over court appointments. It was not until the end of August that there was another communication on naval affairs, and again the subject was raised by Sandwich. This time he requested permission to equip 6 extra ships of the line, and again there was no written reply from the King.[36]

Warnings that France and Spain might be preparing for war continued to reach London throughout the late summer and autumn of 1776, and in October, Sandwich, who was evidently still very anxious, wrote to the King proposing a series of eleven measures which ought to be taken without delay. These included a General "Press", the manning of the Guardships to their full wartime levels, employing more workmen in the shipyards and making them work longer hours, warning Gibraltar and Minorca to be on their guard and pressing ahead with the construction and provisioning of the ships in the ports. Sandwich concluded this despatch by making two very interesting requests. First that Lord Howe should be asked to send back from America all the petty officers that had been sent to him; second that the Treasury and the Ordnance should be advised that no more petty officers could be spared from the home fleet.[37]

This whole paper is of great interest. It clearly shows that the British navy was in a weakened condition, and it also shows that, by contrast to the complacent attitudes of the other ministers, Sandwich was very anxious about this state of affairs. If these measures had

been put into operation immediately, there would have been 39 ships of the line either at sea or ready to put to sea when manned. Of these 39, four would have been outside European waters - two in America, one in the Mediterranean and one in the Far East - giving a strength in home waters of 35, of which twelve would have been ready to receive men. This left an effectively active strength of 23 line of battle ships which were guardships. This force faced a French fleet, reported in the Intelligence report of 20 June, to number 24 ships of the line, and a Spanish fleet which, the same report stated, contained 7 ships of the line fully prepared and a further 15 being made ready.

As well as giving a clear impression of the danger which stemmed from the weakness of the Royal Navy, the paper is also of interest because it shows Sandwich's attitude towards America. He was prepared to weaken the fleet in America in order to create a safer situation at home; the withdrawal of petty officers and the refusal to send others were serious steps to take, for the petty officers were the backbone of the navy, especially during a war when large numbers of men were newly recruited and lacked experience or knowledge of the sea. This restriction on the American fleet may have stemmed from personal animosity between Sandwich and Howe, but it seems far more likely that it reflected a genuine fear on Sandwich's part of the consequences of weakening the Home fleet too greatly. Finally this document shows the difficulty which Sandwich was having in persuading North of the dangers of the situation. This is to be seen in Sandwich's request to the King that he advise the Treasury and the Ordnance that no further petty officers could be spared.

However, there were some indications that the ministers were becoming aware of the dangers of the situation. Apart from the Cabinet minute which has been noted above, there were two other signs which indicate that action was being taken. First there is the reference in the Duke of Manchester's speech, quoted above, to the fact that a "Press" was being put into operation. Second there is the passage in the King's Speech, where it was stated that, despite the assurances from foreign powers, His Majesty considered that it would be proper to put Britain in a respectable condition of defence at home. These points make it appear likely that the government was planning to take steps to ensure against attack.

This impression is confirmed by a letter from Lord Weymouth to Lord Stormont written at the end of October 1776 in which he wrote:-

> 'The very strong and seemingly sincere assurances given by the French Ministers, that these armaments were no more than to restore their navy from the neglected state in which it had long lain, to that in which it ought to be maintained, give no sufficient cause to take any preparatory steps on our part; and His Majesty, ever sincere in his own professions was unwilling to doubt the truth of theirs.
>
> Yet the activity and diligence with which they have continued their warlike preparations ..... makes it essentially necessary that His Majesty should take some steps, that he may not be unprepared if any motive should prompt the Court of Versailles to depart from that system of peace, They have so industriously proclaimed it was their wish to maintain'.

However, even in this letter, when a new and firmer note appears to be entering British policy towards France, Weymouth added the following cautionary note:-

> 'At the same time that your Excellency acquaints M. de Vergennes and M. de Maurepas with His Majesty's resolution to prepare Himself for defense if attacked; you are to renew in His Majesty's name his declarations of the most earnest and sincere desire of maintaining the general peace'.

This last point, Stormont was instructed to make very forcefully. He was also told to assure the French ministers that any preparations made by Britain had no relation to the dispute between Spain and Portugal. Stormont's final instruction was to 'carefully avoid any phrase that shall convey either menace or offence'.[38]

The news that Britain was just beginning to take precautions may have come as something of a shock to Stormont, who had been urging for some time that Britain's best defence lay in vigilance and her own state of preparedness. However, if it was a surprise to him, he did not show it. Five days later he reported to Weymouth that he had told Vergennes that Britain was about to make some preparations. He wrote that Vergennes seemed unconcerned at this news and had even remarked that it was very natural that Britain should want to prepare her navy. Vergennes also tried to minimize the armaments which France was making, though he gave no specific figures. According to Stormont, Vergennes listened to the assurances of Britain's peaceful intentions

'with particular pleasure', which was not surprising because Vergennes did not want a war with Great Britain until he was ready for it. Finally, Stormont wrote that he was pleased with the measures which Britain was taking, and gave his opinion that the French ministers were too wise to attack Britain when she was thus prepared.[39]

At this point there is clear evidence that action was taken over the manning of the navy. On 8 November 1776 Mr Buller put forward a motion in the Commons for the raising of 45,000 Seamen, including 10,129 Marines, for the year 1777. This was a considerable increase over the establishment voted in November 1775, to cover the year 1776, of 28,000 Seamen, of whom 6,665 were to be marines. This large increase in the numbers of seamen reflected both the government's concern at the French preparations and the growth of the British naval Squadron in American waters. The fact that this increased establishment was requested for 1777 also reflects well on Sandwich, who was well aware that the French could raise crews for their ships more quickly than Britain in an emergency, and who therefore took this measure to remove some of the perils of a surprise attack by France.[40]

Lord Sandwich's concern over the naval preparations of France can be clearly seen in those papers quoted above in which the British navy was compared with the navies of France and Spain, and in which Sandwich urged that action should be taken to remedy the situation (see above pp.102-103 and p. 104). His concern is also evident in many passages that are to be found among his own papers; for example the strongly worded exchange of letters between Sandwich and North in July 1776 (quoted above pp.75 - 77). That this concern on the part of the First Lord of the Admiralty continued into October is shown by the following letter, also written to North:-

> 'My Dear Lord - Sir Hugh Palliser came to see me this morning by appointment that we might consider what steps are necessary to be taken in the present alarming situation. The accounts of the French armaments multiply so fast that I must tell your Lordship that every hour is precious, as the French are certainly greatly ahead in their preparations, and I dread the consequence of their being at sea before us. I enclose some fresh accounts I have just received from Lord Weymouth, as also one paper sent me by

> your Lordship's order, by which you will see that everything is going on in the French ports with the utmost alacrity; if you will give Sir Hugh Palliser and me leave, we will wait on your Lordship presently to talk the matter over and consider what is advisable to be done. If we have not our cabinet meeting till Thursday, we shall lose four or five days, which as we have lost so much time already is a matter of great importance'.[41]

Thus it can be seen that the naval preparations which were undertaken by France in this period had a variety of results. In Parliament they led to clashes between the government and the opposition, which the government was in general able to surmount without great difficulty; in the cabinet they led to increased strains and tensions between Lord Sandwich and Lord North and between Sandwich and Lord George Germain; at the Admiralty the preparations caused considerable anxiety which at times verged on panic, as is shown in the final sentence of Sandwich's letter to North quoted above. However, for the purposes of this study, the important thing to notice is that these preparations, for all the reactions which they caused in Britain, were not allowed to disturb the diplomatic relations between Britain and France, and that both countries seem to have been anxious that they should not do so.

At the beginning of this chapter it was stated that both the naval preparations of France and the aid sent by France to America would be examined to see what effects they had on British policy towards France. If we can see that the naval preparations had few results in this field, it is now time to turn to the question of secret aid. Here we shall find a very different picture, for it was over the question of French assistance to the rebels that Vergennes and Stormont exchanged their strongest language; and it was on this question, not that of naval preparations, that the open breach between the two countries finally came about.

In Chapter III, while we were examining the problems which faced Great Britain in this period, we noted the length of time which elapsed between the outbreak of revolt in the American colonies and the date on which the French Ministry finally resolved to pursue a policy of clandestine aid to the colonists. Some of the factors which caused this delay were also noted: lack of support from Louis XVI; the opposition of two leading ministers, Maurepas and Turgot;

and a lack of enthusiasm for the venture by the King of Spain and his Ministers. However, the fact that the Ministry had not decided to send help to the colonists did not mean that no assistance was sent. In fact, quite large quantities of aid were sent from France and other European countries, mainly from private sources. Such private trading was a common occurrence in such situations in the eighteenth century, and a government, such as that of France, which was well disposed towards the rebels, could easily connive at such a trade.

In the spring and summer of 1776 two events changed the nature of the situation. The first event was the decision of the French ministry to adopt the plans drawn up by Vergennes under which aid was to be sent to the American rebels. The second event was the arrival at Versailles, in June, of the American agent Silas Deane. These two events put the aid which was going from France to America on an official footing, and this in turn meant that, if the British were to discover this new situation, they would have good reason to go to war with France.

This decision by the French ministers to send aid to the colonists was not taken for altruistic reasons. Vergennes had two aims; first, the humiliation of Britain, which he felt would result in a corresponding elevation of France; second, commercial benefits which he felt would accrue from the fact that France had been prepared to help the rebels. It is important to remember that Vergennes had no territorial ambitions, his aim was to obtain 'the commercial benefits without the headaches of Empire'.[42] Beaumarchais, who was the instigator of the whole project, was equally clear in his aims and he had no hesitation in expressing these very forcefully for Louis' consideration. In late 1775 he wrote to the King urging him to provide 2,000,000 livres to supply money and capital to the rebels. He wrote:-

> 'The justice and protection which a King owes to his subjects is a strict and rigorous duty; while that which he offers to other states is never more than conventional. Hence it follows that the natural policy which governs states differs almost wholly from the civil morality which governs states... It is the English, Sire, which it concerns you to weaken and humiliate... (America is) a formidable weapon in your hand, and one you can use without striking a blow so as to weaken and abase your natural enemies...'

In the same letter, Beaumarchais shows that he knew that this letter would not appeal to a King, such as Louis XVI, with a strong sense of right; he excused the suggestion he was making with the words '... were men angels, political ways might undoubtedly be disdained'; and then, to sweeten the pill, he went on to stress

> 'the facility of doing, the certainty of success, and the immense harvest of glory and Tranquility...'

which would result from a decision to aid the rebels[43]. Such results, especially the prospect of peace, would have appealed to Louis XVI.

Whether or not Beaumarchais believed, as he professed to here, and again even more strongly in the so-called 'Peace or War Memorandum'[44], that by aiding the rebels the French could avoid a war with Britain, or this was for him, as it was for Vergennes, a mere stratagem to make his suggestion more palatable to Louis XVI, is not particularly relevant to this study. The important fact is that in May 1776, at the instigation of Beaumarchais and with the active assistance of Vergennes, the French government decided to give help to the American colonists in their struggle against Britain. The details were left in the hands of Vergennes who, on 22 May submitted a resolution to the King 'qui doit m'autoriser a fournir un million de livres pour le service des Colonies Anglaises'.[45] We must now look to see how soon the London government became aware of this illicit trade, and what attempts were made to prevent it.

The first sign that the British government was aware of a trade between France and America is to be found well before the French ministry had resolved to send aid. It is to be found in a letter from Lord Rochford to Lord Stormont:-

> 'We have certain Intelligence that a very illicit Trade is carrying on to His Majesty's Colonies in America, as well by British as foreign ships, and as it becomes so necessary in the present juncture to prevent as much as possible the continuance of it, Orders have been sent to the Commanders of His Majesty's ships in the American Seas to be particularly attentive to intercept and seize any British or foreign ships which may be found with prohibited Goods or Warlike Stores destined for His Majesty's colonies in America. I have not thought it improper to mention this to Monsr Garnier and your Excellency may take an

> opportunity of giving the same notice to Monsr de Vergennes, as it will be much easier to prevent Mischief than to apply a Remedy to it afterwards'.[46]

Stormont reported that when he acquainted Vergennes with this information, the French minister 'readily admitted that such a precaution was very proper, at this time' but he added that he doubted if French ships would indulge in such a trade. Stormont also stressed that these actions were taken by Britain as precautions and were not intended as threats or accusations against France.[47]

Thus we can see that the British government was aware of the existence of such a trade from an early date; and we can also see that they had grasped the fact that prevention of the trade would be much easier than attempts to stop cargoes being landed in America. Bearing this in mind it might be expected that the British government would have made a sustained effort to prevent aid from leaving the ports of France. However, as time passed these sound and positive intentions were pursued with less vigour. After several further exchanges upon this subject between Stormont and Vergennes in which the ambassador was given strong assurances that the French King

> 'Would certainly never authorize His subjects to carry on any illicit Trade, or protect them in it and (Vergennes) added that the Strictest Orders had already been given on that head'[48]

the matter was allowed to drop. There was no further mention of arms trafficking or assistance of any kind until July when Rochford wrote to St. Paul that he had been informed that the American General Putnam had deposited a large sum of money with a Paris bank. He asked St. Paul to find out whether it was intended to use this money to buy arms or whether it had simply been lodged in Paris for greater security. St. Paul however could not find anything about this at all.

In September 1775 the difficulties of the situation began to become apparent to Great Britain. Rochford wrote to St. Paul that

> '... the general Opinion entertained here (is) that the American Rebels are constantly assisted by the French nation, as well from Europe as from their American islands'.

He instructed St. Paul to obtain an audience with Vergennes in order to acquaint him with a report which Rochford had received from the Port Master at New York. This report stated that 30 tons of gunpowder

had been sent by the governor of the French colony of Santo Domingo to the rebels at Philadelphia. Rochford pointed out that if this operation had been carried out by a private merchant for the sake of profit, it would not have caused such an outcry,

> '... but it must easily occur to Monsr de Vergennes that when a French Governor acts in that manner, it cannot but convey very different ideas, and therefore the King makes full reliance that the Court of France without delay will cause the necessary enquiries to be made about it, and renew such orders as there is reason to expect in consequence of their repeated friendly declarations'.[49]

This incident smouldered on until the end of September. St. Paul, as he had been instructed, complained to Vergennes, and Vergennes returned evasive answers; he was certain that the British government had been misinformed, and he assured St. Paul that no aid was sent to the rebels with the consent of the French government. Rochford however showed that he remained unconvinced by these statements. He wrote that Britain was 'much disposed' to believe the French gave no assistance to the rebels

> 'But, not withstanding the Language that Monsr de Vergennes held to you in his conversation on that subject, it is not possible but he must know, if he ever makes the enquiries he promises, that very considerable Quantities of Arms and Ammunition have been sent from France and the West India Islands to several of our colonies in America. These practices will not be discontinued unless the Intendants and other officers in the French Ports... be not absolutely prohibited from conniving at those Embarkations, and do not receive orders to prevent them'.

Rochford then gave details of some of the ships which were known by the British government to be in French ports loading cargoes of warlike stores for America. He went on:-

> 'This is publickly known to be an illicit trade at all times, and at this juncture in particular is of great prejudice to Great Britain'.

St. Paul was instructed to report these matters to Vergennes as occasion offered 'that he may at least know that we are apprised of what passes.' Rochford concluded that it was for the French, 'if their declarations have any meaning' to put the situation right without a formal protest.[50]

In his reply to this letter, St. Paul made a very significant

observation. Having given details of his conversation with Vergennes about this, during which Vergennes repeated his assurances, St. Paul went on:-

> 'As your Lordship does not allow me to make a formal complaint, I can only mention narratively to M. de Vergennes the circumstances which you have been pleased to communicate to me, and I am therefore afraid (if it is the intention of the French court to connive) at this illicit commerce) that such language will not have the desired effect of putting a stop to it'.[51]

St. Paul had, in this passage, put his finger on the basic weakness of the British approach to the question of arms traffic between France and the rebels. If the French were determined to assist the colonists, then mild and informal protests such as St. Paul had been instructed to make, would have no effect. If, as appeared to be the case, Rochford was convinced that the French court was trying to deceive Britain, then firmer action should have been ordered either at this point or shortly afterwards. Instead both St. Paul and Stormont, after he returned, continued to make informal complaints which Vergennes and Maurepas parried with little difficulty. In his final despatch before Lord Stormont returned, St. Paul again stressed that there were many ways in which the French could help the rebels without Britain's knowledge, and he concluded:

> 'I am now afraid that there is some duplicity in the action of this court'.[52]

Lord Stormont returned to Paris at the end of October and immediately had an audience with Vergennes. At this meeting Stormont was subjected to the full force of Vergennes' persuasive powers. Vergennes used the strongest language in his denial of any intention on the part of France to see Britain's problems increased. Stormont was impressed. He reported that Vergennes had spoken

> 'with the Air and Manner of a Man who speaks his Real Opinion'.

Stormont also had an interview with Maurepas, who gave him similar assurances.[53] However, although Stormont was initially impressed by the apparent sincerity of the French ministers, he was not deceived for long, and soon after his return he was relaying reports of American ships in the ports of France.

In addition to the return of Stormont to Paris this period also witnessed political changes in Britain. These occured as a result of

the cabinet crisis of November 1775 which led to the replacement of Rochford and Dartmouth by Weymouth and Germain respectively. Rochford, who had held his post since before the French had begun to show an interest in the Americans, was well acquainted with the attitudes of the French ministry and knew that they were playing a devious game. His replacement, Lord Weymouth had an aggressive reputation, acquired during the Falkland Island Crisis of 1770; he was disliked and distrusted by the French - 'un Anglais fougueux, fermé à toutes considérations contraires à l'ambition de son pays'.[54] Yet at the same time it is possible that Weymouth, who had been the scapegoat for the crisis of 1770, had taken this lesson too much to heart and was now reluctant to launch England upon another crisis. As we shall see, his letters to the ambassadors in France were generally far from aggressive in tone.

If it is beyond doubt that aid was being sent from France before the government's decision to sanction it, then there can equally be no doubt that this aid assumed far greater proportions after that decision was taken on 10 May 1776. There were at least four companies that were known to be sending military supplies and equipment to the rebels. These were:- Roderigue Hortalez and Company, the fictitious trading company founded by Beaumarchais with the backing of the French and Spanish governments; the Montadouin Brothers; Pilarne Pennet and Company; and the House of Benson at Bourdeaux. In addition to these trading companies, there were private individuals who took it upon themselves to send supplies. The best known of these is probably Dr. Dubourg, a friend of Benjamin Franklin, who had hoped to fill Beaumarchais' role as the official channel of aid from the French government. The extent of this aid can be seen by the fact that in the year 1777 over 80 ships left Bourdeaux for America, while many others would have taken their cargoes to the West Indies where it would have been sold to Americans or smuggled into America on smaller vessels.[55]

It is then plain that many valuable cargoes of supplies and equipment were sent by the French to the rebels. It is also clear, from a reading of the correspondence between London and Paris, that the British government knew that these supplies were being sent. Throughout the period from 1775 to the end of 1777 there were constant despatches from Stormont and St. Paul in Paris and from Captain Frazer at Dunkirk which reported this. However, as with French naval

preparations, all three generally qualified their reports by stating their opinion that, although France was helping the rebels, she would not go so far as to ally with them. They argued that France would not risk a war on an issue that had nothing to do with French interests, at a time of financial weakness and military and naval reforms, and because they felt that France, like Spain, would be well served by a long and exhausting war between Britain and the colonies.

Nevertheless, in spite of this belief that France would not openly join the rebels, both Stormont and St. Paul were always counselling vigilance and attention to Britains defences:-

> 'You know how little we can depend upon anything but our own Vigilance, which at all Times, but especially while so able and active a Minister presides at the Admiralty Board, will I am sure, guard against the possibility of a surprise'.[56]

The following month, Stormont wrote again on the same theme:-

> 'Indeed, My Lord, after all we know of the present insidious policy of this court it is impossible to place the least Dependence upon their Friendship or Good Faith. We can operate upon Nothing but their Fears and trust to nothing but our own Vigilance and superior Naval Strength'.[57]

If the envoys in Paris were hopeful that France would not actually join the Americans in the war, they left the British government in no doubt that they were aware of the deceitful nature of French policy towards the rebels:-

> 'Tho' I repeat, as is my Duty, the assurances I receive from this Court, tho' I give them credit to a degree, for their pacific wishes and Intentions; yet I hope your Lordship will not think that I am of such easy Credulity, as to believe that they do not connive at the Succours being sent from this country to America'.[58]

It can therefore be clearly seen that the British government was informed that aid was being sent by the French on a large scale to the rebel colonists: it is also clear that the British envoys stressed the need for vigilance and preparation of the defences of Great Britain, and also that they had pointed out that informal protests were unlikely to change the policy of France. Equally it is evident that the envoys knew that the French government knew about this traffic in arms and supplies and encouraged it, if they were not actually involved in it. There is no need here to make a detailed

catalogue of the types of aid that were sent by the French to the rebels or of the assistance that was given to American privateers in French ports, for these can be found elsewhere.[59] We must now examine the response of the British government to these moves by France, and try to see why the steps which they took were not more effective.

The position of the British government appears to have been extraordinarily simple. Except for Lord Sandwich, whose anxiety has already been noted, the cabinet was almost wholly concerned with the situation in America and paid little attention to the preparations in France and Spain or to the aid that was sent from those countries to America. Both the government and the opposition felt that the key to the situation lay in America, although they each approached the problem from a different angle. The government was divided between those who favoured total suppression of the revolution and those who favoured a degree of compromise which would result in a settlement which did not constitute a surrender for either side. The opposition felt that the British ought to come to an agreement with the rebels at any price short of actually granting the Americans independence. Both sides therefore agreed that America must remain within the Empire, and it was the government's methods which attracted the support of the majority of Members of Parliament. The American war was an actual problem, it was happening at the time and therefore it appeared to be the most important factor.

A further reason why American affairs took up so dominant a position in British policy is to be found in the personalities in the cabinet. With the appointment of Lord George Germain, in November 1775, as Secretary of State for the colonies, the cabinet acquired a man of energy, a man of considerable debating skill, but also a man who had been courtmartialled for cowardice. The first two factors in Germains character were certainly those which made him seem to be a desirable acquisition for the cabinet, which relied almost solely on North himself to defend it in the House of Commons. However, Germain's reputation for cowardice made him an ideal target for opposition attack, and also gave him tremendous determination to push the American war through to a successful conclusion, in order to redeem himself. Germain's instructions, which fitted in well with this wish, were:

> 'to pursue with dogged inflexibility his forceful punitive policies towards those "misguided children" the Americans'.[60]

Germain came into the cabinet in the face of opposition from the two old established Secretaries of State, and he very soon managed to create an atmosphere of hostility in his dealings with Lord Sandwich at the Admiralty which persisted right through into 1777. But, despite these apparent handicaps, Germain also had certain factors in his favour. First, he drew strong support from the King, whose approach to the American problem was similar to Germain's. Second, Lord North's weak leadership in cabinet left the field open for these meetings to be dominated by a man who had strong opinions and was prepared to express them. Third, the American war became, at about the time of Germain's appointment the most important issue in British politics, which it had not been until then. These three factors

> 'and his own positive personality resulted in his directing for several years a major British war, more single-handed by than any man of his time except Pitt'.[61]

There can be no doubt that the major factor in the creation of Germain's position of strength was the personality of Lord North. To argue, as has been done by Robson in his article on North, that North was not "prime minister" in any meaningful sense and that the doctrine of collective responsibility did not exist in the 1770's is not a proposition that will stand examination. It was true, as North himself pointed out, that the eighteenth century system of government provided for little more than a loose co-ordination of policy by the first minister, but such a system was totally unsuited to a wartime situation. That this was known at the time is shown the fact, which Robson himself points out, that both ministers and civil servants expected North to give a positive lead. War called for firm leadership, as had been shown by Pitt between 1757 and 1761; North's government, more talented in its individual parts than Pitt's had been, collapsed under the strain because it lacked a leader. For this role, North had 'neither aptitude nor ability', and the results were catastrophic. Instead of concentrating upon a vigorous prosecution of the war, the ministers fell to bickering; Robinson described them as 'hating I may say, but I am sure not loving each other', and portrayed them as anxious to leave cabinet meetings as soon as possible.[62]

North's position as first minister was further complicated by two other factors. The first of these, which may have accounted for North's reluctance to give a firm lead in cabinet, was that he was personally opposed to the plans for the military subjugation of America. He believed that the financial and commercial losses which would be incurred by this operation would far outweigh any military victories which might be won. However, here as in many other areas, men of stronger will prevailed upon North to act as they felt was right and not according to his own wishes. The second complicating factor in North's position was his relationship with the King. Despite the fact that North's views on the American problem were different from those of George III, the King refused North's requests to be allowed to resign. Whether or not Lord North wanted to resign is not material here, the fact was that he asked to be allowed to do so on several occasions, but each time his request was rejected. The King saw Lord North as the focal point of the government, and the government as the focal point of the American policy. If North had been allowed to resign, the King foresaw surrender to the Americans as the logical consequence. That was a prospect he could not tolerate.[63]

Both the government and the opposition concentrated on the American problem, and both had realised its great importance for Britain's world position. There can be no doubt too, that both groups knew of the danger which threatened from across the channel, and that both gave serious consideration to the possibility of French intervention. The government knew of the possibility from the despatches sent by its envoys in Paris and also from the information which was gathered by its agents throughout France. Any one who had seen these despatches and reports could be in no doubt that, despite its assurances to the contrary, the French government was at best doing nothing to prevent aid from being sent to the rebels, and at worst was preparing to give them open assistance. Even Germain, who derided the suggestion that France would help the rebels in his speeches to Parliament, admitted in his letters to Generals Howe and Clinton that this was a distinct possibility. The opposition, although denied access to the official reports, was also well informed about the assistance which was sent from France to America. Many opposition members were in sympathy with the colonists and had either

direct or indirect channels of communication with the colonial representatives and their friends in France.[64]

The opposition favoured a policy of concessions to the Americans for two reasons. First, as what might be termed the more liberal group in politics, they sympathised with the colonists. They were prepared to admit that there had been a certain amount of injustice in the way the colonists had been treated. But, they were vehemently opposed to any idea of granting independent to the colonies. Second, they favoured concession through fear of France. They were afraid that the colonists, unable to achieve independence on their own, would turn to France for help. This would, lead to a situation where Britain would lose the colonies and at the same time France would gain in terms of military prestige and trade. To avoid such a situation the opposition advocated a policy of concession to all American demands short of independence in order to restore harmony within the Empire and so leave Britain free to concentrate upon a war with France, if that country should decide to start one. Such a policy seemed to be highly desirable. If France did not choose to attack Britain, then the objects would have been achieved: America, placated by concessions, would remain within the Empire of her own free will; no troops would be required from Britain to hold down the sullen colonists which the opposition foresaw if military conquest should succeed; and Great Britain would retain her trading links with the Americans. If the French should choose to attack, then the British, without the American diversion would be more than a match for the House of Bourbon.

However, there were two factors which made such a policy quite impractical. First there was the attitude of the King. In eighteenth century politics the King's support was still essential for the survival of a government, and such a policy as was advocated by the opposition would never have gained the support of George III. The King was opposed to concessions to the Americans and would rather have abdicated than have made concessions without a struggle.[65] Second, the major portion of the political classes in eighteenth century Britain would not accept the opposition's policy. They believed the Americans had to be brought to heel.

In the government's opinion, the safest method of avoiding the world war which, like the opposition, they saw threatening them if

France became involved, was to inflict a sharp and decisive defeat on the Americans. They were confident that the British troops and the continental mercenaries which had been hired to help them could achieve such a victory, and that such a victory would achieve the aims of British policy far more surely than concessions would do so. That is to say that it would prevent any thoughts on the part of France of giving aid to the rebels, and avert any ideas of using the American war as a powerful drain on British resources during a struggle between the Bourbon powers and the British Empire. Such a view was well summed up by Lord Stormont when he wrote that the 'public Tranquility' depended upon two things 'constant vigilance at Home, and uninterrupted success in America'.[66]

This was the policy which was finally adopted. It had three principal weaknesses. First, military success in America could not be guaranteed, and indeed in the long term it proved impossible to achieve; second, the government, lacking any positive leadership and direction, and increasingly torn by ministerial jealousy and disputes, failed to maintain the 'vigilance' which Stormont so often stressed was essential; third, and possibly most significant, this policy meant that while all the government's attention was focussed on obtaining victory in America, a passive policy was pursued towards France. Such a policy, aimed at avoiding at all costs a breakdown in relations between Britain and France until success was achieved in America, enabled the French to take far greater liberties in their policy towards the colonies than would normally have been the case.

These weaknesses proved fatal. There has been agreement from that time to this that the rebels would have been unable to carry on the war without the aid sent from France. The correct way for the government to have proceeded would have been to sever the link between France and America, and leave the rebellion to wither and die. General Sir William Howe wrote in November of 1776 that the only thing which kept the rebellion alive was the hope of aid from France:-

> 'If that door were shut by any means and it were publicly known here, it would in my opinion put a stop to the rebellion upon the arrival of the re-inforcements in the Spring'.[67]

If it can be argued that Howe could have been seeking to cover his own

failure to crush the rebels by finding other reasons for their strength then we have the evidence of modern historians with no such axe to grind. Stephenson, in his article about the supply of gunpowder, draws the conclusion, after a detailed examination of the evidence, that without the regular and substantial imports of powder the revolution would have been forced to a standstill long before the Saratoga Campaign even began.[68] R.B. Morris also gives it as his opinion that

> 'without this French aid, to which the Spanish initially contributed their mite, the Patriots could not have sustained their military effort, kept their armies in the field ... or confronted and conquered the Redcoats and Hessians at Saratoga'.[69]

However, inspite of this clear evidence that it was French aid which sustained the rebels, the British made no definite attempt to prevent these shipments from being sent. The only attempts which were made were the type of informal protests which St. Paul referred to (see above pp. 112 - 113). What was required was a strong formal protest if results were to be achieved; however there is evidence that instructions were issued to Stormont which expressly forbade such actions. As early as December 1775 he wrote:-

> 'This, (the French involvement with the Rebels) however, My Lord, I never pretend to see, but always seem to rest entirely satisfied with the assurances they give me.
>
> This was the general Line which His Majesty's wisdom marked out for me before I left England, and from this Line, without positive orders, I shall not depart'.[70]

Thus we can see that Stormont had clearly been given orders during his stay in Britain, that he was not to make strong or formal protests to Vergennes or Maurepas about the operations of the Americans in French ports. The object of such orders was to avoid provoking France into a war until such time as the colonies had been subdued.

However, all the signs which we have noted suggest that, at no time before the victory at Saratoga, were the French sure enough of the Americans' determination to be willing to commit themselves to open war. Even after Saratoga the French ministers hesitated and did not commit themselves until Vergennes became anxious that unless France committed herself the Americans would make peace and the opportunity would be lost. To add to the fact that France was

reluctant to commit herself to joining the rebels, there is also striking evidence of success on the one occasion when the British did make a forceful protest. This came on the subject of the American privateers that were using French port facilities. On 4 July 1777, Weymouth wrote to Stormont:-

> 'It is His Majesty's pleasure that you acquaint the French Ministers, that however desirous His Majesty may be to maintain the present Peace, He cannot, from His respect to His own Honour, and His regard to the Interest of His trading subjects, submit to such strong and public instances of support and protection shown to the Rebels by a nation that at the same time professes in the Strongest terms its Desire to maintain the present Harmony subsisting between the two Crowns. The shelter given to the armed Vessels of the Rebels, the facility they have of disposing of their Prizes by the Connivance of Government, and the conveniences allowed them to refit are such irrefragable proofs of support, that scarcely could more be done if there was an avowed Alliance betwixt France and them, and that We were in a state of War with that Kingdom'.

Stormont was instructed to say all this to the French ministers,

> '.... expressing at the same time that an explanation is desired, not a menace intended; but on full consideration of the circumstances they must be satisfied Peace, however earnestly wished, cannot be maintained, unless an effectual stop is put to our just causes of complaint'.[71]

Here at last was a strong protest which was made on the basis of sound evidence. The results of this were to be very interesting. Five days later, on 9 July, Stormont reported his conversations with Vergennes and Maurepas on this subject. Maurepas had appeared to be very uncomfortable in the face of this new and more aggressive approach on the part of the Ambassador. He instructed Stormont that he should take all the details to Vergennes. Stormont did so, and Vergennes, confronted by the facts, promised action. He said that French crewmen would be withdrawn from the privateers, and that the privateers would be expelled from French ports. Stormont gave it as his opinion that the zeal of the French in carrying out these promises would depend on the success of British arms in America.[72] But, six days later,

Stormont reported an official reply from Vergennes which stated that orders had been given to seize three privateers until guarantees could be obtained that they would return to America; that prizes were no longer to be brought into French ports or sold at them, and that the facilities granted to the Americans should not extend beyond the limits of legal trade - i.e. powder and supplies of munitions should not be sold to them.[73]

Thus it can be demonstrated that by applying heavy diplomatic pressure at a time when the fighting in America seemed to be favouring Britain, the British government caused a considerable reduction in the assistance rendered to the Americans; and this reduction filled the American envoys in Paris with despair. Had such resolute action been taken in regard to the French programme of aid at an earlier stage, and had it been vigorously pursued, it seems probable that the amount of aid which reached America from France would have been drastically reduced, and the outcome of the American War might have been totally different. As it was, the British policy towards France was regarded as being secondary to events in America. The result of this was that when British fortunes took a turn for the worse in America, Britain became involved in a world wide war at a most inopportune moment. Graham has written:-

> 'When the British Government finally decided to resort to force, it was a blunder of the first magnitude not to have applied that force directly on land and sea in overwhelming strength'.[74]

If this was a blunder, it was equally disastrous that the government failed to adopt a policy of vigorous protest against French involvement in the struggle from an early date to support its efforts in America.

NOTE A

The term 'Guardship' appears to have been subject to a variety of interpretations to judge from the numbers of ships which were classed as such at different times. There are three figures which illustrate this well which are to be found in the King's correspondence. At the end of 1775 there were said to be 19 'Guardships'; on 20 June 1776 there were 29 vessels 'completely fitted out as Guardships'; while on 23 October 1776 the figure had contracted to 23 'Guardships in commission'.[75] The only definition of a 'Guardship' which I have been able to find is that it was a ship of the line which was three fifths manned.[76]

FOOTNOTES TO CHAPTER V

Page No.	Footnote Number	Reference
87	1	Doniol H. Histoire de la Participation... vol.i, p.244
88	2	See Doniol H. Histoire de la Participation... vol.i, p.244 and Corwin E. S. French Policy and the American Alliance of 1778 pp. 9-22.
88	3	Doniol H. Histoire de la Participation... vol.i, p.284. See also Meng J. J. 'Secret Aid in the American Revolution' in A.H.R. xliii pp. 791-795 for evidence dating these documents.
90	4	P.R.O. SP/78. 297. Stormont to Weymouth 20 December 1775.
90	5	P.R.O. SP/78. 298. Stormont to Weymouth 28 March 1776.
91	6	See Stephenson O.W. 'The Supply of Gunpowder in 1776' in A.H.R. xxx, pp.271-281, in which it is argued that it was only through French aid that the rebels were enabled to sustain their war effort.
92	7	P.R.O. SP/78. 293. Stormont to Rochford 21 September 1774 (Secret).
92	8	P.R.O. SP/78. 293. Stormont to Rochford 21 September 1774 (Confidential).
92	9	P.R.O. SP/78. 299. St. Paul to Weymouth 12 June 1776.
92	10	P.R.O. SP/78. 299. St. Paul to Weymouth 26 June 1776.
93	11	P.R.O. SP/78. 299. Captain Frazer to Weymouth 21 June 1776.
93	12	P.R.O. SP/78. 299. Stormont to Weymouth 3 July 1776. (Most Secret)
94	13	See P.R.O. SP/78, 295. Despatches from St. Paul to Rochford between 3 April 1775 and 18 April 1775; from the fact that this scare and that of the following year (see SP/78, 299. St. Paul to Weymouth between 12 June 1776 and 3 July 1777) were both first reported by St. Paul and found to be groundless, it may be suspected that St. Paul took alarm more easily than Stormont.
94	14	P.R.O. SP/78, 296. St. Paul to Rochford 3 May 1775.
95	15	P.R.O. SP/78, 299. Stormont to Weymouth 10 July 1776.

FOOTNOTES TO CHAPTER V (CONT'D)

Page No.	Footnote Number	Reference
95	16	P.R.O. SP/78, 294. Rochford to Stormont 25 November 1774.
96	17	P.R.O. SP/78, 299. Stormont to Weymouth 10 July 1776.
96	18	Doniol H. Histoire de la Participation... vol.i, pp. 337-338.
96	19	See Phillips P.C. The West in the Diplomacy of the American Revolution pp. 38-43 for the different motives of France and Spain; and Corwin E.S. French Policy and the American Alliance of 1778 pp. 106-112. It is worthy of note that Florida Blanca was furious when war broke out between France and Britain, and blamed D'Aranda for causing it - see Rousseau F. 'La Participation de l'Espagne a la guerre d'Amerique, 1779-1783', in Revue des Questions Historiques lxxii.
97	20	P.R.O. SP/78, 299. St. Paul to Weymouth 8 May 1776.
98	21	Parliamentary History... vol.xviii pp. 305-313.
99	22	ibid. p.1365
99	23	ibid. p.1367
99	24	ibid. pp. 1371-1372
100	25	ibid. pp. 1379-1380
100	26	ibid. pp. 1380-1381
100	27	ibid. pp. 1382-1384
101	28	The term 'Minister' in the eighteenth century was generally used to mean ambassador. Lord Weymouth would have been referred to as 'the Secretary of State'.
101	29	Parliamentary History... vol.xviii pp.1389-1390.
101	30	Correspondence of King George III... ed. Fortescue vol.iii p.205 no.1644.
102	31	ibid. p.206 no.1645.
102	32	ibid. p.206 no.1646.
103	33	ibid. p.378 no.1894
103	34	ibid. p.380 no.1895
104	35	ibid. p.380 no.1896
104	36	ibid. p.389 no.1905
104	37	ibid. p.396 no.1918
106	38	P.R.O. SP/78, 300. Weymouth to Stormont 25 October 1776.

FOOTNOTES TO CHAPTER V (CONT'D)

Page No.	Footnote Number	Reference
107	39	P.R.O. SP/78, 300. Stormont to Weymouth 30 October 1776. (Most Secret)
107	40	Parliamentary History... vol.xviii p.1449(1776) and p.841 (1775).
108	41	Sandwich Papers... ed. Barnes & Owen. vol.i, pp. 216-217.
109	42	Miller J.C. Triumph of Freedom 1775-1783 p.267; and Dumaine A. 'Le Comte de Vergennes et l'Independence des Etats Unis' in Rev. d'Hist. Dipl. xxxvii pp. 438-9.
110	43	Kite E. Beaumarchais and the War of American Independence vol.ii pp. 48-51.
110	44	ibid. pp. 57-59.
110	45	Doniol H. Histoire de la Participation... vol.i, p.372.
111	46	P.R.O. SP/78, 295. Rochford to Stormont 27 January 1775.
111	47	P.R.O. SP/78, 295. Stormont to Rochford 1 February 1775.
111	48	P.R.O. SP/78, 295. Stormont to Rochford 8 March 1775.
112	49	P.R.O. SP/78, 296. Rochford to St. Paul 15 September 1775.
112	50	P.R.O. SP/78, 296. Rochford to St. Paul 29 September 1775.
113	51	P.R.O. SP/78, 297. St. Paul to Rochford 4 October 1775.
113	52	P.R.O. SP/78, 297. St. Paul to Rochford 18 October 1775.
113	53	P.R.O. SP/78, 297. Stormont to Weymouth 31 October 1775. (Separate).
114	54	Doniol H. Histoire de la Participation... vol.i, p.202.
114	55	Miller J.C. Triumph of Freedom 1775-1783. p.291.
115	56	P.R.O. SP/78, 300. Stormont to Weymouth 10 October 1776. (Supplement to Most Confidential)
115	57	P.R.O. SP/78, 300. Stormont to Weymouth 20 November 1776. (Most Confidential)
115	58	P.R.O. SP/78, 297. Stormont to Weymouth 6 December 1775. See also SP/78, 300 Stormont to Weymouth 11 December 1776. (Private).

FOOTNOTES TO CHAPTER V (CONT'D)

Page No.	Footnote Number	Reference
116	59	See especially: Miller J.C. Triumph of Freedom 1775-1783, Chapter XV 'The French Alliance'.
117	60	Valentine A. Lord George Germain. p.100.
117	61	ibid. pp. 106-107.
117	62	Robson E. 'Lord North' in History Today (1952) pp. 532-538.
118	63	Valentine A. Lord George Germain pp.159-160.
119	64	Details of the correspondence between rebel sympathizers in London and those in Paris are to be found in SP/78 300, Stormont to Weymouth 6 November 1776 (Confidential).
119	65	George III prepared a document of abdication even after the war had been lost. See Brooke J. King George III p.356.
120	66	P.R.O. SP/78, 301. Stormont to Weymouth 1 January 1777.
120	67	Miller J.C. Triumph of Freedom 1775-1778 p.274.
121	68	Stephenson O.W. 'The Supply of Gunpowder in 1776', in A.H.R. xxx p.281.
121	69	Morris R.B. The American Revolution Reconsidered p.98.
121	70	P.R.O. SP/78, 297. Stormont to Weymouth 6 December 1775 (Most Secret)
122	71	P.R.O. SP/78, 303. Weymouth to Stormont 4 July 1777.
122	72	P.R.O. SP/78, 303. Stormont to Weymouth 9 July 1777 (Most Secret) and (Separate and Secret).
123	73	P.R.O. SP/78, 303. Stormont to Weymouth 15 July 1777 (Most Secret).
123	74	Graham G.S. 'Considerations on the War of American Independence' in Bull.Inst.Hist.Res. xxii p.23.
123	75	See Correspondence of King George III... ed. Fortescue vol.iii pp. 308-311, 378-380 and 396 respectively.
123	76	Sandwich Papers... ed. Barnes and Owen vol.i, p.201.

CHAPTER VI: ESPIONAGE AND INTERCEPTION

Apart from two brief references to these two subjects in the previous chapter, little attention has been given to any influence which they may have had upon the formulation of government policy. The reason for this omission is very simple: a study of the period has made it clear that neither the reports from British agents in France, nor any information that may have been gathered from intercepted correspondence, played an important part in deciding British policy towards France. However, since both these methods were employed by the government to obtain information, it is now proposed to examine them briefly, to see first what information was obtained and whether it was important, and second why this information was not used.

It was on the question of intercepted correspondence that my interest in this period was first aroused. In particular I was curious to find out whether any of the letters written by Beaumarchais to his friends and contacts in England and, when he was himself in this country, to his masters in Paris, had been intercepted and read by agents of the British government; if they had been intercepted and read it seemed beyond doubt that they would have been of considerable interest because they were filled with indiscreet language.

From a very early date, Beaumarchais urged Louis XVI to believe that the British would seize the French and Spanish islands in the Caribbean, whether they won or lost their struggle with the Americans.[1] In September 1775, while he was in London on a mission relating to the Chevalier d'Eon, Beaumarchais met John Wilkes and began to realize the possibilities for starting a trade in arms and ammunition between Europe and the rebellious colonists. From this point on, Beaumarchais' letters show that he had made the link between these two items. He constantly urged the need for France to assist the rebels and also warned against the hostile intentions of Britain.

In April of 1776 Beaumarchais returned to London, and began to write a series of letters to the French ministers at Versailles. As an official agent of the French government, furnished with a mission by Sartines to give him protection, Beaumarchais was in a delicate position. That he was aware of this cannot be doubted, for he had written in 1775:-

> 'It would be an unpardonable blunder in me to compromise in any such affair, the dignity of my master, or of his minister .....'.[2]

But, although he was aware of this, Beaumarchais made no attempt to moderate the language which he employed in his letters. In April 1776 he wrote from London:-

> 'Les Americains sont d'ailleurs aussi bien qu'ils se puisse. Armées de terre, flotte, vivres, courage, tout est excellente. Mais sans poudre et sans ingénieurs, comment vaincre, ou même se defendre?
>
> Voulons - nous donc les laisser périr plutôt que leurs prêter un ou deux millions?'.[3]

He then went on to urge Vergennes to return to the King and persuade him of the benefits which would accrue to his country from this small amount of aid to the rebels.

Vergennes replied to Beaumarchais while the latter was still in England, and his reply was significant. He wrote that although there were advantages to be gained from helping the Americans, as Beaumarchais had seen, there were also disadvantages which he had overlooked. However, Vergennes then went on:-

> 'Cette préface n'est point destinée à réfuter votre prévoyance, que je loue, au contraire, et j'approuve. Mais ne croyés pas, parcequ'on ne la saisit point avec rapidité qu'on la rejette ... Pensées y bien, et vous me trouverés plus près de vous que vous ne l'imaginés'.[4]

These letters clearly show that the French ministry was moving towards Beaumarchais' opinions on this subject. There are two questions which are raised by these letters and by the subsequent correspondence between Beaumarchais and Arthur Lee in London: was the British government aware of these letters; and if it was aware of them, did it take any action based on the information gathered from them?

The earliest reference to Beaumarchais in the correspondence between the Secretary of State and the British envoys in Paris came, perhaps surprisingly, in a despatch from Paris rather than one from London. The following extract from this despatch shows the extent and efficiency of the intelligence network established by the British embassy in France:-

> 'I must now mention, My Lord, that I have good grounds to believe that for some months past, there have been French agents in England, endeavouring to procure sums of money for the Rebels in America, from their friends in England, in order to convey them in French ships to the French islands, and from thence to the Congress. M. de Beaumarchais is, I understand concerned in this Business, but he is not alone; within these 18 months he has made 8 voyages to London, and in the space of three weeks, he went twice'.[5]

From this time onwards, Beaumarchais was closely watched. He was already suspected by the Foreign Office in London, and it was for this reason he had been furnished with a mission from Sarticues to buy up old Portuguese coinage in London for use in the Caribbean.

On 14 August 1776 Stormont reported to Weymouth that a man called 'Dana' had recently been to Paris. This man, Stormont reported, was either an agent of the American congress or was at least in communication with that body.[6] On 16 August 1776, Weymouth wrote to Stormont, in a letter which would have crossed with that just quoted:-

> 'Mr Deane, one of the Connecticut Delegates, was appointed by a secret committee for foreign negotiations named by the American Congress as Deputy to the Court of France to induce that Court to a favourable disposition and to ask from it supplies of arms and clothing for 25,000 troops with 200 brass field pieces ..... Deane arrived at Bourdeaux early in June and at Paris early in July, and soon afterwards had a long conversation with Monsr. de Vergennes, who proposed in order to avoid suspicion that M. Gerard should be the vehicle of so much of their correspondence as did not require a personal interview .....
>
> About the middle of July, Deane asked from the French ministry in behalf of the Congress, arms and clothing for 25,000 men together with 200 light brass field cannon.
>
> The arms were immediately promised by Monsr. de Vergennes, and Deane was given to understand that Persons would be found who would furnish the Clothing on the Credit of the Congress ....
>
> Beaumarchais was recommended to Deane by Monsr. de Vergennes as a proper person to supply the Congress with such other Goods and Commodities as they might want. Beaumarchais offered to credit them to the amount of three millions. Deane proposed

> to obtain from him a quantity of Ammunition and other Articles wanted by the Congress'.

Weymouth concluded by asking Stormont to try to verify this information, and stressed the need for great secrecy in such an investigation.[7]

This despatch is an astounding testimony to the efficiency and viligance of the espionage services of Great Britain. Only on 10 June 1776 had the French government given Beaumarchais his funds and only after that date had Roderigue Hortalez and Company been set up,[8] but it is clear that this process had been carefully watched. Only two months after this had happened the government was able to furnish Lord Stormont with this report on the method by which the French ministry was sending aid to the rebels. The information which enabled them to compile this report had not come from the embassy in France, but must have been derived from the reports of British government agents working in France. The accuracy of this information was reflected by Stormont when he wrote to the Secretary of State on 21 August confirming almost all the information which Weymouth had given him.[9] From then onwards the watch on Beaumarchais became intense. British employed spies followed him everywhere he went, and the surveillance was so complete that when Beaumarchais left Paris secretly, without even telling his mistress of his destination, the British ambassador knew exactly where he was.[10]

Later the same year, a further despatch pays tribute to the excellence of Stormont's spies and links the question of information to interception of correspondence. In this despatch, Stormont gave details of the system by which letters were sent from Beaumarchais in Paris to the friends of America in London. Beaumarchais wrote his letters to a gentleman called 'M. Morand', but he addressed them to 'Mr. Wall, at Mr. Moores, Crutched Fryars'. The replies from 'M. Morand' were sent to 'M. Manon, Chez M. Simon, Imprimeur du Parlement a Paris'. Stormont wrote:-

> 'This correspondence, which is trusted to the common post, would be well worth looking into, but it is essential that the letters should not be stopped, nor opened in such a Way as to beget the least suspicion'.

He also gave details of the addresses to which letters were sent for Deane, Franklin and Bancroft from people in England and a list of the names of those in England who wrote to the rebel envoys. He recommended looking into any letters where the names of these people

appeared: he felt such investigations might well 'lead to very useful discoveries'.[11] In his reply, Weymouth wrote

> 'I am not unmindful of the information Your Excellency has given with respect to the correspondence carried on by the persons mentioned in your Letter'.[12]

From this veiled reference, it seems not unlikely that Weymouth did infact order the interception of these letters. We should now turn to a brief examination of the system by which letters were intercepted.

Interception of correspondence was carried out by the Post Office, through which all letters passed, except those which were sent by special messenger. Within the organization there was a separate department known as the 'Secret Office', which was maintained and directed by the Secretaries of State. This was headed by a permanent Civil Servant who was known as the 'foreign Secretary'. Orders to intercept correspondence could only be given by a secretary of state or the Prime Minister, and the officials of the Secret Office had to take an oath not to open any letters without express orders from a proper person. Those despatches which were opened were copied, re-sealed and sent on. The copy was then sent to the King and from the King to the Secretaries of State. There can, therefore, be little doubt that any information obtained in this way would have been known to the Cabinet.

Despatches coming from France were read in the Secret Office for the entire period between the peace treaty of 1763 and the outbreak of war in 1778. However, after 1766 the intercepted letters were classed as private papers and were not kept on file, which has made them harder to trace. However, the despatches were read consistently in this period, and, as Dr. Ellis has written,

> 'The best tribute to the standard of security came from foreign governments, diplomats and private correspondents continually trusting the Post Office and providing the government with valuable information'.[13]

However, although these despatches were read, and although they would have contained much useful information, little use seems to have been made of that information, and little warning taken by the British government. Indeed the absence of any mention of interception, or knowledge gleaned from it, in the King's correspondence is very striking;

and, apart from the references given above, there is no further mention of the subject in despatches between London and Paris.

There were, of course, a number of factors which could reduce the value of interceptions, particularly in regard to official despatches to and from embassies. First, any really important despatch was likely to be sent by messenger and therefore would never go near the Post Office. Second, letters could be written and sent by the common post, which were intended to be intercepted; it is possible that some of the letters from Vergennes to Guines in London fell into this category for these contained re-assuring language which was not consistent with the real aims of French policy. Third, in this particular case, the French ambassador in London was not trusted by Vergennes and therefore, especially towards the end of his period in London, he was not kept informed of the real objectives which France was pursuing.[14]

If there were, thus, some concrete reasons for the British government not to trust the evidence of French aid which it obtained from intercepted correspondence, we must now consider whether there were similar reasons for its failure to use the reports which were sent to London, and to Lord Stormont in Paris, from spies who were employed to gather information.

Espionage was as common in the eighteenth century as it is today, and the British were not the only nation to make use of it. However, there can be no doubt that in the War of American Independence the British were well served by their agents. One major reason why the Secret Service was so efficient, is that a large number of Americans remained loyal to the crown. These men were able to pass themselves off as rebel sympathisers and thus gain the confidence of important figures on the colonial side, thus providing a constant stream of information for the London government.[15] At least two authors have shown convincing proofs of the excellent work done by the British agents Bancroft, Thornton, Hynson and Carmichael who were employed to inform the British about the relations between the rebels and the French ministry; details can also be found of the organization of the Secret Service with William Eden, Secretary to Lord Suffolk, at its head, assisted by Paul Wentworth.[16] In addition, two other types of agent were used. First there were men employed by the Admiralty to watch the French ports and relay information to London about

activities in them. It was from these reports that the papers of intelligence to be found in the Sandwich papers were compiled. As we saw in Chapter IV, these reports gave an accurate impression of the development of French naval strength. The second class of spies were those who were employed by the ambassador at Paris. These were generally paid to watch particular people or places or for individual pieces of information. It was from these sources that Stormont gathered his information about the movements of Beaumarchais, Deane and other leading figures in the negotiations; and also information about council meetings and secret audiences between the French ministers and the American envoys. Rather than catalogue each incident in which information was obtained or reported, it is our task to observe what effects these reports had.

There can be no doubt that the Admiralty took notice of the reports which it received from its agents, because we have already seen that Sandwich became more alarmed at each new report of French strength. However, the information gathered and sent to England by Stormont and St. Paul often seems to have had little or no effect. The government rarely took any action however loudly its envoys in Paris proclaimed the need for it. The most likely explanation for this seems to be that the information passed on by the envoys was too often inaccurate and unreliable. For example, at the end of the naval scare of 1775, St. Paul wrote to inform the government that he had been assured that there was no armament taking place, and that the alarm had been caused by the removal of naval stores from their warehouses so that the quantities could be checked. At the end of this depatch, St. Paul wrote that the information upon which his reports had been based had come from 'one of the principal channels of Intelligence, well known to Lord Stormont'.[17] When the information of the ambassador or his deputy was frequently shown to be based on reports which turned out to have no foundation, it is perhaps not so surprising that the government did not take alarm at reports from that quarter.

However, if the government was frequently correct not to believe the reports which it received from its embassy in Paris, no such justification can be found for its failure to take account of the detailed information which reached it through the network of agents organised by Eden and Wentworth. Bancroft in particular has been

shown to have provided much vital information. How was it that this intelligence was given little or no weight in the government's deliberations on policy?

The answer to this question appears to lie in the attitude of King George III to the Secret Service. The King was unwilling to believe intelligence reports, and his robust refusal to do so seems to have crushed such attempts as were made, especially by North, to bring these reports to his attention. The King's attitude has been well summarized by Brooke:-

> 'Secret Service money, as its name implies was used to meet State expenditure that had to be kept secret ... King George III thought that money spent in this way was largely thrown away.....
>
> Spies always seemed to imagine that they were paid for their reports at so much a word, and so if they had no information, they invented it. They were credulous, ill-informed, and of doubtful moral character. The King disliked having to resort to corruption and espionage'.[18]

The King's reluctance to dabble in this kind of operation is also clearly shown by certain passages in his correspondence. In January 1776 North wrote to him:-

> 'Lord North has the honour of transmitting to his Majesty two letters from Mr. Wentworth, which agree with other intelligence and leave no doubt of the essential assistance that France and Spain have promised, and are on the point of affording to the Rebels'.[19]

North received no reply to this letter, although the King did send instructions to Sandwich that more ships were to be sent to America to prevent the import of arms and powder from the Caribbean islands.

A later exchange between the King and North makes the position clear. By this time the King had conceived a fierce dislike of spies, especially Paul Wentworth, and North was clearly aware of this and was trying to change the King's mind. In December 1776 North reported a letter of intelligence to the King which confirmed that the French ministry had given orders that American vessels were to be convoyed out of the Bay of Biscay by French frigates. Evidently this had already been reported by Wentworth and had received a hostile response from the King for North wrote:-

> 'Hence it appears that there is such a report in France, and that is it believed by others than Mr. Wentworth'.

He then went on to point out that although Wentworth's information had usually been unpleasant, it had usually been accurate:-

> 'Almost everything he has told us .... has been confirmed either by Van Zant, or Lee's Journal, or the papers delivered by Hynson or by some other event'.

North went out of his way to make it clear to the King that this was not an isolated report and that it did not depend upon Wentworth for its foundation, but had been confirmed by a city merchant who had no connection with Wentworth.[20] The King remained unmoved. He replied that Wentworth's letter was

> '.... so exact a copy of that from the Ambassador that it does not require great astuteness to see that the intelligence has been collected from the former. Whether it is exactly true or not, we are taking all the steps that would be proper if the intentions of our neighbours should prove as represented'.[21]

The King's dislike and distrust of Wentworth and his kind were reaffirmed in the strongest possible terms in November 1777:-

> 'The two letters from Mr. Wentworth are certainly curious, but as Edwards (this was Bancroft's code name) is a stock-jobber as well as a double spy no other faith can be placed in his intelligence but that it suits his private views to make us expect the French court mean war, whilst undoubtedly there is good ground to think that the Event is more distant than we might suppose six months ago. Mr. Wentworth, I suspect is also a dabbler in the Alley and as such may have views, I am certain he has one, the wish of getting some employment'.[22]

Time and again the King rejected intelligence reports on the grounds that those who sent them, if they were not actually dishonest, at least had some personal aim in view. There may have been some foundation for these doubts, for it is certain that Bancroft did make money on the stock exchange and that he was a double, or more likely, a triple agent. To succeed in gaining the confidence of the rebel envoys, Bancroft went to extraordinary lengths, even to being arrested while in London and to becoming involved with the arsonist

'John the painter' who set fire to the naval dockyard at Portsmouth.[23] However, although there may have been doubts about the morality of the informants, the information was repeated so frequently and from so many varied sources, as Lord North pointed out (see above p. 132), that to ignore them was extremely foolhardy.

The King's refusal to believe the information which was gathered by the British agents seems to have totally prevented the use of that information in the determination of British policy towards France. Only in a few particular cases, (such as that described on pp. 126 and 127 above) was this information used, and then only for tactical rather than strategic purposes. In this respect the King must surely bear a heavy responsibility for the loss of the war, for had these reports been believed it seems certain that Britain's policy towards France would have been different, and had they been acted on Britain would surely have been better prepared to face France when war finally broke out between the two countries in 1778.

FOOTNOTES TO CHAPTER VI

Page No.	Footnote Number	Reference
124	1	Beaumarchais Correspondence ed. Morton vol.ii, pp. 137-138.
125	2	Kite E. Beaumarchais and the War of American Independence vol.ii p.44.
125	3	Beaumarchais Correspondence ed. Morton vol.ii pp. 189-192.
125	4	ibid. p.197
126	5	P.R.O. SP/78, 299. St. Paul to Weymouth 1 May 1776.
126	6	P.R.O. SP/78, 299. Stormont to Weymouth 14 August 1776.
127	7	P.R.O. SP/78, 299. Weymouth to Stormont 16 August 1776.
127	8	Kite E. Op.Cit. vol.ii, p.82.
127	9	P.R.O. SP/78, 299. Stormont to Weymouth 21 August 1776. (Very Secret).
127	10	Miller J.C. Triumph of Freedom 1775-1783 p.280.
128	11	P.R.O. SP/78, 300. Stormont to Weymouth 6 November 1776 (Confidential)
128	12	P.R.O. SP/78, 300. Weymouth to Stormont 22 November 1776.
128	13	Ellis K.L. The Post Office in the Eighteenth Century p.77. Information on the workings of the Post Office is derived from this work. That the government did gain valuable information in regard to French aid to the rebels from intercepted letters, can be seen from the copies of letters, mainly from America, in: Hist.MSS. Comm. Dartmouth Papers, Fourteenth Report, Appendix X pp.285, 341 and 350.
129	14	SeeDoniol H. Histoire de la Participation... vol.i, pp. 189-195.
129	15	Miller J.C. Triumph of Freedom 1775-1783 p.281.
129	16	See Bemis S.F. 'The British Secret Service and the French-American Alliance' in A.H.R. xxix pp. 474-484. For the work of Thornton see also Correspondence of King George III... ed. Fortescue vol.iv, pp. 45-47.
130	17	P.R.O. SP/78, 295. St. Paul to Weymouth 18 April 1775.
131	18	Brooke J. King George III p.389
131	19	Correspondence of King George III... ed. Fortescue vol.iii, p.327.

FOOTNOTES TO CHAPTER VI (CONT'D)

Page No.	Footnote Number	Reference
132	20	ibid. p.410
132	21	ibid. p.415
132	22	ibid. p.481
133	23	For Bancroft's dealings on the stock exchange and his triple agent status see Bemis S.F. 'The British Secret Service and the French-American Alliance' in A.H.R. xxix; for the confession of John the Painter implicating Bancroft in this plot against the navy see Correspondence of King George III... vol.iii p.423.

CHAPTER VII: CONCLUSION

The aim of this study has not been to examine Britain and America in the conventional sense, that is to say the disastrous Saratoga campaign or the quarrels between Germain and the generals in America; nor to examine the reasons why Britain failed to subdue the colonies. This study has been concerned with Britain's relations with her traditional enemy in Europe during the years between 1775 and 1778. It is now time to sum up the findings by asking whether Britain's policy was dictated by French actions or freely chosen, whether that policy was the right one, and if it was not the right one, then we should see why it was not, and whether there were better alternatives.

From the facts already given there can be no doubt that France played a vital role in enabling the American colonies to liberate themselves from Britain. She helped the Americans in four major ways. First, by sending supplies of military necessities to America, particularly gunpowder, cannons and shot; second by sending experienced officers and engineers to assist the American army which was particularly weak in these two respects; third, by allowing American privateers to use French ports as shelters in both European and Caribbean waters, thus enabling them to inflict considerable losses on English merchant shipping and to hinder the supplying of the British army in America; fourth, by providing a distraction for the energies of Great Britain, for, with the threat of a French attack, the British feared to concentrate all their resources on the American struggle. It is therefore beyond doubt that the British needed to formulate a definite policy towards France.

It seems that there were three options open to the British, two of which attracted attention at the time, and we should now examine these. First, let us look at the position of the opposition. They began, as did almost all politicians of the day, with the firm belief that the colonies could not be allowed to obtain their independence; to achieve this end, they advocated that the government should make meaningful and worthwhile concessions to the colonists in order to retain their loyalty, and the vital American trade, especially in timber.

They also argued this policy of concession for two more practical reasons. First they had serious doubts about Britain's capacity to

subdue the colonies, for they were better informed than the government about the strength of feelings in America. But even if the colonies were to be subdued, the opposition argued, then Britain would face the task of ruling a reluctant population of conquered colonists at 3,000 miles distance; this would require garrisons of troops. Thus even if the revolt were to be suppressed, the result would be to cause bitter resentment on the part of the colonists, and increased expenditure for many years to come. Second, and to the opposition most important, they argued that if the war with America was permitted to drag on, then sooner or later France would seize the opportunity to take revenge for her defeat in the Seven Years War.

Concession to all colonial demands save that for independence would, so it seemed, achieve all that Britain desired. The colonists would remain British of theirown free will and thus no expense would be incurred by having to impose British rule; the American trade and timber would remain dominated by Britain; and France would either refrain from attacking Britain once she had no other commitments, or, if she did attack, Britain would be able to face her confidently.

Such ideas had a considerable appeal for the writers of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. They could be held to symbolize the attitudes of Britain's liberal democracy while at the same time protecting British trading interests. In addition there were ideas here which would have appealed to those familiar with representative government and Dominion Status as the opposition appeared to advocate a limited form of self government for the colonists. However, these ideas had one overriding weakness. They attracted little or no support at the time they were put forward. This was the case because the opposition, which advocated this course, was divided among itself; because the majority of the political class at the time felt that the Americans ought to be disciplined; because the King was opposed to such a policy;[1] and because it rapidly began to be realized that the colonists would not be content with anything less than independence.

The second of the three options available was to pursue an armed struggle with the colonists in order to reduce them to obedience. Since it was the case, in the eighteenth century context, that the

support of the King and the support of Parliament were necessary to be able to govern, the policies of the government were constrained within the limits of the attitudes described above. Before we examine this policy in detail it should be noted that there were members of the ministry who were far from enthusiastic about subjugating the colonies. North himself was far from harsh in his attitudes, while Lord Barrington was opposed to the idea of a land war in America[2] and the Adjutant General, Lieutenant General Harvey wrote:

> 'to attempt to conquer it (America) with our British Army is as wild an idea as ever controverted common sense'.[3]

However, despite these objections the majority of the members of the government and the majority of the political class favoured war, and so the government chose this policy. They argued, like the opposition, that the Americans could not be allowed to become independent, but they concluded from this that the colonists must be reduced to their former status, and then arrangements could be made. It can be seen, from the example of the Quebec Act, that the government was prepared to pursue enlightened policies towards the colonies, but first the Americans would have to accept colonial status and Britain would have to prove her supremacy. To support this attitude, they argued, overconfidently, that the American farmers and peasants would show little enthusiasm for fighting and that they would have no chance of success when faced by the British Army and its German mercenary reinforcements.

The opposition's policy of concession to the colonists would have circumvented the need for formulating a policy towards France for they felt that France was the central problem, and therefore that America should be sacrificed in order to be ready to meet the French. But the government's policy did not offer any such easy solution. We know that the government was aware of the policy pursued by France and that aid was going from France to America in considerable quantities. They also knew that, with Britain committed to war in the colonies, France would have an ideal opportunity to gain revenge for her defeat in the Seven Years War, but the government's solution to this problem, and the key to their policy towards France, was very different from that proposed by the opposition.

The government based its policy upon the fact that, as Stormont frequently wrote, France would not decide to enter the war until the Americans had proved their ability and determination to stay in the conflict. Therefore, the government felt that the way to prevent France entering the war was not, as the opposition advocated, by making concessions to the rebels, but by achieving crushing military successes in the colonies. This would wipe out the American diversion of British resources and, at the same time, give the French proof of British military strength. Thus, the government dominated by the powerful personality of Lord George Germain concentrated almost all its energies on the American conflict, hoping by doing so to prevent France entering the war. However, there can be no doubt that the government was foolish to put its full faith in this policy, and to fail to take action in regard to the preparations made in France and the assistance sent from France to America. That they knew of both these factors is beyond doubt and it is equally clear that Sandwich, alarmed by the advantage of the Bourbon fleets, urged Britain to take actions to meet the threats, but was consistently ignored by North; and also that Stormont frequently urged that Britain required not only success in America but also vigilance and preparation at home, in order to avoid a dangerous situation.

For all the errors made by the government in its handling of the situation in America, and for all its stupidity in failing to take separate measures to deal with the French threat, it seems clear beyond doubt that the government's policy was a more realistic and sensible one than that of the opposition. With the French reluctant to enter the war and the majority of Members of Parliament opposed to concessions to the colonists, it seems likely that a swift and decisive success in America would have removed most of the danger from the situation.

The two courses of action already considered were those which attracted attention at the time, but there is also a third option which, although there is no evidence to suggest that it was actively con sidered, certainly has much potential interest. This is the possibility that it would have served Britain's purpose to have threatened France, in the early stages of the war, in 1776 or 1777, that unless she stopped sending aid to the colonists, she would have to face war with Great Britain.

This suggestion is based on the following premises. First, that the aid sent by France to America constituted a valuable source of support to the Americans. Indeed we can go so far as to say that it was vital to the rebels, for such an opinion was given at the time by General Sir William Howe (see above p. 120) and his since been clearly shown to be the case by the researches of Dr. Stephenson. Without this aid it does indeed seem to have been the case that the American revolt would have collapsed. Second, the facilities granted by the French to the American privateers created a situation in which there was a constant menace to British shipping in European waters and in the Atlantic. Therefore a force of British ships had to be made ready in order to patrol these waters to ensure, as far as possible, safe passages for British merchantmen, and supply ships on their way to America. This caused considerable expense to Britain, especially because the ships used for these duties were mostly ships of the line since the majority of Britain's frigates were in American waters. French aid therefore did not only drain Britain's resources in America, where resistance was prolonged by it, but also damaged Britain by means of these losses of merchant shipping and through the increased expenditure required to try to furnish protection to the merchant shipping and capture the American privateers.

In the light of these factors it can be argued that Britain and France were, beneath the calm surface, really in a state of war. All the benefits of the situation accrued to France, where, for the expense of fairly small sums of money, the government could watch the Americans sap Britain's fighting strength; while all the disadvantages fell on Britain, where the government had to pay to fight a war in America which was sustained by France, and also had to equip a fleet of ships to patrol the Bay of Biscay and the eastern Atlantic, and yet Britain could not actually gain anything at French expense.

In addition to these factors, we can be certain from the writing of Vergennes in the Considerations and the Reflexions that the French did not wish to join the war until they knew that the Americans were committed to war and were likely to win; although Lord North's government did not have access to these documents, it was frequently informed by Stormont that the French were most unlikely to join the war if the rebels appeared to be losing it. For example in October 1776 he wrote:-

> 'There is no Country less disposed than this is to take up a losing game .....'.[4]

We also know that on the only occasion when Stormont was ordered to make a strong protest to the French on the subject of the privateers, the French Ministry was greatly disturbed, and took prompt action to remedy the situation.

In the light of these facts it seems likely that, had Britain pursued a policy of vigorous protest against the assistance rendered by France to the Americans, had Britain even threatened France with war if she did not take steps to put her professions of friendship into practice, the results of such an action would probably have been beneficial. Even if the French had refused to comply, and war had followed, the situation of Britain would hardly have been worse, for her fleet was forced to go to sea to defend the merchantmen any way. Indeed the situation might have improved for in a state of war Britain would have the chance to seize French possessions and shipping; and British morale, somewhat low in the war against the colonists, would probably have risen in a war against France. Certainly the situation would have been no worse than it was in 1778 when the French finally declared their hand and joined the war. However, instead of such a policy of protest, we have clear evidence that Stormont was under instructions not to do anything which might offend the French administration (see above pp. 121 - 122).

Finally we must return to a consideration of the British government's policy towards France. It has usually been argued that the initiative in this period lay with France, to decide whether or not she would join the war. But, from the evidence submitted above, it can be suggested that this was not the case, and it can be argued that it was Britain which was in the commanding position. It was the success or failure of British arms in North American which was the deciding factor in the French decision; if the British had defeated the rebels all Vergennes' attempts to pull the wool over Stormont's eyes, most of which failed, would have been to no avail, and the manoeuverings of Franklin and the other envoys at Versailles would similarly have been in vain. For although France was keenly aware of the opportunity she was offered by the American revolution, it is not convincing to argue that she was committed to war from an early stage. Her refusal to help the Austrians in the Bavarian Succession crisis stemmed from a wish to be able to join the war if

a suitable occasion occurred rather than from a determination to join the war at all costs. In fact it seems to have been the case that even after Saratoga the French were reluctant to commit themselves, and it was only fear of losing the chance which made them join the war.

Until the end of 1777 the British government's policy of pursuing military success in America in order to keep France out of the war had some success. The fall of New York in 1776 was described by Lord Stormont as a 'Thunderstroke' to the hopes of the French[5] while he reported that the news of the Battle of Long Island was a 'decisive blow' and that Vergennes had appeared much put out by the news of the British victory.[6] However, if such a policy were to succeed it required greater energy than Lord North was prepared to devote to it. The War in America required vigorous prosecution with large numbers of troops and a sizeable fleet, and the French court, which was unwilling to join the Americans until the end of 1777, ought to have been pressed to give concrete proofs of its professed friendship towards Britain. Had these two things been done it seems likely that the government's policy, which had been selected to avoid a war with France, to retain the colonies under British rule and to meet with approval from the British Parliament, would have succeeded and would have been praised rather than criticised both at the time and subsequently.

FOOTNOTES TO CHAPTER VII

Page No.	Footnote Number	Reference
135	1	See Correspondence of King George III... ed. Fortescue vol.iv, pp. vi and vii.
136	2	Valentine A. Lord North vol.i, p.378
136	3	Valentine A. Lord George Germain p.118.
139	4	P.R.O. SP/78, 300. Stormont to Weymouth 16 October 1776 (Secret)
140	5	P.R.O. SP/78, 300. Stormont to Weymouth 13 November 1776 (Confidential)
140	6	P.R.O. SP/78, 300. Stormont to Weymouth 16 October 1776. (Secret)

APPENDIX

Since the research for this thesis was done two works have appeared which contain information on the period in question. In this section it is proposed to summarise the arguments of each work as briefly as possible in so far as they affect the above work.

(1) Dull, J. R. The French Navy and American Independence. Princeton, New Jersey. 1975

In this book, the author is mainly concerned to re-appraise the motives which guided the actions of the French ministry in first helping the Americans and then allying with them, and then with showing the part played by the French Navy in helping the Americans to gain their independence. He begins by examining in some detail the position of France in 1774, stressing her weakness and showing that this dictated a cautious policy towards Britain. In particular he draws attention to the weakened condition of the French Navy which he attributes to four years of neglect between 1770 and 1774.

He deals, in considerable detail, with the struggle in the French ministry during the spring of 1776 as to whether the French ought to send clandestine aid to rebels. It is his contention that Turgot, who had hitherto been the dominant force in the ministry was now becoming unpopular as a result of his economic reforms. This enabled Maurepas, Vergennes and Sartines (upon whose activity as a propoment of war Dull lays considerable stress) to unite in a campaign to drive Turgot from power.

For 1777 Dull paints a picture of increasing tension between France and Great Britain which led up to the privateering crisis of

the summer. He writes:-

> 'Vergennes and the council were forced to move with great caution during the period of French rearmament, balancing the need to sustain the Americans and prepare for a war against the need to avoid precipitating a war for which France was not yet prepared.'

To support the idea that France was anxious to avoid a premature rupture with Britain, Dull later shows that there was panic among the French ministers when the British made it clear that they expected severe action to be taken against the American privateers and stated that if such action was not taken war between the two countries would probably be the consequence.

Dull's work, in the sections which cover the period under discussion here, is mainly concerned with French affairs. There is a considerable degree of agreement between what Dull has written of French policy and what I have written above, although I believe that there is room to doubt the extent to which Maurepas was an active advocate of war, and particularly the way in which Dull presents Britain's policy over the privateering crisis as merely an attempt to discredit the French in American eyes and to prevent the French from sending further troops to the West Indies, rather than as a serious threat of war. But despite these issues, Dull's work tends to show that France was anxious about the possibility of an early break with Britain, and this therefore confirms the point made above that Britain held an advantageous position in regard to France in the early stages of the conflict, if only her leaders had acted with the spirit and determination to exploitFrance's fears.

(2) Harris, R. 'French Finances and the War of American Independence' in Journal of Modern History. 1976.

This article is concerned with the effects of the war on French

finances, and particularly with discovering how far the crisis in the Royal finances of 1789 was a result of the strains imposed on France by the war of American Independence. Harris is particularly concerned to vindicate the reputation of Necker, and this concern is outside the scope of the present enquiry. The most important point made by Harris is that the effects of the war were far less important than has been thought hitherto. This discovery tends to detract from the arguments of Turgot at the time that the war would prove to be the ruination of France. However those arguments were advanced very powerfully at the time by Turgot, and the fact that we can now show that they were inaccurate does not detract from the influence they would have had on the minds of men at the time.

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