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THE QUESTION OF FRENCH INVOLVEMENT in the American War of Independence frequently becomes entangled in much larger issues that often obscure the reasons France became involved in the first place and what the consequences were for subsequent French history. Overly simple assumptions are commonly asserted about eighteenth-century French foreign policy and Franco-British animosity, on the one hand, and excessively large, often undemonstrable, historical claims are frequently made on the other. Both are too easily accepted by scholars and students, with the result, among other things, that the question of French naval strategy during the war is poorly handled, treated only obliquely as an adjunct to British strategy, and frequently so misunderstood that only a caricature remains.

Historians often view France's chief strategical problem as defined by the nation's role as "a classical hybrid power," torn between its continental aims and its overseas ambitions.[1] By accepting the permanent existence and reality of this geopolitical model, they are drawn to conclude that even during the American War of Independence—when for once, in Paul Kennedy's phrases, the French "resisted the temptation to attack Hanover or to bully the Dutch," "fought *only* overseas," and "concentrated their resources upon a naval and colonial war"—they failed to conquer, and managed only to humiliate, their British foe.[2] In

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these analyses, French war aims are never identified, except to say that somehow defeat of the enemy, as opposed to conquest, was not enough. Whatever the aims were, however, France in some way was unable to achieve them, accepting the discomfiture of its enemy as a sort of half-measure.[3] This is a summary of fairly common views concerning the role of France during the American War for Independence.

A second issue involves conclusions generally held about the connections between France's involvement in the war of American independence and, a few years later, the French Revolution: first, that France was chiefly responsible for the independence of the United States of America; and second, that the war's burdens led directly to the collapse of the monarchy and the advent of the Revolution.[4] The latter can be found even in distinguished and specialised works. The diplomatic historian Jonathan Dull, for example, claims to show how the war "raised dangers from within the monarchy far greater than those which threatened it from without"; nowhere, however, does he demonstrate that the war brought about the monarchy's downfall or even that it led to any internal destabilisation of the regime.[5]

In view of the ubiquity of such a flawed geopolitical model, and also having in mind the propensity of many (especially political economists) to ignore the roles in history of the particular and the idiosyncratic and to play down the factors of character and circumstance, we should guard against misleading generalisation and reductionism. In the case of France's involvement in the War of Independence, although France did not in fact threaten the Electorate of Hanover (whose ruler was also King of England) or any other part of Germany and, far from bullying the Dutch, struggled hard (for very good reasons) to ensure their neutrality, it did not fight only overseas. Further, though this was in fact a naval war and the French were able to apply their resources accordingly, it was never solely a colonial one (as Kennedy would have it), and they were not free to concentrate their naval forces in the American theater. Indeed, it was precisely because France had to retain so much of its naval strength in Europe that its strategy frequently appeared hesitant and ambiguous. Finally, France did not just "settle for" the humiliation of Great Britain in lieu of better; in fact, its leaders had never intended anything else. Indeed, they explicitly rejected any other plan.

The study of French naval strategy may well be an excellent introduction to certain larger issues, for it reveals that although French naval strategy may have appeared uncertain, ambiguous, and hesitant, that impression was due in part to the character and conduct of senior French naval commanders. One sees, however, that it was also a reflection of the internal weakness of the French political economy and the challenges and difficulties facing French political leaders as those men took the momentous decisions that led France to intervene in the rebellion of the British American colonies and join the latter's struggle for independence. In the end, the French navy forced the surrender of the only large British field army remaining on American soil. Whether this achievement should be seen as the major cause of the independence of the United States, let alone as having anything to do with the French Revolution, is debatable. To study French naval strategy, then, is to deal rather with the events and campaigns of the war.

"A Strategy of Men"

French strategy in the American war was a product of men, whose character and perceptions of the world must be considered in order to understand their strategy's ambiguities and hesitations. Several recent studies of their careers also provide a more complete understanding than heretofore of French foreign and domestic policies that influenced strategy. Chief among the persona is Louis XVI himself, whose recent biographers have seen in him less the dullard of their predecessors than a ruler who was thoughtful, informed, and devoted, if neither strong-willed nor determined.[6] Three of his ministers as well have been subjects of new revisionist studies that are especially pertinent. The first is Jacques Necker, whose place (or position) in French history has been completely altered during the past thirty years. Louis XVI made him director-general of finances in 1776 after the only real opponent of the war, Anne-Robert-Jacques Turgot, resigned from the Royal Council. A Protestant, commoner, and foreigner, Necker was responsible for a conscious policy decision to finance the war through borrowing rather than raising taxes. Historian Robert Harris has shown convincingly that Necker's conduct throughout the war was a model of fiscal restraint, financial responsibility, and prudent management.[7]

The second minister is Gabriel de Sartine, former lieutenant-general of the Paris police, who served as Louis XVI's first secretary of state for the navy from 1774 until 1780. He was primarily responsible for resuming the reform and rebuilding of the navy and the stockpiling of materiel in dockyards in anticipation of the coming war with Great Britain, a policy that had been suspended since the dismissal of the duc de Choiseul in 1770.[8] Sartine also succeeded in obtaining the largest French annual naval appropriations of the eighteenth century in order to accomplish his task, but he went too far when, in 1780, he allowed the treasurer-general of the navy to issue unauthorised *anticipations*, short-term notes issued by financiers on future revenues. These notes, in the amount of 21 million livres, forced up the interest rate on French government borrowings by half a percentage point, thereby upsetting Necker's calculations; in October of that year the director-general of finances engineered the downfall of Sartine and his replacement by an ally, Charles de la Croix, marquis de Castries, a lieutenant-general of the army.[9]

Castries was an excellent choice at the time, probably superior to Sartine, whose ambiguous instructions to naval commanders revealed the uncertainty of his aims.[10] A soldier and veteran of the mid-century wars, Castries was also a reformer; he introduced much-needed vigour and a personal interest in naval campaigning that had been lacking. He was chiefly responsible for the aggressive strategy of 1781 and for the selection of new commanders, especially Admiral de Grasse, for the fleets being readied that year.

Necker's success in replacing Sartine was matched two months later in December 1780 when he manoeuvred to replace the comte de Montbarey, the war minister, with the marquis de Ségur, like Castries an army lieutenant-general, a veteran of the mid-century wars, and an ally. But this demonstration of Necker's growing influence combined with his peace feelers to Great Britain to threaten the two most important men in the government, the elderly comte de Maurepas, the king's chief advisor, and the comte de Vergennes, secretary of state for foreign affairs and the chief architect of French war strategy.[11] When in February 1781 Necker published his famous *Comte rendu au roi*, which explained his financial policies to the French public, he roused the ire of both men, and his days were numbered. He was dismissed from office three months later, and his reforms and prudent management rapidly began to unravel.

In brief, then, French naval strategy was neither economically determined nor the product of geopolitical forces. It was designed by men. Just as historian Piers Mackesy showed, on the British side, that strategy itself must be restored to its place alongside diplomacy and military operations as a legitimate part of the history of the American War of Independence, so too must the perceptions and prejudices of the French political actors be given importance in accounting for the origins, features, and modifications of French war strategy in general and naval strategy in particular.[12] Of no one was this truer than Charles Gravier, comte de Vergennes, the third of Louis's subordinates to receive recent attention. Louis XVI appointed Vergennes minister and secretary of state for foreign affairs in 1774 and relied on him until his death in 1787.[13]

Vergennes and His Strategy

Two conceptions of international politics dominated Vergennes's thinking, and it was both his strength and his weakness that they guided his foreign policy and war strategy. The first was an ambition to restore France to its traditional (in French eyes, rightful) place as arbiter of relations between the powers in the European competitive state system. Second was his understanding that France's reduced position in the 1770s was chiefly the result of the outcome of the great and multifarious mid-century struggles known collectively as the War of Austrian Succession (1740–1748) and the Seven Years' War (1756–1763). These conflicts, by bringing France and Great Britain into direct confrontation overseas, had undermined the traditional primacy of continental issues in the interstate system. The existence of a new and largely independent competitive arena overseas marked international affairs in the years leading up to the American War of Independence (and would continue to do so during and after that conflict). France, unable to break free from membership in an Eastern European anti-Prussian alliance, had few attractive continental options for improving directly its position in that theater. Therefore—though already trapped in other overseas commitments and although doing so further constrained its role in European affairs—France directed its foreign policy overseas, against Great Britain.

The purpose of this anti-British policy, then, was to end British preponderance and restore the "natural" balance of power in order to pursue more fully French interests on the continent. At no time was the comte de Vergennes interested in destroying Great Britain. He was far too experienced to imagine that the other great powers would permit such a thing, even had it been possible. His own words, written to the French ambassador to Spain, make this perfectly clear: "We must work resolutely to weaken this enemy of ours, but we must not display intentions which would only do us harm because the jealousy they would arouse against the House of Bourbon [i.e., the French crown] would give England friends and allies."[14]

The challenge to French strategy by the late 1770s was far greater than is sometimes imagined by those who see merely the need to resist the temptation to attack Hanover or the United Provinces (modern Holland) in order to concentrate resources on an overseas naval war. What needs to be made clear is that French naval strategy—and this key fact accounts for much of the real and apparent hesitation with which it was executed—could not be made by France alone. Vergennes was deeply aware in 1778 that, despite four years of naval rearmament, France remained too weak to proceed by itself. France required all the assistance that Spain, its Bourbon ally, could provide. Unfortunately, no one knew that better than the Spanish foreign minister, who had not the slightest interest in supporting American insurgents, acknowledging the independence of the United States, or serving as powder monkey to the French navy. Throughout the American War of Independence, Spain had its own agenda, one that included controlling and directing French strategy when and wherever possible.

Also, a strategy of striking at Great Britain overseas had serious limitations arising from the nature of the opponent.[15] Vergennes's view of the need to weaken Great Britain and his awareness of the need for the most subtle, complex diplomacy to restore French influence in Europe combined with his mercantilist outlook.[16] He assumed that British wealth and power were built on its flourishing distant overseas trade, which contributed to the nation's economic growth, encouraged the development of naval power, provided valuable revenues to the state, and connected Britain to its colonies, where plentiful supplies of cheap raw materials were exchanged for valuable metropolitan manufactures. While this recipe for power was true (and has attracted navalists, including A.T. Mahan and Sir Julian Corbett, for two centuries and more), it was not the whole truth. The fundamental source of British wealth remained its expanding and diversified agriculture, increasing industrial production, and its rapidly growing domestic transportation network, which contributed to additional consumption. Also very important, as Napoleon's continental blockade later showed, was trade with other European nations.

"Finally, France did not just 'settle for' the humiliation of Great Britain in lieu of better; in fact, its leaders had never intended anything else."

In fact, a critique along these lines had been offered—by Turgot, Necker's predecessor in finances and an opponent on principle of colonies and monopolies. Turgot's arguments, which were in favor of peace and continued until his dismissal in 1776, had been more perceptive than those of others. In the first place, he believed American independence would occur whether France intervened or not; second, he had argued that an independent America would contribute more rather than less to British trade.[17] Nevertheless, it was Vergennes's perceptions and not Turgot's that prevailed, and they account for the French naval strategy of sending major thrusts to America and the West Indies. For France's foreign minister, the independence of the American colonies was the specific overseas, or peripheral, lever that would help him achieve his greater goal, in two stages: restoring the colonial balance of power and thereby also restoring French influence in the central arena, the European competitive state system.

A key to understanding why Vergennes embarked upon so problematic a strategy was his own failure to comprehend the financial weakness of France that made naval and military reform very slow processes. A career diplomat who had spent all but two of the thirty-five years prior to his ministerial appointment outside France, he was a man with no family or social connections at court (except the king's aunt, to whom he owed his appointment). He had little awareness of the domestic political situation and no appreciation of the forces that had led in 1770 to the display of monarchical power that preceded his own appointment. Unlike Turgot, he had no grasp at all of socioeconomic conditions in the nation, nor did he have any interest in them; Vergennes saw domestic politics only in the context of international *raison d'état*. In his eyes, war with

Great Britain was unavoidable, because the latter's situation was so unnatural that peace could not last. The great strategic problem, then, was to control when, where, and under what conditions France would fight that war.

Vergennes's geopolitical view had other shortcomings as well that make the flaws in his strategy clear. First, his aim to fight Great Britain, in however limited a way, was based on his conviction that France's lost prestige and reduced position in Europe was entirely due to that nation's rise. In response, he sought for France the role of arbiter. He did not grasp that none of the five great powers could now control the conditions governing the relative strengths of the others. Second, the ideological paradox of an absolute monarchy aiding a republican uprising bothered Vergennes not a whit. For him the problem was not the independence of the United States but how France could benefit from intervening in Britain's growing troubles in America.

On the other hand, Vergennes was to achieve in this war a marriage of diplomacy and military strategy of a very high order, whereas even students of purely military strategy will grant (and Napoleon's career is the paramount demonstration) that strategy without diplomacy can have no long-term effect. His astuteness lay especially in five things, the first of which was his timing of the French intervention in America. Beginning by authorising secret financial and material assistance to the insurgents in May 1776, he gave diplomatic recognition to the United States at the end of 1777. A formal alliance committing France to achieving American independence followed shortly; finally, an expeditionary force was sent "when it became necessary" two years later.[18] The second was the subtle and difficult diplomacy used to develop the anti-British coalition. Vergennes's qualities of timing and astuteness towards the Americans were evident in their coordination in a continental initiative by which he coaxed Spain into war (1779), fostered the League of Armed Neutrality (1780), prevented a new German war from breaking out in Central Europe, and blocked the dismemberment of the Ottoman empire.[19]

Third, Vergennes never forgot that however questionable Spanish resources might be, they were indispensable; France had insufficient strength to attack Great Britain alone. Fourth, Vergennes knew when it was time to make peace, and the Treaty of Versailles (or of Paris, 1783) is his monument. Finally, it also needs to be remembered that Vergennes developed an original set of relations with the United States of America, foiling those Americans who sought a compromise peace with Great Britain while checking those in France and Spain who sought to negotiate with Great Britain, leaving American independence unachieved and France alone opposing Great Britain.

During 1778 and 1779, then, French naval strategy was ambivalent in essence and hesitant in execution for a variety of reasons, but its chief outlines are clear enough. Although a twelve-year-old plan to concentrate France's entire effort during the coming war on an invasion of England had been updated as recently as 1777, the French naval ministry had quite different ideas. There is no evidence that Vergennes was attracted before the spring of 1779 to any invasion plan or even an attack on the British navy's chief base at Portsmouth.[20] Invasion required France to draw as many ships as possible away from the British home squadron, by feints or minor thrusts against British colonies and attacks on British overseas trade, and then to strike across the Channel. The actual French naval plan was precisely the opposite: to keep the attention of the British home forces riveted on Brest and launch the primary attacks overseas in America, the West Indies, and the Orient.[21]

The drafter of this plan remains virtually unknown: Charles-Pierre de Claret, chevalier (later comte) de Fleurieu, a former student of scientific navigation who occupied the position of director-general of ports and arsenals and served as the chief administrative assistant of Sartine, the naval minister. Though Piers Mackesy refers to "the French Admiralty's planning staff," there was no such body.[22] Fleurieu was the sole French naval officer of the day who might be called a general staff officer, and it was he who drew up for the minister's signature instructions for naval commanders during the war.[23]

Therein lay one of the major weaknesses of the French navy: the absence of a collective body of seagoing officers to advise the minister concerning policy on the conduct of operations. The results of this institutional shortcoming were that a great deal was left to improvisation, naval doctrine remained undeveloped, and, despite recent reform efforts, administrators continued to wield too much power over operations. The absence of a vehicle for the expression of professional opinion such as the Board of Admiralty in Great Britain's Royal Navy also exacerbated the savage factionalism that wracked the service throughout the eighteenth century and was unchecked during the American war.[24] Even the foremost French admirals of the war, d'Estaing and de Grasse, were both to suffer the effects of insubordination and the ill will, even hatred, of some of their captains.[25] Perhaps only in the French navy, where a corps of haughty, conservative nobles virtually ignored the hierarchy of rank in favor of that of birth, would a junior captain refer to Vice-Admiral d'Estaing, the senior officer afloat, as "chicken-hearted and witless" ("un poltron et un homme sans talents").[26]

The Campaigns of 1778 and 1779

The 1778 campaign mirrored Vergennes's strategy exactly, and by and large it was remarkably successful. Far from being examples of muddleheadedness and "oafish tactics," as has recently been claimed, the conduct of sixty-eight-year-old Admiral Louis-Guillouet, comte d'Orvilliers, off the west coast of France and that of the much younger but senior Admiral Jean-Baptiste-Charles-Henri,

comte d'Estaing, deserve examination.[27] Vice-Admiral d'Estaing left Toulon in April on a multiple mission: to attack the English in Delaware and New York or anywhere he thought practicable; to support American land operations (but only north of the United States, in Nova Scotia or Newfoundland); and, after the hurricane season had passed, to proceed to Martinique in the West Indies to take British possessions in the Windward Islands and protect French islands and their shipping before leaving for France.[28]

In the Channel, French strategy was to divert British attention from d'Estaing's major thrust to America and, just as important, provoke a British attack. In order to prevent Britain from exercising the terms of its defensive alliance with Holland and thus bring the Dutch into the war, and also to avoid disturbing the extremely delicate state of Franco-Austrian relations, Vergennes needed to be able to point to British aggression. This is perhaps a good illustration of the limits of strategy designed by a diplomat; but it was no accident that France dated the outbreak of war with Great Britain at the attack of HMS *Arethusa*, frigate, on *La Belle Poule*, twenty-six guns, on 17 June 1778.[29] Throughout the next five years of war France maintained the fiction of British aggression, though not one power in Europe accepted the elaborate fraud.

When Admiral d'Orvilliers sailed from Brest in command of thirty-two ships of the line, his original instructions urging aggressive tactics were cancelled, and new ones from Sartine ordered him to avoid all risks. His chief tasks were to draw British attention to the Channel and hold it there, disguise the significance of d'Estaing's departure from Toulon, and prevent any morale-destroying British landings on the French coast.[30] Putting the best face on the events of the indecisive engagement that resulted, known to history as the Battle of Ouessant, scholar Etienne Taillemite recently concluded that although serious tactical weaknesses remained in matters of command, conception of operations, and handling of large forces, the engagement had an important effect on morale in demonstrating to the French navy that it could engage the largest navy in Europe with some success.[31] The main point, however, is that the French commander had acted as he had been instructed and trailed his coat.

The seemingly strange behaviour of d'Orvilliers at Ouessant does shed light on a larger issue bearing upon French naval performance during the eighteenth century, that quite contrary views on the purpose and aim of naval battles prevailed in France and in Great Britain. Whose views were the more valid is a separate issue; but it is clear from examples that can be drawn from the previous fifty years or more that the general French aims in war at sea were to attack seaborne trade, launch land assaults against enemy colonial possessions, reinforce French interests overseas, and escort French trade. As early as the 1730s senior French officers denied that any good could come from fleet actions, and a similar attitude prevailed throughout the American war.[32]

The hesitancy in the handling of the French fleets also owed much to their commanders' inexperience. Sartine's own uncertainty as secretary of state for the navy probably communicated itself as well. The latter may have stemmed from the enormous effort it had cost during the previous four years to rebuild the navy, and also from the contradictory policies advocated by colonial planters on one hand and metropolitan merchants (who feared the threats war posed to their investments at sea) on the other. As a miserly French merchant might have been, Sartine was anxious to preserve the great horde of wealth that the navy represented. He may have feared to risk it without a guarantee of success.[33] His hesitation, and also his surprising orders to open the French West Indies to American and neutral shipping in response to the refusal (well before the war broke out) of metropolitan merchants to fit out new trading ventures, lend support for this view.

Admiral d'Estaing, once a lieutenant-general of the army, had been "parachuted" into the navy sixteen years before the American war and had never been in a naval battle, and neither he nor d'Orvilliers had ever before manoeuvred large squadrons of ships. His conduct in America has often been criticised on the basis of his refusal in July 1778 to engage Vice-Admiral Richard Howe near Sandy Hook at the entry to New York harbour and for failing to strike some positive blow to assist his American allies.[34] Recently, however, it has been appreciated that in pursuing, as instructed, his vaguely defined mission, d'Estaing on that occasion imposed upon the British a major change of strategy, one that greatly favoured the American insurgents. Despite his maladroitness and failure a second time to engage the British, off Newport in August, and though a major storm subsequently damaged both fleets, forcing the British into New York and the French into Boston, the mere presence of d'Estaing's squadron, with or without local superiority, forced the British to alter their own strategy of suppressing the insurgents and to abandon their blockade of the American coast.

By September the British navy had been reduced to defending three urban centres—New York, Newport, and Halifax—thus opening the entire coast as far south as Florida to insurgent trade and privateering.[35] French strategy had delivered a major blow to the British war effort. The news of d'Estaing's imminent arrival in the theater in the spring of 1778 had forced the evacuation of Philadelphia. By its presence alone, the French navy had reduced British counterinsurgency to a secondary priority, of which no clearer demonstration could be had than what followed.

When the French fleet finally sailed from Boston for the West Indies in November 1778, the British navy followed, taking five thousand troops and sending three thousand more to Florida the same month.[36] In short, the French had deprived the British navy of the strategic initiative and reduced it to reacting defensively. The French began the next year's campaign enjoying strategic freedom, controlling the pace of the maritime agenda. The question remains as to how well they used it.

In the event, in 1779 the need to rely on Spanish support forced France to turn from its overseas, or peripheral, strategy back to a European, or central, one. Although Sartine and Vergennes had believed that France enjoyed effective naval parity with Britain for a few months in the spring of 1778, they had not expected French strength alone to bring results. From the beginning they knew that Spanish naval assistance was a prerequisite to success, and French diplomacy in the latter half of 1778 focused on Spain as never before. By early 1779, Spain's reluctance to enter the war had driven Vergennes to desperate eagerness to agree to any and all Spanish demands, including an invasion of Great Britain, in order to get an alliance. Fortunately, a combination of British ineptitude and arrogance pushed Spain towards France, and on 12 April the two nations signed an offensive alliance in the Convention of Aranjuez. Whether the Convention amounted to a great accomplishment of French diplomacy in that war, however, remains problematic; it allowed the Spanish to focus at will either at home or overseas, on Gibraltar and Minorca, or Jamaica and Florida, even Honduras and Newfoundland if one wanted to stretch the point.[37] Spain had much more to lose overseas than France and lacked the resources for a long conflict. It was Spain's desire for a short and decisive war rather than a long-drawn-out one that was the basis of the Franco-Spanish plan ultimately settled upon for 1779—to invade Great Britain.[38]

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The history of the "grand design," as the invasion became known, and of its deterioration into a naval and military disaster of tragic proportions, with thousands of lives lost, has been well told elsewhere.[39] However, the plan was the preference of neither French foreign policy nor naval strategy but a reflection of French military and economic weakness; it was the price for support elsewhere demanded by Spain, which had not the slightest interest in the reestablishment of French prestige in Europe. Aside from the enormous loss of human and material resources resulting from the failure of the invasion, Spanish aims produced two major detrimental effects. First, they ensured that France would have to fight a much longer war than originally planned and that the strain on the government's already weak financial structure would accordingly increase. Second, Spanish demands made it much more difficult from 1779 on for the French to concentrate sufficient resources overseas to achieve local superiority. Indeed, far from being a great accomplishment of French diplomacy, the Franco-Spanish alliance rendered French strategy after the failure in the Channel more ambiguous and hesitant than before. Support that had once been a prerequisite for victory had quickly become to some degree an impediment.

The 1779 campaign in America supports such an interpretation. On 30 December 1778, British naval reinforcements and troops from New York captured St. Lucia, to windward of Martinique, and provoked a counterattack by slow-sailing d'Estaing, who had arrived in the Antilles behind the British. Following an exchange of fire with the inferior British fleet, d'Estaing personally led his troops ashore, was repulsed by the new occupiers, and retreated to Martinique.[40] British possession of St. Lucia was of decisive tactical importance for the duration of the war. For a third time, and with superior numbers, d'Estaing had abandoned the scene of battle. At Martinique, d'Estaing quarrelled with the vigorous governor-general, the marquis de Bouillé, who three months earlier had captured, with local forces, the island of Dominica, lying between Martinique and Guadeloupe. Bouillé was justifiably angry about the threat posed to Martinique by the new British conquest.

During the winter and spring of 1779, the French lost tactical superiority in the West Indies as British ships arrived in substantial numbers but French reinforcements, because of the great demand for ships in Europe, only trickled in. Commodore (later Admiral) de Grasse arrived with five ships of the line in February, and two more escorting a convoy came in April. In June, with the aid of some of d'Estaing's ships, Bouillé captured the island of Saint Vincent, but more significant—though it had been accomplished only by cancelling the departure of a squadron destined for India—was Commodore Toussaint-Guillaume de La Motte-Picquet's arrival soon after with five more ships, which gave d'Estaing local superiority.[41]

D'Estaing acted immediately, sailing to attack Barbados. Contrary winds forced him to a new destination, Grenada, and on 2 July he landed with his troops and took that island along with thirty richly laden merchantmen. Four days later d'Estaing successfully defended his conquest against an inferior British fleet. He did not then annihilate that force, and naturally he has been criticised for this; yet, he had carried out his mission. In fact, considering that the original twelve ships of his fleet had been away from France for fifteen months, his reluctance may well be deemed prudence.[42] In all of 1779 only twelve more ships of the line were sent to the Caribbean (and none to America). Thus, after d'Estaing received orders to bring his heavily fouled ships home in advance of the hurricane season, he left only twelve of the line in the West Indies.

During the winter of 1778–1779, urgent appeals from the Americans for aid against the British who had overrun Georgia and captured Savannah had reached d'Estaing at Martinique. He could do nothing at the time, for good reasons: his numbers were then inferior, and he could not leave Martinique except for the fortnight it took to attempt to retake St. Lucia. Also, the preservation of French possessions took priority over retaking Georgia, which he thought impossible in any case. Finally, he had plans to attack instead farther north, at Halifax or in

Newfoundland.[43] Nevertheless, later in August, on his way out of the Antilles, the much-maligned admiral responded generously. Ignoring his most recent orders, d'Estaing sailed with all his ships for Savannah on a mission more in accord with his original instructions, which had been to strike a blow in aid of his American allies. Perhaps his earlier failure to do so now rankled, but that is unknown. As he had at St. Lucia and Grenada, d'Estaing put his troops ashore and led them himself in a ground assault on the British entrenchments. The French attack failed, and the admiral was wounded.[44] Getting the troops back on board the ships de Grasse had brought in February to return to the West Indies, he collected his original squadron and sailed for France. Storms scattered his ships, and they reached France only a few at a time.

Such a miserable end has obscured for historians the strategic accomplishments of the 1779 campaign, its extraordinary duration, and the fact that d'Estaing had not lost one ship to the enemy. Nevertheless, d'Estaing had shown himself to be, to say the least, a strange naval leader. His chief military activity had been leading troops in land assaults. His naval actions were utterly undistinguished; he seemed never to have grasped the nature of sea power at all. "Much more noise than work is only too often the net product of naval engagements," he reported to Vergennes.[45] No better evidence could be had of the dominant French view of naval strategy.

On the other hand, such an attitude was no indication at all of the admiral's personal courage. "If only Monsieur d'Estaing was as able a naval officer as he is brave as a man," wrote one of his captains.[46] The author was Pierre-André de Suffren, who during this campaign may have learned the lessons that were to be reflected in his aggressive conduct in the Indian Ocean only a year later. One final irony remains: that d'Estaing's last appearance in America in fact accomplished what his earlier efforts had failed to do. On learning that the French admiral had appeared at Savannah, Sir Henry Clinton decided he could no longer hold both Rhode Island and New York, and he evacuated the former. The following summer, a French expeditionary force under the command of the comte de Rochambeau would occupy Narragansett Bay and Newport without firing a shot.

The 1780, 1781, and 1782 Campaigns

French naval tactics of 1779 have drawn much criticism, but the success of that year's strategy should not be overlooked. In 1780, however, French strategy became weaker and less focused. Dissension and military ineffectiveness among the Americans discouraged Vergennes, as did the continued vigorous response of the British. Spanish emphasis on besieging Gibraltar and refusal to cooperate in joint operations in the Caribbean also contributed to hesitancy and uncertainty.[47] The French navy returned to its American strategy but with even more serious impediments to its coherence than before. In January, the British navy's successful relief of Gibraltar and destruction of the blockading force there delivered such a severe blow to morale that the Spanish government began to consider separate negotiations with Britain out of fear for the security of its overseas possessions.[48] Anticipating a threat there, Spain announced plans in February to send ten to twelve ships of the line and ten thousand men to the West Indies as early as May.[49] French naval strategy now acquired a new obligation, to prevent a defection or defeat of the Spanish, who well remembered the loss of Havana and Florida less than twenty years before. In keeping with their larger aims, the French saw as their first priority not aiding the Americans but ensuring the safety of their own and Spanish possessions in and around the Caribbean.

Sartine, the naval minister, planned to place a combined fleet off the Azores to intercept commerce and hold the attention of the enemy's home fleet, but to send his main strength once more to America. The need to contribute ten ships of the line to the mid-Atlantic Franco-Spanish force, however, strained French resources to the limit and made local superiority in the West Indies nearly impossible to achieve. Sixteen ships of the line, nine lighter warships, and eighty-three merchantmen and transports carrying 4,400 troops were sent to the West Indies under the command of sixty-seven-year-old Admiral de Guichen, whose instructions were exclusively defensive: to protect his convoy and colonial commerce, ensure free communication for French shipping, and guard the French islands from attack. As in the past, Sartine ordered him "ne rien entreprendre qu'avec la certitude du succès"—not to risk his fleet without the certainty of success.[50]

Luc-Urbain du Bouexic, comte de Guichen was (unlike d'Estaing) a typical French naval officer of the *ancien régime*. His provincial (i.e., Breton) origins, long service, lack of sea experience, slowness of promotion, and traditional tactics had all combined to earn him disdain and reproach for excessive caution and lack of initiative.[51] Guichen's orders in 1780 were "to keep the sea, so far as the force maintained by England in the Windward Islands would permit without too far compromising the fleet entrusted to him."[52] Mahan remarks that the French admiral had no alternative but to shrink from a decisive engagement; more to the point is that Guichen operated under defensive instructions that reflected not only the traditional mission-oriented strategy of the French navy—epitomized by d'Estaing's comment about naval engagements—but also the transformation of the Spanish from an asset to a liability, one that could not be ignored.

After reaching the Antilles and attaching the ships under Commodore de Grasse's command, Guichen had twenty-two ships of the line and enjoyed a slight superiority in numbers over British Admiral Sir George Rodney, who arrived shortly after him. But virtually nothing would be accomplished, due to the French admiral's instructions, which reinforced his habitual prudence. Under the urging of the governor-general of the Windward Islands, the marquis de Bouillé, Guichen planned to attack St. Lucia. The battle that ensued off Martinique on 17 April occasioned much vilification from the British admiral against his own captains and has been the subject of debate ever since; the chief results, however, were that the future victor at the Battle of the Saintes failed to put a crimp in the well handled French forces, whereas the cautious French tactician withheld his attack from St. Lucia.[53] Guichen and Rodney met twice again a month later, but after two weeks of manoeuvring to allow each to fight on his own terms, they broke off and returned to Martinique and Barbados, respectively. Rodney had successfully thwarted the planned French attack on St. Lucia.[54]

All accounts of French operations here ignore the marquis de Bouillé, which is a serious mistake. For although the naval strategy called for the capture of British islands, in fact those that fell into French hands did so chiefly due to the vigorous conduct of the governor, who spent most of the war—when he was not himself capturing islands—railing against the excessive caution of naval

"Castries also wrote to Ternay, instructing him 'to be more enterprising and not to sentence himself to a punctilious residency in Newport harbour.'"

commanders.[55] Towards the end of the war, Bouillé wrote of the French squadron, "Since the war [began], on the offensive as on the defensive, it has been much more prejudicial than useful to the king's service in the colonies where, in general, the navy has done only silly things."[56] Bouillé described one of Guichen's divisional commanders, Commodore de Sade (cousin of the notorious novelist and playwright), as a "seventy-year-old man, half-witted and ignorant, but brave."[57]

Bouillé was a trifle hard on the navy. Guichen and Rodney met three times during 1780, and in each case the British admiral accomplished little. For the French, however, this campaign marked a turning point in the war, in that the Spaniards would not have accepted another setback.[58] Guichen's eventual success was owing not to his tactical manoeuvring against Rodney but to the arrival off Martinique in June 1780 of the promised Spanish fleet, with twelve ships of the line, 146 merchantmen and transports, and eleven thousand troops. The French admiral now slipped out of Fort Royal (modern Fort-de-France) with fifteen sail and joined the Spaniards; but the latter, who had many sick on board, had no thought of joint operations and insisted instead on being escorted northward. Early in July the allied fleet departed the Windward Islands and separated at the eastern end of Cuba, the Spaniards to make for Havana and the French for Cap François (today Cap Haitien) on the northern coast of Hispaniola. There Guichen found entreaties from Lafayette and the French minister to the United States to bring his forces to the American mainland, but the ever-cautious admiral refused to disobey his orders, which made no mention of North American waters. Convoying a home-bound fleet of nearly one hundred heavily laden merchantmen that he had escorted from Martinique to St. Domingue (present-day Haiti), in mid-August he sailed for Cadiz to avoid the onset of the hurricane season.

By July 1780, however, another French force had arrived, this time at Narragansett Bay. It was commanded by Commodore chevalier d'Arsac de Ternay, and it carried a French expeditionary force under the comte de Rochambeau. Where the outcome in the West Indies had been unclear, the French strategy in America now met with success. That these seven ships of the line and thirty-two transports with 5,500 troops had arrived safely indicated that even on the defensive and in an uncertain situation the peripheral strategy remained effective—certainly Rodney's appearance in mid-September at Sandy Hook with fourteen ships confirms that the British thought it was.[59] Although the British now had three times the number of French ships in America, their commanders chose to quarrel among themselves. (The French were not the only ones whose personal animosities affected outcomes, which suggests that too much weight should not be given to the factional divisions among French officers.)

At Narragansett Bay, Ternay was astride the communications between New York and Halifax and for that matter in position to strike anywhere along the coast to the south. As autumn wore on and the danger of hurricanes subsided, he also presented a growing threat to the West Indies. The strategy was clearly intended to force the British navy to react, leaving the French in control of the pace of the war. Ternay had to be watched, and during the last six months of 1780 the Royal Navy did little else. In November, Rodney returned, like Guichen before him, to Europe; but a superior British field force remained at New York keeping an eye on the French at Newport, this at a time when British forces in the southern colonies were becoming ever more deeply mired in a murderous war of terror and counterinsurgency. Nevertheless, the French did not develop their strategic initiative in America; that failure proved deeply disappointing and combined with altered circumstances in Europe to increase the need to seek a resolution.

In France, political events that autumn also led to important changes. Some in the Royal Council favoured initiating peace, but others, accepting that any hope for a short war was already a thing of the past, advocated expanding the conflict. Though earlier in the year the combined Franco-Spanish fleet (which had spent the campaign season in Cadiz and off the western approaches to Europe) had made the largest capture of a British convoy in the eighteenth century, French policy makers had become deeply dissatisfied with its non-tactical role. Also, the secretary of state for the navy was becoming difficult; Sartine's request for the enormous sum of 173 million livres for the 1781 campaign suggested that he had become uncontrollable. This perception, combined with serious flaws in his programme of naval rearmament and his choice of commanders, left him politically vulnerable. The Spanish alliance, too, continued to be a problem; in September 1780 the Spanish foreign minister had proposed a combined attack on Jamaica, which would force the French to abandon their current strategy in favour of a Spanish aim of reconquest.[60] Finally, the growing war of attrition had become unbearably costly. Even Vergennes agreed that the coming campaign must be the last: "The means to support it are daily becoming exhausted," he wrote in February 1781.[61]

The marquis de Castries, secretary of the navy after October 1780, demanded an escalation of the war, but he was totally opposed to Spanish demands for a combined attack on Jamaica and also to those in the Royal Council who dared even consider it. He was also adamantly opposed to the current chiefs, d'Estaing and Guichen. In one of his first moves Castries ordered home all the French naval units at Cadiz, including Guichen's ships recently arrived from the West Indies. For Castries, the American war must be expanded and a new commander in chief given new freedom to determine strategy in the field. Louis XVI had promised command of the West Indies squadron to the older, more senior Admiral Charles-Auguste de La Touche-Tréville, but Castries successfully imposed his will in Council, and the king named the fifty-eight-year-old comte de Grasse.[62] The naval minister travelled to Brest in March 1781 to inspect the new rear admiral's fleet. Castries also wrote to Ternay, instructing him "to be more enterprising and not to sentence himself to a punctilious residency in Newport harbour."[63]

With no military reinforcements available (in part because of a deteriorating situation in Europe) for Rochambeau at Newport, Castries directed de Grasse to act according to a new strategy of aggression and expansion, operating in coordination with the land commanders in America to strike a strong blow during the coming fourth campaign of the war. Commodore Barras de Saint-Laurent, who went out in the spring to take command of the Newport force, was ordered to send to the West Indies American pilots familiar with the Chesapeake. A week after leaving Brest for the West Indies with his enormous convoy, de Grasse dispatched a frigate to Newport with proposals addressed to Rochambeau and General George Washington for coordinated action later in 1781. At that point he parted company also with Captain the chevalier de

Suffren, who was to expand Castries's peripheral strategy to the South Atlantic and India.[64]

Before de Grasse sailed for the West Indies, however, the French strategic situation had worsened. The British declared war against the United Provinces, which led to the seizure of St. Eustatius and other Dutch islands in the West Indies. France had always sought to preserve Dutch neutrality, knowing full well that the Dutch colonies and commitment to neutral rights and trade were of far greater strategic advantage to both France and the United States than any alliance.[65]

During the four months after de Grasse appeared at Martinique in April 1781, little occurred beyond the French capture of Tobago. The campaign appeared to be heading towards a repeat of the previous year's passive strategy, preserving the fleet rather than striking a blow. In August the onset of the hurricane season led de Grasse to seek more northerly seas. Reaching St. Domingue after leaving the Windward Islands, however, de Grasse found replies from the American military commanders to his earlier letters and also their pleas for immediate assistance. De Grasse obtained an additional 3,300 troops from the governor of St. Domingue and, in response to Rochambeau's news that French troops had not been paid for two months, he sent a frigate to Havana where, on his personal promise to pay, five million livres were raised from Spanish merchants in a single day.[66] French merchants had previously refused to provide the necessary funds. Less than two weeks later, on 30 August, Admiral de Grasse entered Chesapeake Bay, and the prelude to one of the most significant naval battles in history was over.

The subject of French naval strategy does not require any examination of the battle of the Virginia Capes or the conduct there of Admiral de Grasse. If his military capacity was not conspicuous, his energetic response to the news awaiting him at St. Domingue contributed to the speed and concentration that left the enemy outnumbered and conditioned the successful outcome of French strategy. It is also true, however, that the European half of French strategy in 1781 severely modified the American half—but also reinforced its success. That is, and although the marquis de Castries favoured expanding the war overseas, Spanish demands (and Vergennes's larger concerns) forced modification of a strategy so obviously in the French interest.

Meanwhile, growing pressure among the allies for peace challenged the strategy in yet another way. France had gone to war not to destroy Great Britain or its international influence, or to further Spanish interests, but to regain its position in Europe, which it hoped to achieve by redressing the colonial balance of power. By the end of 1781, both had been largely accomplished, the latter owing in part to the successful achievement of the half of French strategy concerned with the centre, that is, Europe.

During the summer of 1781 allied naval forces achieved success in European waters. In the North Sea, the Dutch usefully kept a British squadron occupied and contributed to stretching British naval resources to their limits.[67] More dramatically, a combined Franco-Spanish assault carried the island of Minorca. The expeditionary force was larger than anything in American waters; in July the French naval component, eighteen ships of the line from Brest under the comte de Guichen, placed itself under the overall command of Admiral Don Luis de Córdoba, whose combined fleet of thirty sail and one hundred transports safely landed fourteen thousand men on the island. Thereafter, the ships of the combined fleet spent most of the summer of 1781 cruising on the Soundings, westward of the English Channel and far from Minorca. Its aim was primarily to prevent the British from operating in the Mediterranean, but also to intercept British convoys and, in view of its own numerical superiority, to provoke a general fleet action.

It was in fact a fateful year in both theaters, and early that autumn, despite Spanish aims that concentrated resources against the British in Europe, French fortunes overseas also seemed to be at a crest. In October 1781 the British surrendered their last remaining field army in the American colonies, at Yorktown, but by then Britain had lost more than that to its allied enemies. Spanish colonial forces from Cuba and Louisiana, culminating in May a two-year effort, had seized (with the assistance of French ships and troops) Pensacola, on the coast of the Gulf of Mexico.[68] Also, during the autumn the ever-active marquis de Bouillé recaptured St. Eustatius.

Already, however, reverses were occurring. In early September the Spanish contingent of the combined fleet returned to Cadiz, forcing the now inferior French fleet to fall back into Brest. The whole Spanish alliance was thrown into jeopardy. The French reaction, at the insistence of Castries, was to plan a return in 1782 to the peripheral strategy; the focus would be on the West Indies and India, and even the cancelled attack on Hudson Bay was to go forward. In rapid preparation, reinforcements for these overseas campaigns were readied in the autumn and dispatched from France in December. Now occurred a second series of setbacks: over 80 percent of those reinforcements intended for de Grasse in the West Indies were captured, and in early 1782 a second convoy, bound for Suffren in India, was also lost.[69]

The consequences of these losses were severe. They redoubled financial strain on the government brought on by Necker's removal from office; and the defeat of de Grasse at the Battle of the Saintes in April 1782 (about which more presently) was due in some part to the missing guns, munitions, spars, and naval stores. Just how much his defeat can be blamed on this cause is unclear, but a strong argument can be made in the case of Commodore de Suffren in India.

His campaign was to be continually checked and inhibited by lack of manpower and materiel (as well as by disobedient subordinates).

Despite these disasters, French strategy for 1782 remained to attack on the periphery, but now its aim became three-fold: to force Great Britain to the peace table, keep Spain in the war, and prevent the Americans from leaving it. The French navy, however, was strained to its limits; no growing "military-industrial complex" existed at home to replace its losses. Manpower, materiel, and financial resources were exhausted.[70] And if Vergennes, Castries, and the Spanish foreign minister controlled strategy at the centre, in 1782 de Grasse had chief direction of the campaign in the West Indies, and he clearly failed.

On returning to Martinique after the battle off Chesapeake Bay, de Grasse and the marquis de Bouillé decided upon a campaign to conquer all of the British possessions in the Windward Islands. In January came the French attack on St. Kitts (St. Christophe); Admiral Samuel Hood's attempt to raise the siege was beaten off, and the island's fortress surrendered on 12 February.[71] At the end of March, de Grasse received some reinforcements, three ships of the line, but they carried new instructions that French forces were to effect a juncture with a Spanish force of warships and transports en route to the Antilles and attack Jamaica. The French had to agree; Castries left it to de Grasse, however, to choose the time of the landings. In the event, Admiral Rodney's arrival at Barbados in February gave the British numerical superiority and defensive advantage in the British Windward Islands.

According to John Creswell, more has been printed about the engagement that followed, known as the Battle of the Saintes and fought off the island of Dominica on 12 April 1782, than any other British naval battle except Trafalgar.[72] In short, it was a disaster for the French, who suffered the capture of the admiral commanding and three captains, and also the deaths of eight captains. In the aftermath, command of the French forces passed to the marquis de Vaudreuil. He gathered the surviving vessels around the convoy carrying troops of the expeditionary force that had been the original reason for sailing and made off for Cap François, which he reached on 25 April. Vaudreuil had but sixteen vessels and, following a council of war between French and Spanish officers and officials, he organised two convoys of homeward-bound merchantmen escorted by eight ships of the line, keeping with him only those ships that were copper-bottomed (and, with less bottom fouling, were therefore faster). Although the planned rendezvous with fifteen Spanish vessels now occurred, giving the allies numerical superiority, the entire offensive strategy had been shattered. Dissension and recrimination greatly increased within the French officers in the wake of the battle, and the planned attack on Jamaica was called off.[73] The French pursuit of an offensive strategy in the Western Hemisphere ended; the fleets in the West Indies remained on the defensive until the end of the war.

Franco-Spanish strategy at the centre now focused again on Gibraltar, but with the failure of yet another assault on 13 September the naval war effectively came to an end. A month later the British successfully relieved the fortress once again.[74] The ensuing engagement decided nothing; the signing of the preliminaries of peace on 20 January 1783 was exactly three months away.

France's involvement in the American war neither caused American independence, though it made a major contribution, nor made the French Revolution inevitable. The war certainly weakened France's financial system, as had previous crises, but this time the government proved unable to gain control of its debt—not because the task was impossible but because political opposition prohibited the employment of usual solutions. Men, not fate or historical forces, led France toward the Revolution.[75] This article has sought to demonstrate that French intervention in American affairs and the effect of purely military factors on French objectives in the American war were never as important as the influence exerted on the intervention itself by domestic politics, the Spanish alliance, and the exigencies of the colonial situation.

French intervention in the American War of Independence did allow France to resume, however briefly, the position in the competitive state system that it had lost twenty years earlier. From the comte de Vergennes's point of view, intervention succeeded magnificently. The decision to aid the American insurgents, the choice to fight the war against Great Britain overseas while struggling against Spanish efforts to co-opt France in its own interests, and the dispatch of the several French expeditionary corps were all primarily due to him. The 1783 Treaty of Paris not only acknowledged the independence of the United States but reestablished the prestige of France, by restraining the appetites of Prussia and the Hapsburg house of Austria, playing off the Ottoman Empire against the steadily mounting pressure of Russia and also the United Provinces against the Hapsburgs, and by reinforcing the Spanish alliance to counterbalance British power.

This was no mean feat, considering that Vergennes, unable to rely on French resources alone, had been forced to depend upon strength outside French control. Notwithstanding, and although the French seized a high degree of strategic initiative at the beginning of the war, in general their operations were inhibited. They never succeeded in shaking off the moral advantage possessed by the enemy, with his experience, skill, and arrogance. Nor did they shake off their own traditional strategic and tactical doctrines, which rejected fleet actions to destroy enemy sea forces—though it remains debatable whether the latter deserved the outright condemnation it has received from later navalists. French naval strategy also failed to rise above the ambitions and collective interests, insubordination, and inexperience of the officer corps. While this aspect needs to be taken into account, it seems scarcely surprising; strategy, after all, is socially as well as politically constructed. Personal factors neither prevented (nor caused) final French success. In fact, French naval strategy during the American War of Independence was more than a matter of keeping peace in Europe and sending major naval forces to America. Its success was due to something else entirely.

During the American War, French naval strategy took the form of an interlocking relationship between the centre and periphery, between the European and American theaters. French naval planners initially called for major thrusts to America, chiefly to the West Indies. Having to assign naval resources to the centre seemed to them a constraint, the price paid for the Spanish support that filled the vacuum of French naval weakness. Historians without exception have accepted this notion, finding that France achieved success in proportion to the degree to which it freed itself from European entanglements. But it can be argued that this "price," the invasion of England and later the conquests of Gibraltar and Minorca, may not have been detrimental to French naval strategy after all. Rather than weighing against the effectiveness of naval forces deployed to the periphery, that large French forces remained in Europe in support of the Spanish was the key to the former's effectiveness. Had the Spanish insisted instead on protection of their own colonial possessions or conquest of British possessions in the Caribbean (e.g., Jamaica) as their primary demand, it is unlikely that French naval resources would have been so available to support the Americans. At the same time, the Spanish aims, pursued with French support, considerably increased British uncertainty throughout the war, forcing the latter to retain forces in home waters beyond what the French alone would have tied up. France had not disengaged itself from Europe in order to concentrate resources in America, but rather owed its final success in America to its continued involvement in Europe. It locked the central and peripheral strategies into one.

It is not surprising that the French displayed no strategic boldness during the five years of war. French naval strategy was never clear-cut or straightforward, as many historians assume it was or ought to have been. It operated with considerable success when focused on North America, where options abounded; at the same time, it led naturally to the conduct of French admirals, which—like that of the British commanders in America, who also faced many choices—reflected cautiousness, uncertainty, and hesitation.

Notes

1. See, e.g., Paul Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers: Economic Change and Military Conflict from 1500 to 2000* (London: Unwin Hyman, 1988), pp. 88–90, 169.

2. *Ibid.*, pp. 117–8, my italics.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 89.

4. For the first claim see, e.g., William J. Eccles, *France in America*, rev. ed. (Toronto: Fitzhenry & Whiteside, 1990), p. 251.

5. Jonathan Dull, *The French Navy and American Independence: A Study of Arms and Diplomacy, 1774–1787* (New Jersey: Princeton Univ. Press, 1975), pp. 11 and 343–4.

6. J.F. Bosher, *The French Revolution* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1988), p. 67; also Simon Schama, *Citizens: A Chronicle of the French Revolution* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1989), pp. 51–9.

7. Robert D. Harris, *Necker: Reform Statesman of the Ancien Regime* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1979) is the most complete study; but see also J.F. Bosher, *French Finances, 1770–1795: From Business to Bureaucracy* (United Kingdom: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1970), chap. 8, pp. 142–65.

8. For a somewhat uncritical view of Sartine, see Dull, *The French Navy*, pp. 14–5, 23–5, and 58–60. See Jacques Michel, *Du Paris de Louis XV à la marine de Louis XVI, l'oeuvre de Monsieur de Sartine*, 2 vols. (Paris: Edition de l'Erudit, 1984) for a more complete study.

9. Dull, *The French Navy*, admits Necker's influence (pp. 199–202) but attributes Sartine's dismissal to the secretary of state for foreign affairs, Vergennes, who sacrificed him to the demands of Franco-Spanish diplomacy. Harris, *Necker*, is more convincing in arguing that the reasons were financial (pp. 208–9).

10. On Castries see René de la Croix, duc de Castries, *Le Maréchal de Castries (1727–1800)* (Paris: Flammarion, 1956).

11. One of the most enigmatic and controversial figures of eighteenth-century French governments, Maurepas has never been the subject of a scholarly biography; a good source of insight into his pervasive influence in government and at court during the reign of Louis XVI, however, is Jehan de Witte, ed., *Journal de l'Abbé de Véri*, 2 vols. (Paris: Plon, 1933).

12. Piers Mackesy, *The War for America, 1775–1783* (London: Longmans, 1964).

13. In addition to Dull's sketch of Vergennes in *The French Navy*, pp. 6–8, 294–5, and 334–5, see Orville T. Murphy, *Charles Gravier, comte de Vergennes: French Diplomacy in the Age of Revolution, 1719–1787* (Albany: State Univ. of New York Press, 1982), for the most complete study; and also J.-F. Labourdette, *Vergennes, Ministre principal de Louis XVI* (Paris: Editions Desjonquières, 1990), whose work complements Murphy's by focusing on the politics of the French court and Royal Council.

14. Archives des Affaires Etrangères, Espagne, tome 590, folio 141. Vergennes to comte de Montmorin, 31 July 1778, quoted in A.T. Patterson, *The Other Armada: The Franco-Spanish Attempt to Invade Britain in 1779* (United Kingdom: Manchester Univ. Press, 1960), p. 37; also Dull, *The French Navy*, p. 165 for a similar expression to the same correspondent fourteen months later.

15. For a broad overview and comparison of the French and British economies during the half-century before the American war, see François Crouzet, "England and France in the Eighteenth Century: A Comparative Analysis of Two Economic Growths," reprinted in his *Britain Ascendant: Comparative Studies in Franco-British Economic History* (United Kingdom: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1990), pp. 12–43 (French original in *Annales E.S.C.*, v. 2 [1966], pp. 254–91); see also Ralph Davis, *The Rise of the Atlantic Economies* (London: Methuen, 1973) chaps. 17 and 18, pp. 288–316, for a critical variation on the same theme.

16. Murphy, *Vergennes*, p. 256; and Dull, *The French Navy*, pp. 138–9.

17. Schama, *Citizens*, pp. 79–87; also Dull, *The French Navy*, pp. 46–7.

18. Harris, *Necker*, p. 119.

19. Murphy, *Vergennes*, chaps. 21 to 25, pp. 261–330.

20. See, E.H. Jenkins, *A History of the French Navy* (London: Macdonald and Jane's, 1973), p. 151.

21. See Patterson, *The Other Armada*, pp. 37–9, for an excellent brief discussion; also Mackesy, *War for America*, pp. 190–2.

22. Mackesy, *War for America*, p. 324.

23. G. Lacour-Gayet, *La Marine militaire de la France sous le règne de Louis XVI* (Paris: Honoré Champion, 1905), pp. 19–20; also Raoul Castex, *Les idées militaires de la marine du xviiie siècle, de Ruyter à Suffren* (Paris: L. Fournier, 1911), p. 165.

24. See E. Taillemite, *L'Histoire ignorée de la marine française* (Paris: Librairie Académique Perrin, 1988), pp. 175–6, for a more complete discussion.

25. *Ibid.*, pp. 169, 173.

26. Quoted in Michel Vergé-Franceschi, *La Royale au temps de l'amiral d'Estaing* (Paris: La Pensée Universelle, 1977), p. 44.

27. See John A. Tilley, *The British Navy and the American Revolution* (Columbia: Univ. of South Carolina Press, 1987), p. 150.

28. See Henri Doniol, *Histoire de la participation de la France à l'établissement des Etats-Unis d'Amérique: correspondance diplomatique et documents*, 5 vols. (Paris: Imprimerie nationale, 1886–92), v. 3, pp. 237–52, for summaries of instructions in d'Estaing's own hand sent to the French minister to the United States in June

1778. Of the historians who have heaped so much opprobrium on the admiral, few have ever referred to his instructions.

29. Dull, *The French Navy*, p. 119.

30. *Ibid.*, p. 121; also Jenkins, *A History of the French Navy*, pp. 150–2.

31. Taillemite, *L'Histoire ignorée*, pp. 185–6.

32. V.F. Brun, *Guerres maritimes de la France: port de Toulon, ses armements, son administrotion depuis son origine jusqu'à nos jours*, 2 vols. (Paris: Plon, 1861), v. 1, pp. 243–4, quoting Admiral René Duguay-Trouin that sea battles cost France infinitely and decided nothing.

33. Jean Tarrade, *Le Commerce coloniale de la France à la fin de l'ancien régime: l'évolution du régime de "l'Exclusif" de 1763 à 1789*, 2 vols. (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1972) v. 1, pp. 466–8, esp. note 67.

34. Jenkins, *History of the French Navy*, p. 153; and Dull, *The French Navy*, pp. 123–4.

35. For the best discussion of the campaign in America, see David Syrett, *The Royal Navy in American Waters, 1775–1783* (Aldershot, Hants, U.K.: Scolar Press, 1989), pp. 92–116.

36. *Ibid.*, p. 118.

37. See Dull, *The French Navy*, pp. 126–43; also Murphy, *Vergennes*, pp. 261–79, for the complex diplomacy leading to the Convention.

38. Mackesy, *War for America*, pp. 279–80.

39. See Patterson, *The Other Armada*.

40. A.T. Mahan, *Major Operations of the Navies in the War of Independence* (London: S. Low, Marston, 1913), pp. 101–4; also Mackesy, *War for America*, pp. 231–2.

41. Dull, *The French Navy*, p. 159.

42. See Mahan, *Major Operations*, pp. 105–12, for the best overall account; but see John Creswell, *British Admirals of the Eighteenth Century: Tactics in Battle* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1972) chap. 9, pp. 132–40, for a more detailed, tactical discussion based on the *Barrington Papers* (Navy Records Society, 1941).

43. Doniol, *Histoire de la participation*, v. 4, pp. 160–1, d'Estaing to Gérard, Fort Royal, 9 March 1779.

44. See A.A. Lawrence, *Storm over Savannah: The Story of Count d'Estaing and the Siege of the Town in 1779* (Athens: Univ. of Georgia Press, 1951); and C.C. Jones, Jr., ed., *The Siege of Savannah by the Fleet of Count d'Estaing in 1779* (New York: New York Times [1874], 1968).

45. Doniol, *Histoire de la participation*, v. 5, p. 295.

46. Quoted in Jenkins, *A History of the French Navy*, p. 158.

47. Mackesy, *War for America*, p. 324.

48. See David Spinney, *Rodney* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1969), pp. 196–312; and Murphy, *Vergennes*, p. 330.

49. Patrick Villiers, *Marine royal, corsaires et trafic dans l'Atlantique de Louis XIV à Louis XVI*, 2 vols. (Dunkerque: Société Dunkerquoise d'Histoire et d'Archéologie, 1991), v. 2, pp. 582–3.

50. Taillemite, *L'Histoire ignorée*, p. 204; and Villiers, *Marine royal*, v. 2, p. 583.

51. See Castex, *Les idées militaires*, pp. 79–97, for a highly critical assessment of Guichen's three battles.

52. Quoted in Mahan, *Major Operations*, p. 141; see also Taillemite, *L'Histoire ignorée*, pp. 200–9, for a recent favourable appreciation of Guichen.

53. See Mahan, *Major Operations*, pp. 128–58, for the classic account of Guichen's and Rodney's campaign; but see also Creswell, *British Admirals*, pp. 141–51, for a different and superior appreciation.

54. Spinney, *Rodney*, pp. 317–44; and also Mahan, *Major Operations*, p. 140.

55. Bouillé's 480-page report on the war in the West Indies, which can be found in Archives des colonies, Série C^8A, v. 82, contains a valuable commentary on the behaviour of the navy.

56. Quoted in Tarrade, *Le Commerce coloniale*, v. 1, p. 472, note 82.

57. Quoted in Taillemite, *L'Histoire ignorée*, p. 171.

58. Dull, *The French Navy* p. 188.

59. See Syrett, *The Royal Navy*, pp. 142, 144–6 for the clearest discussion of Ternay's threat to the British war effort. See Maurice Linyer de la Barbée, *Le Chevalier de Ternay: vie de Charles-Henry-Louis d'Arsac de Ternay, chef d'escadre des armées navales*, 2 vols. (Grenoble: Editions des 4 seigneurs 1972), v. 2, pp. 529–642, for a recent account of the French campaign.

60. Dull, *The French Navy*, pp. 197–9.

61. Doniol, *Histoire de la participation*, v. 4, pp. 544–5.

62. Dull, *The French Navy*, pp. 217–8.

63. Castries, *Le Maréchal de Castries*, p. 89.

64. Doniol, *Histoire de la participation*, v. 5, pp. 469–70, Castries to Rochambeau, Brest, 21 March 1781.

65. See Murphy, *Vergennes*, pp. 280–8; and Dull, *The French Navy*, pp. 211–6.

66. Dull, *The French Navy*, pp. 239–48, for a good summary of the movements of the French forces; but see also Mahan, *Major Operations*, pp. 176–8.

67. Mackesy, *War for America*, pp. 394–5.

68. In one of the strangest events of the war, on 12 February 1781 a small Spanish force captured Fort St. Joseph, near present-day Niles, Michigan, as part of the overall Spanish attack on the British in America. See the proclamation of conquest printed in Joseph L. Peyser, ed. and trans., *Letters from New France: The Upper Country, 1686–1783* (Urbana and Chicago: Univ. of Illinois Press, 1992), pp. 220–1.

69. Mahan, *Major Operations*, pp. 227–8.

70. Dull, *The French Navy*, pp. 279–80.

71. Some historians ignore these preliminaries, which were primarily responsible for rendering the British naval victory nugatory; for example, see Creswell, *British Admirals*, pp. 163–5.

72. Creswell, *British Admirals*, p. 163.

73. Villiers, *Marine royal*, v. 2, p. 603; Dull, *The French Navy*, pp. 283–4.

74. T.H. McGuffie, *The Siege of Gibraltar 1779–1783* (London: Batsford, 1965), pp. 139–67.

75. J.F. Bosher, *French Finances*, pp. 166–82; also Harris, *Necker*, p. 216.

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