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CHAPTER 18

LOUIS XVI AND MARIE ANTOINETTE

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THE reign of the last *ancien régime* monarchs of France, and the influence of his Habsburg queen-consort on politics, continues to be the source of much historical inquiry and debate. Their importance has never been in doubt. Indeed, his first biographer, the abbé Soulavie, stated unequivocally that the 'fleeting and uncertain character of Louis XVI, is the primary cause of the collapse of the ancient monarchy and also of the fall of the constitutional monarchy.'¹ After two centuries of painstaking archival investigations one could be forgiven for thinking that all possible avenues of research have been exhausted, however this is very far from being the case.

Indeed, since the early 1990s, there has been renewed academic interest in ministerial politics, diplomacy and the public imaginary.² Such scholarship has stressed, rightly, the problems of governance in *ancien régime* France and, inspired by Tocqueville, has examined how contradictory attempts at reform did much to undermine the public's confidence in the Bourbon monarchy.³ For many, the Crown, and its tarnished image, became part of the problem, rather than the traditional source for pragmatic solutions and compromises. Great stress has been placed on how Louis XVI's freedom of action was constrained by the interlocking and conflicting goals of ministerial elites and clans of noble courtiers, whose interests were often detrimental to the need for fiscal rigour.⁴ Considerable time has been devoted to examining how the difficulties France faced on the international stage of global competition further exacerbated an already delicate situation.⁵ These approaches have tended to interpret the monarchy's fate as sealed once power migrated from the ministries and cabinets of Versailles to the National Assembly in Paris. In effect a monarchy, committed to reform through *ancien régime* instruments, was unlikely to engage in a constructive dialogue with a Revolution defined by a regenerative mission which sought to redraw beyond recognition France's political, social, and cultural landscape.

Such an interpretative framework has, however, tended to neglect events inside the Tuileries during the revolutionary maelstrom. Instead, it has favoured research into the legacy of the pre-1789 reign, and into the real, and imagined, diplomatic efforts by this monarch, and especially his Austrian consort, to erect some form of counter-revolutionary conspiracy. Admittedly, there is much to justify this approach, after all, the king sometimes considered himself a virtual prisoner of the capital. On several occasions, he self-consciously referred to any political concessions he made as 'things which circumstances force me to undertake'.⁶ While it is not the intention here to deny the importance of the legacy of the *ancien régime*, foreign conspiracy, and the radicalizing impact of the outbreak of war in 1792, it does seem that a reevaluation of France's first constitutional monarchy is overdue. To merely describe Louis XVI's reaction to revolutionary events as an invariant paroxysm of hostility is unenlightening. The king's relationship with the National Assembly and the Revolution's emergent political culture was dynamic and inherently unstable.⁷ The efforts and opportunities to find an accommodation, or at the very least a working relationship, between Crown and nation varied throughout the period.

In historiographical terms, the constitutional monarchy has not fared well. It has generally received unsympathetic treatment, dismissed as an ineffectual compromise almost predestined to failure.⁸ At the beginning of the twentieth century, Jean Jaurès, in his multi-volume history of the period, famously rewrote the lawyer Raymond de Sèze's defence speech at the king's trial. According to Jaurès the king's actions were irrelevant, as he was a victim to the vagaries of social and economic forces which were outside his control.⁹ From this historical materialist perspective, the king had neither the intelligence nor ability to resist the invisible tides of history. Georges Lefebvre, the leading voice of the classical school of French Revolutionary history, placed the blame for this failed experiment squarely on Louis XVI's recalcitrance when it came to accepting the Revolution's regenerative mission.¹⁰ Indeed, for Lefebvre the revolutionaries had generously made every effort to integrate the Crown within the recreated French state.

The revisionist challenge to this orthodoxy has somewhat struggled to gauge the evolutionary potential of the French monarchy in the early 1790s. Over forty years ago François Furet and Denis Richet, in their narrative of the revolutionary maelstrom, presented 1790 and 1791 as a great missed opportunity to create a liberal parliamentary regime of a quasi-Anglo-Saxon stamp in the hexagon. These two scholars were among the first to analyse the flight to Varennes in a sympathetic fashion. For them this was not just the noxious fruit of a counter-revolutionary conspiracy, but rather an attempt to put the reform programme of 1789 back on course. Ultimately, Louis XVI merely wanted to renegotiate, from a position of strength, a constitutional settlement which would reinvigorate his executive powers.¹¹ In their view the Varennes blunder had the deeply unfortunate effect of catalysing the *dérapiage* (skidding off course) of the Revolution. This botched escape plan pulled the carpet from underneath the feet of the 'liberal' Feuillant majority of the Constituent Assembly and, in their stead, the surviving extremists of the Jacobin club grabbed hold of the Revolution's helm.¹²

This rather neat account of the monarchical causes of the failure of the 'liberal revolution' was soon challenged by new interpretative frameworks (one of which was strongly championed by Furet himself) emphasizing the radical and discursive continuities which persisted from the beginning of the revolutionary rupture of 1789 right through to the Jacobin Republic and Terror. An influential group of mainly English and American historians became convinced that the deputies of the Constituent Assembly, through their reading (or some would say misreading) of some of the key eighteenth century works of political thought, had opened a Pandora's box from which a deeply intolerant, quasi-totalitarian and proto-Republican ideology emerged.¹³ This vision of politics had little or no wish to reach genuinely a working compromise with the *ancien régime* past, let alone with the monarchy which stood at its summit. Norman Hampson, in an eloquent essay, described the entire period as a prelude to the Terror.¹⁴

Not all have accepted this negative assessment of the Constituent Assembly. Some continue to stress more contingent explanations. Timothy Tackett and Michael Fitzsimmons praise the constitutional settlement, and place the blame for its unworkability squarely at the king's feet for his refusal to accept its spirit and dictates.¹⁵ As Fitzsimmons states, with little equivocation: 'ultimately the edifice constructed by the National Assembly failed less from internal contradictions than from the refusal of the monarch to abide by it unconditionally and in good faith'.¹⁶ If one were to suppose, but not concede, that Fitzsimmons is correct, his conclusion does assume that Louis XVI should, and could, have jettisoned his dynastic heritage and the legacy of Bourbon rule at a whim. Alas in 1790 it was not a mere question of the Constituent Assembly's will meeting with the monarchical wont; nor was it simply the case that the separation of powers, espoused by the deputies in 1789, deprived the king of all legislative initiative, and merely bestowed on him executive powers, which were severely limited through the strict supervision of the Assembly and its vast network of parliamentary sub-committees. The problem with such an argument, excepting its oversimplification, is that even an 'unworkable' compromise must first be agreed upon. The Constitution, which was in force in France from June 1789 to September 1791, existed only in the unfettered imaginations of the 1200 deputies of the Constituent Assembly. As Hampson put it: 'in the France of the summer of 1789 there was no past that anyone was prepared to invoke as proof of legitimacy. Behind them, the deputies had the exhilarating triumphs of July. Ahead lay a future whose possibilities seemed endless'.¹⁷

Yet another interpretation of the immediate origins of the French Revolution has painted the summoning of the Estates-General in the colours of a Royal Revolution that misfired.¹⁸ After all, as the story goes, it was Louis XVI who summoned the Estates-General to Versailles to deal with the *ancien régime*'s debt-crisis. According to this view, he was an enlightened ruler, who wanted to regenerate the state's fiscal structure. Despite these good intentions, he became the instigator of drastic changes which, ultimately, subverted the political foundations of the kingdom of France. There is something to recommend this point of view, after all Louis XVI was not averse to change and reform. Indeed, his pre-Revolutionary reign was littered with many examples of institutional and humanitarian reforms (whose outcomes were decidedly mixed).¹⁹ The hypothesis

that the king appealed directly to the Nation, by allying himself with the Third Estate, in order to circumvent the obstacles and intermediate bodies which had previously blocked the path to fiscal reform, is compelling. Such a line of argument also helps to explain why, in 1790, he was still prepared to engage in a 'possibilist' fashion with the reform programme of the Constituent Assembly. The concern remains that this argument is, at times, rather more intuitive than grounded in a firm evidential basis.

While Louis certainly desired to be the prime mover behind any reform initiative, it seems clear that, from 1787 to 1789, both control, and indeed understanding, of events rapidly slipped away from him.²⁰ It has been argued that he suffered some form of nervous breakdown, and lived the years of the Revolution through a sort of mental haze, which made him seem disconnected from reality. The evidence for a sustained psychological illness is difficult to prove with any degree of confidence, as throughout all his life the king demonstrated a phlegmatic, calm and detached composure, impervious to external stimuli. It was part of the eighteenth century art of being a monarch to be impenetrable, and to dissimulate one's true thoughts. Louis XVI's lethargy was as much a political tactic as it was a fatalistic resignation.²¹ Whether this was an efficient way of playing the game is another matter. As events spiralled out of control, the king bided his time, only intervening if he felt that he could influence their direction. Such temporizing was ineffective when confronted with the new format of revolutionary politics, whose chief characteristic was its unstoppable forward momentum.

The birth of the National Assembly and its arrogation of the realm's legislative authority were unexpected and disturbing. The better part of the subsequent year saw the king trying to digest not only this unwelcome setback, but also seeking to find a means of adapting to the evolving new political climate. It should be realized that, despite early legislative decisions, no aspect of the final settlement had been determined irrevocably. Thus in 1790, everything in theory was still 'up for grabs'. Louis XVI had some understanding of these stakes and that is why, on 4 February, he appeared in the *Salle du Manège* and proclaimed: 'I shall favour, I shall second through every possible means within my power, the success of this reorganization upon which depends the future of France.'²² Contemporaries interpreted this move as an exercise in manipulation. They suspected that its immediate aim was to put an end to public unrest, allow the Crown to resume control of government affairs and, in time, undermine the drafting of a constitution.²³

Such a reading maybe overly cynical, and attributes to the king a devious desire, at every turn, to re-establish 'absolutism'. This seems unconvincing in the light of recent studies. As Munro Price has argued, Louis XVI had effectively conceded a constitutional settlement in his declaration for the *séance royale* of 23 June 1789.²⁴ The principle of regular meetings of the Estates-General, and that new taxation would require their consent, had been granted. In his subsequent writings the king always made reference to his declaration of June 1789. Clearly, he was not seeking to destroy the Constitution, but rather to improve it from his monarchical perspective. The programme set forth in his speech on 4 February 1790 described a moderate constitutional charter that was respectful of the traditional structure of French society. This blueprint recognized some

concept of national sovereignty, but watered it down in favour of a mixture of property and merit-based qualifications for political participation. The monarch's political vision aligned him not with diehard counter-revolutionaries but placed him on the same wavelength as the liberal and moderate fringe of the Assembly. This was not a *politique du pire*, but a practical effort on the part of the monarchy to salvage what it could from the previous year's turmoil. The year 1790 is among the most neglected by scholars of the Revolution. There is much evidence that, in this crucial year, a nascent constitutional monarchy was diluted and disempowered by an increasingly confrontational political context. Radical deputies, popular societies and other pressure groups intended that a break with the past was not merely a question of reform, but rather of destroying every administrative institution that was contaminated by *ancien régime* corruption. In the end, the failure of the constitutional monarchy was not a stillbirth but rather a form of infanticide.

In this fraught context it is tempting to turn to Marie-Antoinette and interpret her role as the counter-revolutionary *éminence grise* during her husband's political woes. Again, there is a risk here of excessive over-simplification. Centrally, and this is often forgotten, this Habsburg princess was a consort rather than a queen-regnant. She had been in a difficult position since the moment of her arrival in France. Why did this individual, who was supposed to be the physical embodiment of the pacific and positive fruits of France's 'diplomatic revolution' of 1756, receive such a sustained barrage of contemptuous criticism? The answer seems to lie in Chantal Thomas' compelling observation that: 'Marie Antoinette's crimes lie not in an act but in a quality of being.'²⁵ As the daughter of the hated Habsburg nemesis the queen was hardly a free agent. It was far easier for her to confirm the public's worst expectations than to dispel atavistic hatreds.²⁶ Indeed, there were other elements in this operatic drama which significantly muddied the waters.

The queen's ambiguous role during the Revolution has been the subject of far from sympathetic treatment over the past two centuries.²⁷ It has provided a convenient alliance of patriotism and misogyny that has allowed much pseudo-scholarship to attack a degenerate woman and foreigner who betrayed France's war plans to her imperial brothers. As Thomas Kaiser notes compellingly she was a hostage to the fortunes of the Bourbon-Habsburg alliance.²⁸ This diplomatic pact's association with military defeat and international humiliation meant that the public's frustration was vented on its living embodiment in Versailles. Unhappily for her, the young queen possessed neither the necessary ruthlessness nor a natural flair for realpolitik. Marie-Antoinette seems for all of her life to have had an admirable, though ultimately self-defeating, obsession with friendship and family loyalty, which made it difficult for her to pursue an effective political line.

Even in the very midst of the revolution she never abandoned her former court allies, and remained a committed lobbyist for Habsburg interests in France.²⁹ With the benefit of much hindsight it can be seen that, in the early 1790s, this was a suicidal form of conduct. It would be unfair to depict Marie-Antoinette as either dim-witted or naive, but it should be realized that she constructed her court partisanship on the basis of emotive

and dynastic affinities, rather than purely political ends. It was logical, and from her point of view legitimate, to seek outside assistance from her Habsburg clan, aiming to permit her aristocratic allies to regain French soil.³⁰ Marie-Antoinette was not a stateswoman, but a traumatized witness of revolution, who wished to turn back the clock in order to resume the relatively tranquil existence she had enjoyed at Versailles. The queen's notable political role in both court politics and international relations cannot be denied, but to view her as either an *éminence grise* or unofficial foreign minister seems to be taking a stride too far. She was an influential player and intermediary, but never constituted the power behind the throne which, for a long time, a misogynistic historiography has implied. A powerful atavistic distrust of foreign princesses meddling in politics ensured that her role could only ever be indirect. Ultimately, it was the fiscal reform which precipitated the revolutionary turmoil, and in this domestic matter the queen did not determine the course of events. The death of her eldest son, the dauphin Louis Joseph, on 4 June 1789, and the violence of the early Revolution, deeply traumatized her. It would take time before she would again have the stomach to re-enter the game of politics. During the subsequent constitutional monarchy, her role remained circumscribed to the sphere of covert diplomatic negotiation. It was only in mid-1790 that she recovered from the shock of the October days, and began actively intriguing to influence the outcome of the constitutional settlement which would govern France.³¹ Whether or not this was done with the knowledge of her husband remains an area of intense debate.³²

Indeed, as the year 1790 commenced, there was no certainty in which constitutional direction the Revolution would head. It was the year when, as Timothy Tackett has argued, the deputies became revolutionaries but failed to transform Louis XVI into a constitutional monarch.³³ When Louis awoke on the morning of 1 January 1790 in the Tuileries palace, he could have been forgiven for still harbouring some optimism. After all, his executive powers had remained unaltered since the previous year. The royal routine continued unperturbed, and its usual array of rituals and ceremonies were deployed to uphold the spectacle of monarchical representation. On this day, he received in audience the grandees of the court, the magistrates of the *parlements* and delegations from the other judicial institutions littered around Paris.³⁴ Each presented their compliments for the new year. The only real element of novelty was embodied by a delegation sent by the National Assembly, which symbolically reminded all those present that there was a rival source of sovereignty in the realm.³⁵ Despite this development, the king's authority in most spheres remained strong. It is true that, by September 1789, Louis had lost his law-making ability. During this crucial month the National Assembly limited the monarch's involvement in legislative process by granting him a suspensive veto rather than an absolute one.³⁶ They also rejected proposals for the creation of an upper house composed of royal appointees.³⁷ While this is undoubtedly the case, it is also true that the king retained the power to issue administrative regulations and guidelines on how to implement the substantial stream of legislation emanating from the Assembly.

In the early months of 1790 Louis never used these residual legislative powers to hijack any of the assembly's reforms. It seems likely that the king, initially, approved of many of the Revolution's early transformations. In his speech of 4 February 1790 he expressed

his admiration for the deputies' desire to create a uniform administrative and legal system, which would increase the state's efficiency. Studies in the monarch's education and personality show that he had a natural aptitude for the sciences and practical arts.³⁸ Law reform projects for the departmentalization of France's administrative jurisdictions, a uniform system of weights and measures and a rational scheme for tax collection all elicited not only the king's approval but admiration.³⁹ During 1790 the court of the Tuileries was rather more welcoming than in subsequent years. The king received in formal audience many of the celebrities of the time. These included not only the Corsican patriot (and former rebel) Pasquale Paoli, but also a number of scientists and a centenarian Burgundian former serf called Jean Jacob who came to Paris to inspect his newly acquired liberty.⁴⁰

Meanwhile, there is also evidence that the king intended to use at least some of his remaining royal prerogatives in a progressive fashion. Louis' right of appointment and patronage over governmental posts and pensions had not yet been called into question. The monarch not only theoretically selected the highest ranking ministerial civil servants and army officers, but thanks to the terms of the Concordat of Bologna of 1516 he still chose which clerical candidates should be appointed to vacant Sees.⁴¹ The key adviser in the sphere of ecclesiastical appointments was the minister of the *feuille des bénéfices*. The incumbent at this time was Jean-Georges Lefranc de Pompignan, the liberal archbishop of Vienne, under whose guidance the king was to make the last royal episcopal appointment of the *ancien régime*. He chose the distinguished divinity professor Asseline of the Sorbonne to fill the vacancy which had emerged for the bishopric of Boulogne.⁴²

It is an appointment which could easily be ignored were it not a sign that the king was trying to show his willingness to adapt to changing circumstances. After all, this nomination was the first time in the second half of the eighteenth century that a non-noble had been chosen to occupy an episcopal throne. It was a direct message to the Assembly that the king could be trusted to choose clerics who were progressive and sympathetic to its reform programme. There is also some evidence that, during this time, Lefranc tried to persuade the progressive abbé Grégoire to accept the See of La Rochelle.⁴³ The First Estate's position had been under threat from the outbreak of the Revolution. Their properties had been placed at the nation's disposal and the tithe had been abolished. Louis XVI defended his right to nominate bishops not in terms of traditional aristocratic patronage, but by demonstrating his openness to candidates who were favourable to the new religious order of things.

The most important sphere where royal power remained undiluted was foreign policy and its concomitant military dimension. This, since time immemorial, had been considered the prime site of regal competence, the *métier du roi* par excellence. When it came to foreigners, the revolutionaries experienced ambivalent feelings. On the one hand, they believed that their revolution enshrined a universal system of government, which was applicable to all mankind.⁴⁴ On the other hand, conspiracy theories and panics led to mass xenophobia. The Paris populace feared infiltration on the part of foreign agents bent on counter-revolution, and in late 1789, to prevent such a contingency,

they invaded the ambassadorial residences of the capital in search of compromising documents. The papal nuncio Archbishop Dugnani in November 1789, as doyen of the *corps diplomatique*, protested against such outrages, which constituted a clear violation of the Law of Nations.⁴⁵ This formal complaint was also seconded, on 12 December, by the Foreign Minister, the comte de Montmorin, and the Assembly in response decreed that ambassadors and other emissaries remained under the protection of the Executive Power, that is the monarchy.⁴⁶

Therefore, despite the fall of the Bastille and the court's forcible removal from Versailles to Paris in October 1789, the king still possessed a strong measure of residual authority. What most threatened the monarch's position was that the Constituent Assembly was not merely a law-making organ, but had determined, on 27 July 1789, to redraw *ex novo* the fundamental political organization of the realm.⁴⁷ The Constitution remained unwritten and, if the king wanted to retain the lion's share of his exclusive competencies, he would need to prove to the representatives of the nation that he could be trusted with any public function. The initial indicators were promising, especially considering that the deputies endowed the monarch with a very generous financial settlement. The creation of a British-style civil list provided the king with 25 million *livres*. This sum was augmented by separate emoluments for the queen and some of the princes of the blood. The deputies' generosity extended also to the private debts of the monarch and his court, which were subsumed into the national debt.⁴⁸

After initially refusing to leave the seclusion of the Tuileries, the king started appearing in public more often. One suspects that this was meant to serve as an outward sign of his acceptance of the new order of things. In February 1790 he rode, escorted by courtiers and national guardsmen, in the bois de Boulogne, and attended *Te Deums* in Notre Dame to celebrate his endorsement of the Assembly's achievements.⁴⁹ The queen also participated in such events. Most notably, she donated and distributed to the Versailles National Guard their new flags and standards.⁵⁰ The royal couple also used the civil list to bestow some charitable donations on the destitute and visited the foundlings' hospital in Paris.⁵¹ Louis XVI's reviews of the National Guard, which took place in May and July on both the Champ de Mars and Plaine de Sablons, were supposed to highlight the Crown's positive working relationship with the citizen militia and its Fayetteist general staff.⁵² These occasions were marred, to some extent, by the royal refusal to wear this military unit's uniform. Several National Guard officers and journalists drew attention to this supposedly unpatriotic behaviour.⁵³ Indeed, Lafayette's cousin, the prince de Poix, made the unwise choice of suggesting directly this course of action to the king and received an angry and withering written response.⁵⁴ Louis was incensed that a former *garde du corps* should interfere in matters relating to his dress. For two centuries the monarch's clothing had been a matter for the *premier gentilhomme de la garde robe*, and Bourbon kings had very seldom worn military uniform.⁵⁵ So this suggestion, from a junior member of the Noailles, smacked of impertinence. From the king's traditionalist perspective it made no sense to wear the recently created National Guard uniform when he had rarely donned those of long-established and distinguished regiments.⁵⁶

Despite this stand over his personal appearance, there is also significant archival evidence that the king was tinkering with ways of reorganizing his court along less exclusivist and traditionalist lines. Private reports, and other writings, suggested to the king that he should abolish redundant honorific positions and amalgamate duplicate departments in an effort to cut costs.⁵⁷ All in all the start of 1790 was promising and showed a will on both sides to find some form of common ground. The quibbles that initially appeared were ones of style rather than substance. What eventually put an end to this brief honeymoon was the legacy of the recent past, and developments in the international arena.

One of the key remits bestowed on the Estates-General had been the examination of the Crown's rudimentary budgets and other governmental accounts. After spending several months perusing the figures of the previous administration, the Assembly published, on 11 April 1790, a detailed list, the *livre rouge*, containing the names of those who had received pensions since 1774.⁵⁸ The total sum spent, during the fifteen years of Louis' pre-revolutionary reign, on this, at times dubious, form of royal patronage amounted to a staggering 225 million *livres*. The presence of the Polignacs, Vaudreuil and other members of the queen's party drew much negative press speculation.⁵⁹ When it came to the expenditure of the royal chapel few were impressed by Cardinal Montmorency's argument: 'let not thy left hand know, what thy right doeth', for keeping the royal alms secret.⁶⁰ The fallout from the *livre rouge* was enormous, and deeply damaged the Crown's reputation. It became difficult to sustain the monarchy's credibility as a fiscally responsible institution, and darker doubts started to arise. Indeed, the radical journalist Louis Prudhomme asked: 'how can it be that a king, who is generally respected as an honest man, has signed ordinances whose very purpose was to swindle the public purse[?]'.⁶¹

Three international crises further stoked political discontent. The less serious of these involved, first, the annexation, after a pro-revolutionary insurrection, of the papal territories of the Comtat-Venaissin in Provence, and latterly the suppression of the sovereign rights of several German princes in Alsace.⁶² While neither was catastrophically destabilizing, they did give the other European monarchies a rather frightening glimpse into the National Assembly's disregard for international law. Avignon had been part of the Pope's temporal domains since the fourteenth century, and the Alsatian princes' sovereign right to collect feudal dues from their vassals was guaranteed by the terms of the Treaty of Westphalia of 1648.⁶³ The Assembly asserted that it possessed a higher jurisdiction, grounded in natural law, and argued that it was not bound to honour the diplomatic treaties negotiated by corrupt *ancien régime* ministers.⁶⁴ For the king, whose international standing was inextricably linked with his ability to honour the agreements which he and his predecessors had entered in good faith, this was a worrying development. The Assembly's unilateral decisions were a dangerous intrusion into an area which the king considered to be his exclusive competence.⁶⁵

The flashpoint, which deeply compromised royal control of foreign policy, occurred when Britain and Spain almost declared war on each other in May 1790 over the 'Nootka Sound Incident'.⁶⁶ This revolved around the Spanish Crown's claim that it had the exclusive right to colonize and settle the western coast of North America. Between May and

July 1789, a flotilla of Spanish vessels seized a number of British and US merchantmen off what is now Vancouver Island, British Columbia. As the ensuing diplomatic crisis over events in the Pacific Ocean worsened, Charles IV of Spain appealed to the clauses of mutual support enshrined in the third Bourbon family compact of 1761.⁶⁷ Louis XVI, aware of his international obligations, began arming a squadron of warships in case this crisis escalated into war. He appealed to the National Assembly to guarantee the funds necessary for France to meet its diplomatic commitments. Instead of consenting automatically to the executive's request the Assembly launched one of its most animated debates on who, ultimately, had the right to declare war and negotiate peace. The baron de Menou seemed somewhat inebriated by the possibilities opened up by this question. On 15 May he declared:

I say that it is essential to immediately decide on the issue of who holds the right to make peace and [declare] war; only subsequently shall we decide which of the two nations in question is in the wrong. If it is Spain we should use all our influence to force her to stand down; if it is England and she refuses herself to justice we must not just arm fourteen ships of the line but all of our forces on land and sea. It will be at this juncture that we will show to Europe that this is not a ministerial war but a national one.⁶⁸

Certainly, the prospect of arrogating the monarchy's power to determine foreign policy made the deputies indulge in some of their most hyperbolic fantasies. On 18 May, the Alsatian Reubell was among the most extreme in his denial of reciprocal obligations among states:

Treaties of alliances are nothing but a means of raising taxes and ruining the national treasury; to give the king the right [to make treaties] is to allow him constitutionally to sell men like flocks of sheep. The executive power may determine the quantity and deployment of military forces. A great nation needs no other allies but providence, its own resources and justice.⁶⁹

The debate was decidedly chaotic; there were excursions into different hemispheres of the world, and some musings on whether or not Henri IV's foreign policy had been ethical. Ultimately, the vindication of natural law over precedent meant that, in terms of foreign relations, everything was now up for grabs.⁷⁰ Treaties that emanated from the cabinets of princes had little or no validity. Only nations, with representative Assemblies, could legitimately enter into negotiations. The individual was made vicious by his particular interests, while the collective body of all citizens was infallible. No one better epitomized this vision than Maximilien de Robespierre: 'it is from France that the liberty and happiness of the world must commence.'⁷¹ In the end, it was agreed that the monarch could propose war, but the ultimate decision had to be ratified by the National Assembly.⁷² Suddenly, Louis found himself stripped of the key aspect of early modern kingship: the ability to direct foreign policy. It is clear from his

correspondence with Charles IV that the king not only resented this interference, but equally was much embarrassed at having to abandon his cousin in a time of need, especially when his Bourbon cousins had done much to support him during the American War of Independence.⁷³

The second half of 1790 brought little in terms of reassurance when several high-profile army and naval mutinies erupted.⁷⁴ The troops in several provincial garrisons, displeased with the lack of progress made in army reform, refused to obey their officers and, in some cases, seized regimental funds.⁷⁵ In the end order was restored, but at high price. In Nancy the military commander the Marquis de Bouillé fought a pitched battle, for three hours, with the rebels.⁷⁶ The ringleaders of these revolts were either hanged, broken on the wheel or sent to the galleys. Many patriots and radicals of the popular societies in Paris believed that the soldiers' grievances were justified, and saw the severe repression that followed as evidence that the Crown was reverting to despotic habits. The military committee of the Assembly proposed that the king lose his monopoly over military appointments and that seniority of service be codified in a proper promotions system.⁷⁷ By the end of the year, Louis XVI's role as commander in chief of the army seemed to be increasingly symbolic. The emigration of the lion's share of noble officer corps in the subsequent months meant that the issue of who ultimately controlled the army was opaque to say the least.⁷⁸

In his speech of 4 February 1790 the king had signified to the Assembly his willingness to accept that the old medieval notion of a society of orders was superseded. After all, the tax exemptions of the clergy and nobility had been one of the great obstacles that he himself had faced when trying to solve the budget deficit. Yet, despite this acceptance that the social compact needed to be altered he did warn that: 'at the same time, all that reminds a nation of the ancientness and continuity of the [public] services provided by an honoured race, is a distinction which nothing can destroy, [...] all classes of society should aspire to serve their fatherland efficiently and those who have already experienced the joy of doing so in the past, have an interest in respecting [the] transmission of titles, or other such reminders, which are the most beautiful of all the legacies which they can bestow on their children.'⁷⁹

Consequently the Assembly's decision, on 19 June, to abolish titles of nobility seems to have been diametrically opposed to the Crown's appeal for a society in which honorific distinction and civic equality could coexist. The abolition of hereditary titles remains one of the more mysterious events of the French Revolution. A recent study by William Doyle, inspired by Mirabeau's correspondence, suggests that this was the work of a group of liberal nobles working in the *Société de 1789*.⁸⁰ It is unclear what the monarchy's role was in the whole affair. The king never made any public comment on this political decision (only finance minister Necker dissented in writing).⁸¹ However, one could speculate that the Crown had prior knowledge of this political decision as, on 4 June 1790, the king abolished court presentations and removed all genealogical criteria for admission to honorific and courtly offices. By doing so he was obviously trying to demonstrate his adherence to the Declaration of the Rights of Man, which stated that admission to public positions could only be determined through meritocratic principles and

notions of public utility.⁸² While it is true that the erasure of the kingdom's nobility did not lead to irreconcilable difficulties between monarch and assembly, on the other hand, it was a symbol that the loose constitutional blueprint laid out in 4 February speech was being jettisoned to satisfy a more radical reform agenda. Bare months later, the king, honoured with the title 'Restorer of French Liberty', was largely ignored by the nation's legislature, who were refashioning the kingdom's fundamental governance with little, or no, reference to past practices, and who resented any form of regal interference.

The straw which broke the camel's back was the Civil Constitution of the Clergy of July 1790.⁸³ It seems that the king—and even many clerics—were initially sympathetic to the stated aim of rationalizing the ecclesiastical jurisdictions present in the realm by reducing the number of bishoprics and giving all priests a state salary. However, the principle that appointment to ecclesiastical benefices, such as parishes or dioceses, would be subject to an electoral process was troubling. Even more so was the requirement that all clergymen with an active ministry swear an oath to uphold the supremacy of the French Constitution. This law created a conflict of loyalty and diminished the authority of the king, the bishops and the Pope.⁸⁴ The Assembly acted in a unilateral fashion when it came to negotiations with the Holy See. It effectively presented Pius VI with a *fait accompli*, rather than any gesture of consultation. Other enlightened monarchs, especially the Emperor Joseph II, had shown that concessions could be obtained from the Church through patient diplomacy.⁸⁵ The Roman curia moved at a snail's pace, and it took more than six months before the Pope's fulminations duly arrived in March 1791, when the Civil Constitution was formally denounced in the bull *Quod Aliquantum*.⁸⁶

The prospect of a Church schism must have been deeply unsettling for a monarch who, at his coronation, had insisted on maintaining the time-honoured oath to extirpate heresy from his domains.⁸⁷ Throughout the early months of 1791 a steady stream of letters from some of the most senior prelates of the hexagon, such as the Bishops and Metropolitans of Clermont, Aix and Paris, reached the Tuileries.⁸⁸ 'How unfortunate it would be if ever this schism could be legitimated through your Majesty's conduct', wrote the Bishop of Clermont early in 1791.⁸⁹ The effects of the legislation led to a growing polarization in French society, violence in Paris, and a monumental crisis in church-state relations, when all but seven bishops refused to take the constitutional oath.⁹⁰ In April, as a symbol of the worsening situation, the king and his family were surrounded by a crowd who stopped their coach leaving the Tuileries for their country residence in Saint-Cloud (during this incident one of the first gentlemen of the bedchamber the duc de Villequier was physically attacked).⁹¹ Growing sectional violence, and journalistic attacks, put pressure on Louis XVI to allow his most important courtiers to resign. By April 1791 the first gentlemen of the bedchamber, the grand almoner, the master of the horse and several other senior officials had all quit the court over fears for their personal safety. Increasingly eminent voices like Prudhomme, Desmoulins and Marat referred to the king as the 'first functionary of the Nation', a profound insult for a monarch raised on the belief that his power was divinely sanctioned.⁹² After a year in which the possibilities of creating a favourable constitutional settlement had floundered, the now isolated king of the French stopped believing that

he could honourably function as a constitutional monarch. His thoughts started turning to flight and counter-revolution.

Fleeing from either Versailles, or Paris, was a contingency which the king had considered from the earliest days of the Revolution. However one dilemma remained, and it was best expressed by the maréchal de Broglie who, during the July crisis of 1789, asked 'we can go to Metz, but what do we do when we get there?'⁹³ The prospect of flight as the king knew well, from his careful study of Hume's history of England, was replete with the danger of instigating civil war.⁹⁴ Once in flight from his capital he would eventually need to appeal to armed forces in order to subdue rebellion and restore his authority. This is why I would suggest that, for over a year, Louis wanted to avoid this dangerous and uncertain prospect in order to attempt to find some *modus vivendi* in which the Crown and the nation's representatives could collaborate in the government of the realm. Yet, it became increasingly apparent that political manoeuvring would not be sufficient to exit the political impasse which had been reached at the beginning of 1791. Some drastic course of action was necessary. Some months previously, around July 1790, the Queen's diplomatic channels had been used to secure the expensive advice of the comte de Mirabeau. This wily deputy advised a flight to one of the kingdom's internal provinces (to avoid suspicion of a foreign plot), from where the court could negotiate, from a position of strength, an agreement anchored on a reinvigorated monarchical executive.⁹⁵

This rudimentary plan, however, seems to have offered insufficient guarantees. Mirabeau's death in April 1791 meant that the king had to rely on other advisers, most notably the baron de Breteuil, a former minister of the royal household, and the marquis de Bombelles, a veteran diplomat both of whom were close to the queen. Their prolonged absence from the kingdom inevitably meant that their knowledge of France's internal situation was increasingly second hand and perhaps out of touch with reality. The ultimate aims and objectives of the royal plans for flight are difficult to gauge with precision. Most of the papers dealing with preparations were considered too compromising and consequently were destroyed. Whatever Louis XVI may have hoped to achieve, the central flaw in the arrangements for Varennes, and other foreign plots, was that the need for secrecy meant that insufficient local support was raised in the provinces. In the end, a rather ill-concocted scheme was devised to flee to Montmédy, a border fortress town, under the command of the reliable marquis de Bouillé (whose role in the flight earned him an unflattering mention in the 'Marseillaise').⁹⁶ It seems that this strategy was adopted on the queen's insistence, and there is no evidence that the king dissented in any significant way. It was believed that the proximity of Montmédy to the Austrian Netherlands, and the perceived threat of Habsburg military intervention, would allow the king to dictate a new constitutional settlement.⁹⁷

There is no need to describe in detail the blunders which resulted in the royal family's arrest at Varennes. It is worth recalling, however, that the choice of Monsieur, the king's brother, to follow a more direct route, and his refusal to waste time, ensured that he successfully escaped from France.⁹⁸ The reasons and aims of this historical event will always remain a subject of intense controversy.⁹⁹ Its effects are less difficult to discern.¹⁰⁰ The radical sections and opinion makers of Paris recalibrated their political focus. They

abandoned any residual allegiance they may have held towards the constitutional monarchy and turned their attention to the establishment of a republic. The attempts to recast the flight to Varennes as a kidnapping, and later events on the Champ de Mars in July 1791 (where Republican petitioners were fired upon by the National Guard), did much to undermine popular support for the moderate Feuillant and Fayette party within the Assembly.¹⁰¹

Perhaps, the most unexpected outcome of the failed escape was that it gave rise to secret negotiations, from July to September, between the court and a number of moderate deputies.¹⁰² These tangled discussions resulted in a constitution purged of the worst excesses proposed by the Jacobin press. For instance, the king was not referred to as either the 'Nation's agent' or 'chief civil servant' as Desmoulins, Marat and others had proposed. In essence, the document that emerged established a strange political stalemate. The king was not bereft of power, he was in charge of the realm's administration and the implementation of all legislation. In some ways it could be argued that, through his 'suspensive veto', he had the ability to participate in the law-making process. However, this positive assessment should not blind one to the significant limitations placed on his powers. Most acts of the executive authority were placed under the direct surveillance of parliamentary sub-committees, who could effectively block royal initiatives.¹⁰³ The chapter of the Constitution which dealt with the monarch's authority was a peculiar piece of legal thinking. A large share of its attention was devoted to describing the remedies to be applied in the eventuality that the king fled the nation or raised an army against the Assembly. Also of note was the decision to enshrine in law the king's right to raise a personal guard of 1800 men, outside of the regular army, for protection against unspecified threats.¹⁰⁴ It is true that on a superficial level the constitution of 1791 presented the appearance of a liberal constitutional monarchy. However, its contents remained the expression of the legislative's deep distrust of executive authority and for this reason the Crown's wings had been clipped significantly.¹⁰⁵ Its purpose was to avoid the dangers of another royal flight and to stem the tide of nascent republicanism.

After the king ratified this document, the deputies of the Constituent wrapped up a few loose ends and returned home. They had passed, in May 1791, a self-denying ordinance which made them ineligible to stand in the elections for a new legislature.¹⁰⁶ These polls had been deeply influenced by events at Varennes and the Massacre at the Champ de Mars. The 749 deputies of the new Legislative Assembly, unlike their predecessors, did not feel they had a clear mandate and were uncertain how to proceed.¹⁰⁷ This placed them at the mercy of their more energetic colleagues, like the members of the Brissotin party, whose political ends were inimical to the survival of the monarchy. It is unnecessary to cover here ground which has been analysed in depth by others.¹⁰⁸

Louis XVI, after Varennes, had few real political options open to him and seemed to be outmanoeuvred at every turn. In 1790 the king had tried to come to terms with events. However, in the subsequent two years, he hoped that the increasingly turbulent course of the Revolution would lead to its implosion. As he stated in a secret memorandum: 'in adopting its [the Constitution's] principles and executing them in good faith, [I will

make the people] see the true cause of its misfortunes; public opinion will change; and since without this change new convulsions will be inevitable, I will have more chance of achieving a better state of things by my acceptance than by my refusal'.¹⁰⁹ This approach, ultimately, did little to endear him to the radical population of the capital, and when he became a prisoner of the insurrectional commune on 10 August 1792 his fate was hardly in any real doubt. Indeed, the king's most loyal courtiers and military supporters were purged and executed, with little in the way of legal due process, by the second Revolutionary Tribunal of August 1792. Attempts by some experts to view his trial of December 1792 as a form of justice akin to twentieth-century innovations in the realm of prosecutions for crimes against humanity seem wishful thinking. In the end, despite some flimsy legal window dressing, it was Saint Just and Robespierre's argument, that the monarch be tried as a *hostis humani generis* (enemy of the human race), that carried the day.¹¹⁰ The failure to negotiate a constitutional compromise, which could blend tradition and innovation, flung the king away from a conciliatory stance into a state of dejection and passive counter-revolution. For the constitutional monarchy the crucial turning point had been the year 1790.

NOTES

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4. Julian Swann, 'The French Nobility, 1715-1789', in *The European Nobilities in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries*, ed. Hamish Scott, 2 vols (London, 1995), 168.
5. Bailey Stone, *The Genesis of the French Revolution, A Global-Historical Interpretation* (Cambridge, 1994).
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7. For a recent psycho-historical interpretation of the dysfunctional relationship between king and deputies see, Barry Shapiro, *Traumatic Politics, The Deputies and the King in the Early French Revolution* (Pennsylvania, 2009), esp. part I.
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11. Denis Richet and François Furet, *La Révolution Française* (Paris, 1988 [orig. pub. 1965]), 125–57.
12. *Ibid.*, pp. 143–5.
13. François Furet, *Interpreting the French Revolution* (Cambridge, 1982), part I, *passim*; and Keith Michael Baker, *Inventing the French Revolution* (Cambridge, 1990), chaps 9–11.
14. Norman Hampson, *Prelude to Terror* (Oxford, 1988), *passim*.
15. Timothy Tackett, *When the King took Flight* (Cambridge, MA, 2004); and Michael Fitzsimmons, *The Remaking of France, The National Assembly and the Constitution of 1791* (Cambridge, 1994), 111–39.
16. *Ibid.*, p. 256.
17. Hampson, *Prelude to Terror*, 189.
18. Pierre Lafue, *Louis XVI, l'échec de la Révolution Royale* (Paris, 1964).
19. Hardman, *French politics, 1774–1789*, esp. part II the politicians and the public; Jones, *Reform and Revolution in France*, chap. 4.
20. For the most recent studies see John Hardman, *Overture to Revolution, the 1787 Assembly of Notables and the crisis of France's old Regime* (Oxford, 2010); Vivian Gruder, *The Notables and the Nation, the Political Schooling of the French, 1787–1788* (Cambridge, MA, 2007).
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22. A[rchives] P[arlementaires], vol. XI, 429.
23. Adolphe Fourrier de Bacourt, *Correspondance entre le comte de Mirabeau et le comte de La Marck, pendant les années 1789, 1790 et 1791*, 3 vols (Paris, 1851), I, 464; Joël Felix, *Louis XVI et Marie-Antoinette, un couple en politique* (Paris, 2006), 514–16.
24. Munro Price, *The Fall of the French Monarchy, Louis XVI, Marie Antoinette and the Baron de Breteuil* (London, 2003), 63–71.
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27. For a summary, see Thomas, *The Wicked Queen*, esp. ch. 4; Louis Prudhomme, *Les Crimes des Reines de France depuis le commencement de la Monarchie jusqu'à Marie-Antoinette* (Paris, 1791), 434–60.
28. Kaiser, 'Who's Afraid of Marie-Antoinette', 252–8.
29. Antonia Fraser, *Marie Antoinette, The Journey* (London, 2001), 288–91.
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34. *Gazette de France*, no. 1.

35. *Révolutions de France et de Brabant*, no. 8, 340–2.
36. Furet and Halévi, *La monarchie républicaine*, 369–417.
37. Doyle, *The Oxford History of the French Revolution*, 118–20.
38. Pierrette Girault de Coursac, *L'éducation d'un Roi, Louis XVI*, 2nd edn (Paris, 1995).
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53. Dupuy, *Garde Nationale*, 51–2 and 64–5.
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64. David A. Bell, *The First Total War, Napoleon's Europe and the Birth of Modern Warfare* (London, 2007), 89–109; and for a succinct summary and very compelling argument see, Henry A. Kissinger, *A World Restored, Metternich, Castlereagh and the Problems of Peace 1812–1822* (Boston, 1973), 3–6.

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67. *Ibid.*, 317–24.
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71. AP XV, 516.
72. T. C. W. Blanning, *The Origins of the French Revolutionary Wars* (London, 1986), 79.
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75. Scott, *The Response of the Royal Army to the French Revolution*, 81–97.
76. *Ibid.*, 95–6.
77. AP XVII, 264–9, 338–9, 427–36, 446–8, and 489; AP XVIII, 141–3.
78. Again the loss of his military powers was another humiliation of which Louis XVI complained bitterly in his Varennes' declaration. AP XXVII, 379–80.
79. AP IX, 430.
80. William Doyle, 'The French Revolution and the abolition of the Nobility', in Hamish Scott and Brendan Simms (eds), *Cultures of Powers in Europe during the long Eighteenth Century* (Cambridge, 2007), 299.
81. Léonard Burnard, 'Necker et le débat sur l'abolition de la Noblesse', in Philippe Bourbin (ed.), *Les Noblesses françaises dans l'Europe de la Révolution* (Rennes, 2010), 41–51.
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85. Derek Beales, *Joseph II*, 2 vols (Cambridge, 1987–2009), II, chap. 6.
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87. Baker, *Inventing the French Revolution*, 109–12.
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96. 'Mais ces despotes sanguinaires, Mais ces complices de Bouillé'.
97. Cf. Price, *The Fall of the French Monarchy*, 117–18.
98. Philip Mansel, *Louis XVIII* (London, 1999), 53–7.
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