

Center *for the Study of the* American Constitution

NO.8: FRENCH DIPLOMATS FORESEE AN AMERICAN COUNTER-REVOLUTION

From the beginning of the American Revolution, Congress sought to establish diplomatic relations with other countries. One of the greatest achievements of the Confederation Congress was the appointment of its diplomatic corps led by Benjamin Franklin and Thomas Jefferson as U.S. ministers to France, John Adams as U.S. minister to The Netherlands and to Great Britain, and John Jay as U.S. minister to Spain and U.S. secretary for foreign affairs. Along with former President of Congress Henry Laurens, these men were also appointed as peace commissioners who successfully negotiated a favorable treaty of peace with Britain in 1782-83.

During and after the war a number of European countries sent diplomats to the United States. The most-extensive and skillful corps of diplomats came from France. They included a minister, a charge d'affaires, a consul general, and regional consuls stretching from Portsmouth, New Hampshire, to Charleston, South Carolina. In the two letters presented here, the French charge d'affaires, Louis Guillaume Otto, and the French minister, the Count de Vergennes, insightfully informed the French foreign minister (i.e., secretary of state), the Comte de Vergennes, of what they saw as a nationalist counter-revolution occurring in America, where advocates for constitutional reform sought a more robust central government to bind the states together.

Otto informed Vergennes that the Annapolis Convention had just adjourned without proposing any commercial reforms—the ostensible reason for its meeting. Otto forwarded a translation of the report of the Annapolis commissioners in which he looked beyond the formal “obscurity” to the true meaning. For a long time, Otto wrote, “powerful and enlightened” Americans had wanted to infuse Congress with “more energy and vigor.” They felt that the common people had too much power within their respective states and that the states had too much power over Congress. Americans knew that if Congress were given more powers it might result in higher taxes, stricter law enforcement, steeper import duties, harsher actions against debtors, and “a marked preponderance of the rich men.” Ordinary Americans opposed these measures, preferring to maintain the spirit of their revolutionary-era state constitutions that placed sovereignty in the people with government officials acting only as the people’s servants.

Although there was no aristocracy in America, Otto wrote, there was a class known as “Gentlemen,” who strive for greater preeminence than the people were willing to give them. These gentlemen, by their families, talents, education, and positions in society, had formed a liaison—a coalition—“interested in strengthening the Government.” Many were merchants who wanted to establish the credit of the United States in Europe, to transfer the primary cost of government to the common people, and “to divest the people of a liberty of which they make such bad use.”

A bold, overt effort to change the federal government would not have won the people’s acceptance. But the economic depression that the country was experiencing furnished the reformers “a pretext” to introduce some commercial reforms. They planned to use the Annapolis Convention as a springboard to another convention empowered to propose reforms that would radically change the Articles of Confederation and the relationship of the states to the federal government. Discontented with the depression and not suspecting “the secret motives of their Antagonists,” the people embraced the measure.

Upon Vergennes' death, Moustier continued this series of insightful memos, informing Foreign Minister Montmorin that New York had become the eleventh state to ratify the new Constitution. Soon it would be implemented, dealing "a great blow" to the sovereign states. "The phantom of Democracy" would soon vanish. The people had been deceived by a coalition of wealthy, prominent men into forging their own "bonds" by which the federal government would eventually "be able to subjugate and control them." ■

LOUIS GUILLAUME OTTO TO
COMTE DE VERGENNES
NEW YORK, 10 OCTOBER 1786

My Lord. The Commissioners named by various States to propose a general plan of Commerce and to give to Congress the powers necessary to execute it were meeting in Annapolis over the last month. But, only five States being represented, they did not think they should broach the principal question, and they limited themselves to addressing to Congress and to the various Legislatures a report that characterizes the present spirit of this country's politics. In translating this report, I have taken care not only to put it into French but to render it intelligible. They endeavored to give the original an obscurity that the people will see through with difficulty, but which the powerful and enlightened Citizens will not fail to turn to account.

For a very long time, My Lord, they have felt the necessity of giving the federal Government more energy and vigor, but they have also felt that the excessive independence accorded to the Citizens with regard to the States, and to the States with regard to Congress, is too dear to individuals for them to be divested of it without great precautions. The people are not unaware that the natural consequences of a greater power accorded to the Government will be a regular collecting of taxes, a strict administration of justice, extraordinary duties on imports, strict actions against debtors, and lastly a marked preponderance of the rich men and the great proprietors. It is therefore in the interest of the people to preserve, as much as possible, the absolute liberty that was accorded to them at a time when they knew no other law than necessity, and when an English army laid, so to speak, the foundations of the political Constitution. It is in these tempestuous times that it was necessary to agree that all power should emanate only from the people, that everything be submitted to its supreme will, and that the Magistrates be only its servants.

Although there were no Patricians in America, there is a class of men known under the denomination of *Gentle-*

men; who by their wealth, by their talents, by their education, by their families, or by the positions that they fill, aspire to a preeminence that the people refuse to accord them, and although several of these men have betrayed the interests of their class in order to acquire popularity, there reigns among them a liaison all the more intimate, since they fear almost all the efforts of the people to despoil them of their possessions, and since they are in addition creditors, and consequently interested in strengthening the Government and attending to the execution of the laws. These men ordinarily pay the highest taxes, while the small proprietors escape the vigilance of the Collectors. Most of them being merchants, it is important to them to solidly establish the credit of the United States in Europe by the exact payment of debts and to have Congress given sufficiently extensive powers to make the people contribute thereto.

They have tried in vain, My Lord, by pamphlets and by other publications, to propagate notions of justice and of integrity, and to divest the people of a liberty of which they make such bad use. In proposing a new organization of the federal Government, they would have caused all minds to rebel. Ruinous circumstances for the Commerce of America have happily chanced to furnish the reformers a pretext to introduce some innovations. They represented to the people that the name American had become a disgrace among all the nations of Europe; that the flag of the United States was everywhere exposed to insults and vexations; that the farmer, no longer being able to freely export his produce, would soon be reduced to the last misery; that it was time to employ reprisals and to prove to foreign nations that the United States would not suffer this violation of the freedom of Commerce with impunity, but that vigorous measures could only be taken by unanimous Consent of the thirteen States and that, Congress not having the necessary powers, it was essential to form a general assembly charged to present it with the plan that it should adopt, and to indicate to it the means to execute it. The people, generally discontented with the difficulties of Commerce, and little suspecting the secret motives of their Antagonists, embraced this measure with ardor, and named Commis-

sioners who were supposed to meet in Annapolis at the Commencement of September.

The authors of this proposition, My Lord, had no hope or even any desire to see this Assembly of Commissioners, which should only prepare a question much more important than that of Commerce, succeed. The measures were so well taken that at the end of September, there were no more than five States represented in Annapolis, and the Commissioners of the Northern States were held up for several days in New York in order to delay their arrival. The assembled States, after having waited almost three weeks, had broken up on the pretext that they were not numerous enough to enter into the matter, and to justify this dissolution, they sent the various Legislatures and Congress a report, of which I have the honor to send You the enclosed translation. In this document, the Commissioners make use of an infinity of circumlocutions and ambiguous phrases to explain to their constituents the impossibility of taking into consideration a general plan of Commerce and the powers relative thereto without touching at the same time on other objects intimately connected with the prosperity and the national importance of the United States. Without naming these objects, the Commissioners elaborate on the present crisis of public affairs, on the dangers to which the confederation is exposed, on the discredit of the United States in foreign countries, and on the necessity of reconciling under a single point of view the interests of all the States. They conclude by proposing for the month of May next a new Assembly of Commissioners charged not only with deliberating on a general plan of Commerce, but *on other matters that might interest the harmony and the well-being of the States and on the means of adapting the federal Government to the needs of the union*. In spite of the obscurity of this document, You will perceive, My Lord, that the Commissioners do not wish to take into consideration the grievances of Commerce, infinitely interesting to the people, without perfecting at the same

time the fundamental constitution of Congress. It is hoped that new Commissioners will be named with powers sufficiently extensive to deliberate on these important subjects and to put Congress in a position not only to approve resolutions for the prosperity of the union, but to execute them.

COMTE DE MOUSTIER TO
COMTE DE MONTMORIN
NEW YORK, 2 AUGUST 1788 (EXCERPT)

The State of Newyork on the 25th of last month finally acceded to the new Constitution, which is now adopted by eleven States. The recommended amendments are so numerous and so important that if the new Congress takes them into account, this Constitution will barely resemble its first form. However, a great blow has been dealt to the individual Sovereignty of the States taken separately. The phantom of Democracy that has seduced the people is about to disappear. The credulous majority, intoxicated by the noblest hopes that it allowed itself to be fed, has itself forged the bonds by which sooner or later the Leaders of the people will be able to subjugate and control them after having appeared to want to obey them. The Constitution is taken on approval until a better one is found. This tendency always to perfect is infinitely favorable to the designs of the ambitious, who, by means of alterations, will manage to weary the American people and make them receive with indifference the yoke that is prepared for them and that they will probably endure much more patiently than expected. The proposed amendments offer a multitude of pretexts at the outset even for a reorganization of Government. This means is open to various parties. It is not doubted that each will profit from it according to its views.

The new Constitution appeared to be a remedy for all the ills from which the United States is suffering. . . . ■



TEACHING TOOLS

Discussion Questions

1. What are the reasons that Otto gives to support his view that the commissioners wanted the Annapolis Convention to fail? Do you find them convincing?
2. In your opinion, does Otto's explanation of the "Gentlemen" of America lead you to the conclusion that there actually was an aristocracy in the United States?
3. To what extent would you conclude that these diplomats were sympathetic or supportive of the "Gentlemen" of America?
4. What do these texts suggest about the French diplomats' views of democracy? What evidence would you use to support your answer?
5. According to Otto and Moustier, how would the Constitutional Convention and the Constitution undermine democracy?
6. Otto asserts that the "Gentlemen" of America used the "ruinous circumstances" of U.S. commerce as "a pretext to introduce some innovations." How was this done? Do you find Otto's explanation convincing?

Lesson Suggestions

I. Charges of Conspiracy: Thinking about the Letters of Otto and Moustier

1. Divide the class into groups of 3-5 students.
2. Each student should have access to the chart below. Groups should read the documents and list the specific accusations that Otto and Moustier made in asserting that the "Gentlemen" of America engaged in a conspiracy against the people or democracy.

The Specific Charges of Otto

How serious is this?

1	1	2	3	4	5
2	1	2	3	4	5
3	1	2	3	4	5
4	1	2	3	4	5
5	1	2	3	4	5
6	1	2	3	4	5
7	1	2	3	4	5
8	1	2	3	4	5

The Specific Charges of Moustier	How serious is this?
9	1 2 3 4 5
10	1 2 3 4 5
11	1 2 3 4 5
12	1 2 3 4 5
13	1 2 3 4 5
14	1 2 3 4 5

3. Have students read the documents and itemize specific accusations that each author made and list them in the first column of the chart.
4. After students have completed column 1, they should discuss in their small groups the seriousness of each of the accusations.
5. Have the small groups report their findings to the class. They should be prepared to explain the reasons why they have designated some accusations as more serious than others.
6. You can lead a discussion using the following questions as possible prompts:
 - a. What criteria are appropriate to use when analyzing these accusations?
 - b. What do these accusations reveal about the opinions of the French diplomats?
 - c. Why might the French be particularly suspicious about Americans’ efforts and processes in creating a new Constitution?

II. A Suspicious Mind: Evaluating Otto’s View of the Annapolis Convention

1. Divide the class into groups of 3-5 students.
2. Students should have access to the chart below. As they read Otto’s words, students should record the motivations that, in Otto’s estimation, drive the groups’ actions.

Actions of Annapolis Convention Delegates or the “Gentlemen” of America

“they limited themselves to addressing . . .”

Motivation(s): _____

“aspire to a preeminence . . .”

Motivation(s): _____

“interested in strengthening the Government . . .”

Motivation(s): _____

“to propagare notions of justice and of integrity . . .”

Motivation(s): _____

“represented to the people that the name American . . .”

Motivation(s): _____

“had no hope or even any desire to see this Assembly . . . succeed.”

Motivation(s): _____

“The assembled States, after having waited almost three weeks, had broken up . . .”

Motivation(s): _____

“make use of an infinity of circumlocutions and ambiguous phrases . . .”

Motivation(s): _____

“They conclude by proposing for the month of May next . . .”

Motivation(s): _____

“It is hoped that new Commissioners will be named . . .”

Motivation(s): _____

3. After groups have discussed their findings, have them share their answers with the class.
4. You can conclude the lesson by leading a discussion using the following questions:
 - a. What do Otto’s accusations suggest about those who wanted a new Constitution for the United States?
 - b. Is Otto overly suspicious of those who were arguing for a new Constitution?
 - c. Why might the French be interested in the motives behind the movement for a new U.S. Constitution?

III. What’s Wrong with These People?:

Evaluating Moustier’s Assessment of American Society

1. Students should have access to the chart below as they read the Moustier document.
2. In the second column, have students record Moustier’s characterization of each group.

Segment of American Society	Its problem according to Moustier?
“The credulous majority”	
“the Leaders of the people”	
“the ambitious”	
“the American people”	
“various parties”	

3. You may want to gauge students' understanding by having them report their findings to the class.
4. You can lead a discussion using the following questions as prompts:
 - a. What conclusions would you draw from Moustier's assessments of the American people?
 - b. What conclusions would you draw from Moustier's assessments of the leaders of the American people?
 - c. What might lead Moustier to come to his conclusions about the American people?

Vocabulary

Otto to Vergennes, 10 October 1786

1. *broach*: bring up, touch on
2. *obscurity*: ambiguity, uncertainty
3. *divested*: deprived, robbed
4. *duties*: taxes, fees
5. *preponderance*: growth of, increase in
6. *tempestuous*: intense and stormy
7. *emanate*: come from
8. *Patricians*: aristocrats, upperclass men
9. *denomination*: designation, name
10. *preeminence*: supremacy
11. *liaison*: connection, link
12. *despoil*: rob
13. *vigilance*: watchful care, oversight
14. *propagate*: spread, circulate
15. *pretext*: excuse
16. *vexations*: irritations, aggravations
17. *reprisals*: retaliations
18. *impunity*: without unpleasant consequences
19. *ardor*: passion, intense emotion
20. *circumlocutions*: indirect language
21. *ambiguous*: vague
22. *obscurity*: generally unknown

Moustier to Montmorin, 2 August 1788

1. *credulous*: gullible, trusting
2. *subjugate*: subdue, overpower
3. *indifference*: lack of interest
4. *pretexts*: made-up excuses