5. The National Interest vs. Abstract Moral Principles

On April 22nd, 1793, Washington issued a proclamation declaring the neutrality of the United States in the war then waged by Great Britain and most of the continental powers against revolutionary France. This proclamation was greeted with a storm of indignation by public opinion, and it has been said that if the proclamation had then been subjected to a vote in Congress, a great majority would have voted against Washington. The proclamation raised essentially three issues: the constitutional right of the President to make it without authorization by Congress; the compatibility of the proclamation with the legal obligation of the United States under the treaty of alliance with France of 1778; the moral obligation of the United States to come to the aid of France because of the affinity of republican institutions, the common dedication to liberty, and the debt of gratitude the United States owed France for the latter's support in the Revolutionary War. It is of course with the last two issues that we are here concerned.

Under the pseudonym "Pacificus," Hamilton defended the proclamation in a number of articles in the Gazette of the United States, to which Madison replied under the pseudonym "Helvidius." Madison's articles deal exclusively with the constitutional question and are therefore of no interest here. Hamilton's articles are noteworthy in that they unswervingly apply one standard to the two issues which concern us here: the national interest of the United States. Hamilton puts the legalistic and moralistic arguments of the idealistic opposition into the context of the concrete power situation in which the United States finds itself on the international scene and asks: If the United States were to join France in a war against virtually all of Europe, what risks would the United States run, what advantages could it expect, what good could it do to its ally? Such are the questions which must always be raised when the decision between war and peace is at issue. It is a great merit of Hamilton to have raised them on the concrete occasion of the Neutrality Proclamation of 1793 and, by doing so in terms of general principles, to have illuminated the nature of international politics itself.
FRANCE, at the time of issuing the proclamation, was engaged in war with a considerable part of Europe, and likely to be embroiled with almost all the rest, without a single ally in that quarter of the globe.

In such a situation, it is evident, that however she may be able to defend herself at home, of which her factions and internal agitations furnish the only serious doubt, she cannot make external efforts in any degree proportioned to those which can be made against her.

This state of things alone discharges the United States from an obligation to embark in her quarrel.

It is known, that we are wholly destitute of naval force. France, with all the great maritime powers united against her, is unable to supply this deficiency. She cannot afford us that species of co-operation which is necessary to render our efforts useful to her, and to prevent our experiencing the destruction of our trade, and the most calamitous inconveniences in other respects.

Our guaranty does not look to France herself. It does not relate to her immediate defence, but to the defence and preservation of her American colonies; objects of which she might be deprived, and yet remain a great, a powerful, and a happy nation.

In the actual situation of this country, and in relation to a matter of only secondary importance to France, it may fairly be maintained, that an ability in her to supply, in a competent degree, our deficiency of naval force, is a condition of our obligation to perform the guaranty on our part.

Had the United States a powerful marine, or could they command one in time, this reasoning would not be solid; but circumstanced as they are, it is presumed to be well founded.

There would be no proportion between the mischiefs and perils to which the United States would expose themselves, by embarking in the war, and the benefit which the nature of their stipulation aims at securing to France, or that which it would be in their power actually to render her by becoming a party.

This disproportion would be a valid reason for not executing the guaranty. All contracts are to receive a reasonable construction. Self-preservation is the first duty of a nation; and though in the performance of stipulations relating to war, good faith requires that its ordinary hazards should be fairly met, because they are directly contemplated by such stipulations, yet it does not require that extraordinary and extreme hazards should be run; especially where the object to be gained or secured is only a partial or particular interest of the ally, for whom they are to be encountered.

As in the present instance, good faith does not require that the United States should put in jeopardy their essential interest, perhaps their very existence, in one of the most unequal contests in which a nation could be engaged, to secure to France—what? Her West India islands and other less important possessions in America. For it is always to be remembered, that the stipulations of the United States do, in no event, reach beyond this point. If they were, upon the strength of their guaranty, to engage in the war, and could make any arrangement with the belligerent powers, for securing to France those islands and those possessions, they would be at perfect liberty instantly to withdraw. They would not be bound to prosecute the war one moment longer.

They are under no obligation in any event, as far as the faith of treaties is concerned, to assist France in defence of her liberty; a topic on which so much has been said, so very little to purpose, as it regards the present question.

The contest in which the United States would plunge themselves, were they to take part with France, would possibly be still more unequal than that in which France herself is engaged. With the possessions of Great Britain and Spain on both flanks, the numerous Indian tribes under the influence and direction of those powers, along our whole interior frontier, with a long extended sea-coast, with no maritime force of our own, and with the maritime force of all Europe against us, with no fortifications whatever, and with a population not exceeding four millions; it is impossible to imagine a more unequal contest, than that in which we should be involved in the case supposed. From such a contest we are dissuaded by the most cogent motives of self-preservation, no less than of interest.

We may learn from Vatel, one of the best writers on the laws of nations, that "if a state which has promised succors, finds itself unable to furnish them, its very inability is its exemption; and if the furnishing the succors would expose it to an evident danger, this also is a lawful dispensation. The case would render the treaty pernicious to the state, and therefore not obligatory. But this applies to an imminent danger threatening the safety of the state: the case of such a danger is tacitly and necessarily reserved in every treaty."

If too, as no sensible and candid man will deny, the extent of the present combination against France, is in a degree to be ascribed to imprudences on her part, the exemption to the United States is still more manifest and complete. No country is bound to partake in hazards of the most critical kind, which may have been produced or promoted by the indiscretion and intemperance of another. This is an obvious dictate of reason, with which the common sense and common practice of mankind coincide.
A third objection to the proclamation is, that it is inconsistent with the gratitude due to France, for the services rendered to us in our revolution.

But though this would be a sufficient answer to the objection under consideration; yet it may not be without use, to indulge some reflections on this very favorite topic of gratitude to France; since it is at this shrine that we are continually invited to sacrifice the true interests of the country; as if “all for love, and the world well lost,” were a fundamental maxim in politics.

Faith and justice, between nations, are virtues of a nature the most necessary and sacred. They cannot be too strongly inculcated, nor too highly respected. Their obligations are absolute, their utility unquestionable; they relate to objects which, with probity and sincerity, generally admit of being brought within clear and intelligible rules.

But the same cannot be said of gratitude. It is not very often, that between nations, it can be pronounced with certainty, that there exists a solid foundation for the sentiment; and how far it can justifiably be permitted to operate, is always a question of still greater difficulty.

The basis of gratitude is a benefit received or intended, which there was no right to claim, originating in a regard to the interest or advantage of the party on whom the benefit is, or is meant to be, conferred. If a service is rendered from views relative to the immediate interest of the party who performs it, and is productive of reciprocal advantages, there seems scarcely in such a case, to be an adequate basis for a sentiment like that of gratitude.

The effect at least would be wholly disproportioned to the cause, if such a service ought to beget more than a disposition to render in turn a correspondent good office, founded on mutual interest and reciprocal advantage. But gratitude would require much more than this; it would exact to a certain extent, even a sacrifice of the interest of the party obliged to the service or benefit of the one by whom the obligation had been conferred.

Between individuals, occasion is not unfrequently given for the exercise of gratitude. Instances of conferring benefits from kind and benevolent dispositions or feelings towards the person benefited, without any other interest on the part of the person who renders the service, than the pleasure of doing a good action, occur every day among individuals. But among nations they perhaps never occur. It may be affirmed as a general principle, that the predominant motive of good offices from one nation to another, is the interest or advantage of the nation which performs them.

Indeed, the rule of morality in this respect is not precisely the same between nations, as between individuals. The duty of making its own welfare the guide of its actions, is much stronger upon the former than upon the latter; in proportion to the greater magnitude and importance of national, compared with individual happiness, and to the greater permanency of the effects of national, than of individual conduct. Existing millions, and for the most part future generations, are concerned in the present measures of a government; while the consequences of the private actions of an individual ordinarily terminate with himself, or are circumscribed within a narrow compass:

Whence it follows that an individual may, on numerous occasions, meritoriously indulge the emotions of generosity and benevolence, not only without an eye to, but even at the expense of, his own interest. But a government can rarely, if at all, be justifiable in pursuing a similar course: and, if it does so, ought to confine itself within much stricter bounds.* Good offices which are indifferent to the interest of a nation performing them, or which are compensated by the existence or expectation of some reasonable equivalent, or which produce an essential good to the nation to which they are rendered, without real detriment to the affairs of the benefactors, prescribe perhaps the limits of national generosity or benevolence.

It is not here meant to recommend a policy absolutely selfish or interested in nations; but to show, that a policy regulated by their own interest, as far as justice and good faith permit, is, and ought to be, their prevailing one; and that either to ascribe to them a different principle of action, or to deduce, from the supposition of it, arguments for a self-denying and self-sacrificing gratitude on the part of a nation, which may have received from another good offices, is to misrepresent or misconceive what usually are, and ought to be, the springs of national conduct.

These general reflections will be auxiliary to a just estimate of our real situation with regard to France; of which a closer view will be taken in a succeeding paper.

France, the rival, time immemorial, of Great Britain, had, in the course of the war which ended in 1763, suffered from the successful arms of the latter the severest losses and the most mortifying defeats. Britain from that moment had acquired an ascendant in the affairs of Europe, and in the commerce of the world, too decided and too humiliating to be endured without extreme impatience, and an eager desire of finding a favorable opportunity to destroy it, and to repair the breach which had been made in the national glory. The animosity of wounded pride, conspired with calculations of interest, to give a keen edge to that impatience, and to that desire.

The American revolution offered the occasion. It early attracted the notice of France, though with extreme circumspection. As far as counte-
nance and aid may be presumed to have been given prior to the epoch of the acknowledgment of our independence, it will be no unkind derogation to assert, that they were marked neither with liberality, nor with vigor; that they wore the appearance rather of a desire to keep alive disturbances which might embarrass a rival, than of a serious design to assist a revolution, or a serious expectation that it could be effected.

The victories of Saratoga, the capture of an army, which went a great way towards deciding the issue of the contest, decided also the hesitations of France. They established in the government of that country, a confidence of our ability to accomplish our purpose, and, as a consequence of it, produced the treaties of alliance and commerce.

It is impossible to see in all this anything more, than the conduct of a jealous competitor, embracing a most promising opportunity to repress the pride, and diminish the power of a dangerous rival, by seconding a successful resistance to its authority, with the object of lopping off a valuable portion of its dominions. The dismemberment of this country from Great Britain was an obvious, and a very important interest of France. It cannot be doubted, that it was both the determining motive and an adequate compensation, for the assistance afforded to us.

Men of sense, in this country, derived encouragement to the part which their zeal for liberty prompted them to take in our revolution, from the probability of the co-operation of France and Spain. It will be remembered, that this argument was used in the publications of the day; but upon what was it bottomed? Upon the known competition between those nations and Great Britain, upon their evident interest to reduce her power and circumscribe her empire; not certainly upon motives of regard to our interest, or of attachment to our cause. Whoever should have alleged the latter, as the grounds of the expectation held out, would have been then justly considered as a visionary or a deceiver. And whoever shall now ascribe to such motives the aid which we did receive, would not deserve to be viewed in a better light.

The inference from these facts is not obscure. Aid and co-operation, founded upon a great interest, pursued and obtained by the party rendering them, is not a proper stock upon which to engraft that enthusiastic gratitude, which is claimed from us by those who love France more than the United States.

This view of the subject, extorted by the extravagancy of such a claim, is not meant to disparage the just pretensions of France to our good-will. Though neither in the motives to the succors which she furnished, nor in their extent, (considering how powerfully the point of honor, in such war, reinforced the considerations of interest when she was once engaged,) can be found a sufficient basis for that gratitude which is the theme of so much declamation; yet we shall find, in the manner of affording them, just cause for our esteem and friendship.
that their glory offended its ambitious views, and the ambassadors of France bore the criminal orders of stopping the career of their prosperity."

The information which the address of the convention contains, ought to serve as an instructive lesson to the people of this country. It ought to teach us not to overrate foreign friendships; and to be upon our guard against foreign attachments. The former will generally be found hollow and delusive; the latter will have a natural tendency to lead us aside from our own true interest, and to make us the dupes of foreign influence. Both serve to introduce a principle of action, which, in its effects, if the expression may be allowed, is anti-national. Foreign influence is truly the Grecian horse to a republic. We cannot be too careful to exclude its entrance. Nor ought we to imagine, that it can only make its approaches in the gross form of direct bribery. It is then most dangerous when it comes under the patronage of our passions, under the auspices of national prejudice and partiality.

I trust the morals of this country are yet too good to leave much to be apprehended on the score of bribery. Caresses, condescensions, flattery, in unison with our prepossessions, are infinitely more to be feared: and as far as there is opportunity for corruption, it is to be remembered, that one foreign power can employ this resource as well as another; and that the effect must be much greater, when it is combined with other means of influence, than where it stands alone.