

JONATHAN R. DULL

The French Navy and American Independence

*A Study of Arms and
Diplomacy, 1774-1787*



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THE FRENCH NAVY AND AMERICAN INDEPENDENCE

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AND
AMERICAN INDEPENDENCE

A Study of Arms and Diplomacy, 1774-1787

Jonathan R. Dull

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Observe good faith and justice toward all nations.
Cultivate peace and harmony with all. Religion and
morality enjoin this conduct. And can it be that
good policy does not equally enjoin it?

George Washington
Farewell Address
17 September 1796

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PREFACE

WARS are too important to be left to military historians. The study of war generally has been restricted to the recounting of battles or at best campaigns. Naval history in particular has been dominated by the descendants of Mahan, sharing all too often his antiquarian interest in battle tactics and his political biases. Although political, social, and economic historians are now beginning to ask their own questions about armies and navies, diplomatic historians have been slow to follow them. This is unfortunate since the conduct of diplomacy, particularly during wartime, is greatly influenced by the instruments of force at its disposal, by the requirements of war strategy, and by the appeal of victory. In the belief that military history is an essential component of diplomatic history I have studied the French navy as the means by which French diplomacy won its greatest (and most costly) victory of the eighteenth century, the achievement of American independence.

This book is not about the French navy as a political pressure group—lacking an instrument like the English Parliament to transmit political pressure, French naval officers as such enjoyed little influence within the French court. Instead, it treats the share of long-range naval requirements in the French decision to aid the American colonists, the part played by naval rivalry in the transition from limited aid to full-scale war, and the ways naval considerations affected French wartime diplomacy, particularly the French direction of the complex alliance system which finally defeated Britain. There is a good deal about shipbuilding, the naval budget, and even naval administration, insofar as they affected France's diplomatic options. The major naval subject missing will be battle tactics, for I am interested in the

Preface

strategic setting and consequences of battles rather than their mechanics.

Since I believe both the background and the immediate consequences of the French participation in the American war integral to this topic, my work extends from the accession of Louis XVI on 10 May 1774 to the death on 13 February 1787 of the Count de Vergennes, the principal author of the French intervention. It is based on approximately equal amounts of research in the naval collection of the French national archives and in the diplomatic correspondence of the French foreign ministry at the Quai d'Orsay. A final point—the first two-thirds of this book originally was written as a doctoral dissertation,¹ from which I have eliminated a large body of information which I felt was of interest only to those preparing to do research on related subjects. For such readers I recommend reading the two versions in conjunction.

I would like to acknowledge the help of Gerald Cavanaugh (who directed my thesis), the late Raymond J. Sontag, Orville T. Murphy, Svetlana Kluge Harris, Richard Herr, Brian Morton, John Schaar, Charles Berberich, Robert Hamburger, my typists Barbara Zelwer and Penny Ruby, and my editor Sanford Thatcher. My family has been of continual help: my mother Mrs. Earl Dull; my parents-in-law Mr. and Mrs. Robert West; my sister and cartographer Caroline Dull Hamburger; and above all my wife Agnes and elder daughter Veronica. I wish to dedicate this book to my brave and wonderful younger daughter Caroline.

¹ Jonathan R. Dull, "The French Navy and American Independence: Naval Factors in French Diplomacy and War Strategy, 1774-1780" (Ph.D. diss., University of California, Berkeley, 1972). It has been microfilmed by University Microfilms; the order number is 72-24,439. This work will be cited hereafter as Dull: Dissertation.

GLOSSARY

ALL translations unless otherwise noted are my own. I have attempted when translating or paraphrasing documents to follow the phraseology of the original as closely as good style permits. Foreign Ministry documents from Spanish sources here cited are in French translation.

Allied: "Allied" refers to French, American, Spanish, and Dutch forces at war with Britain. "Britain" and "England" are used interchangeably, and, with no greater accuracy, the United Provinces of the Netherlands has been referred to as both "Holland" and "the Netherlands."

Armaments, Matériel, Munitions: "Armaments" refers to ships having crews and placed in service or to the act of placing them in service. "Matériel" refers to all the equipment necessary to place ships in service—sails, masts, hemp, etc. "Munitions" refers to guns and ammunition.

Battalion: The battalion was the basic infantry unit of the French army during the war. An infantry regiment usually, but not always, contained two of these 650- to 850-man units (French and more often British regiments sometimes contained only a single battalion). The term "battalion" has been used for a regiment of only a single battalion.

Council of State: "Council of state" is my translation for *le Conseil d'Etat du Roi*, the supreme advisory body to the king, whose members, the ministers of state, generally numbering about a half-dozen, functioned much as did the members of the British cabinet—although they

Glossary

lacked the parliamentary responsibility which could also act as a buffer against the king's displeasure.

Fleet and Squadron: "Fleet" refers to all the ships operating from a European port and "squadron" to a detachment, however large.

Military: The adjective "military" includes "naval" unless it is clear from the context that only army affairs are discussed.

Money: The basic unit of currency mentioned is the livre. I have used the following conversion formulas: 23 livres: £ 1 (eighteenth century), as recommended by Robert and Elborg Forster, *European Society in the Eighteenth Century* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1969), p. 410; 5 livres: 1 Spanish piastre, the standard conversion figure used in diplomatic correspondence of this period. The Forsters estimate that the livre in 1760 was roughly equivalent in purchasing power to the American dollar in 1968. This rough equivalency would still seem valid for 1774 and the present.

Naval Minister: The translations "Naval Minister" and "Foreign Minister" have been used for the secretaries of state having charge respectively of naval affairs (among others) and foreign affairs. Their "department" refers to all under their charge; "ministry" refers to the central directing body of each department. Note that neither was necessarily a "minister of state" (see Council of State).

Overhaul: Both *le radoub* and *la refonte* have been translated as "overhaul," although the former was less extensive an operation than the latter. The even more extensive *reconstruire* has been translated as "re-construct."

Ship of the Line: A ship of the line was, in theory, a ship of sufficient strength to fight in the standard line-ahead or column formation of the eighteenth century. French

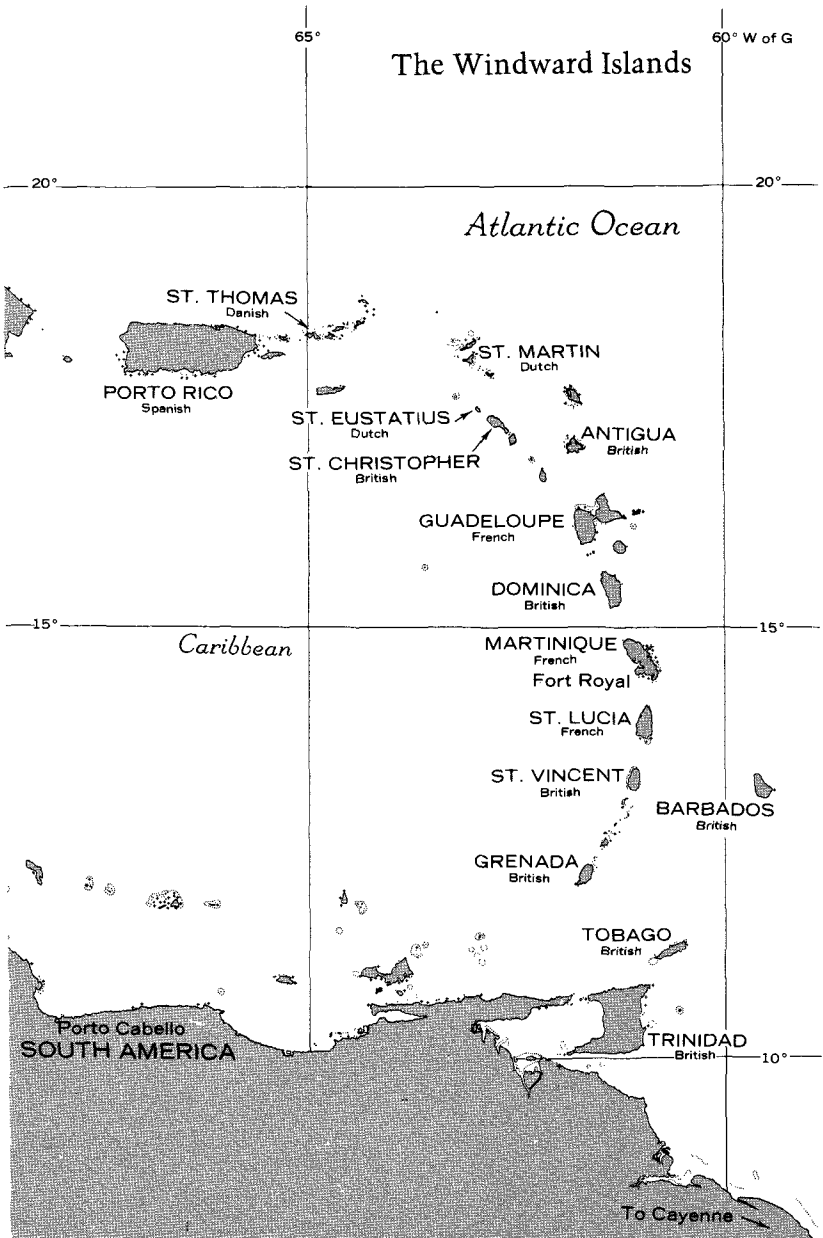
Glossary

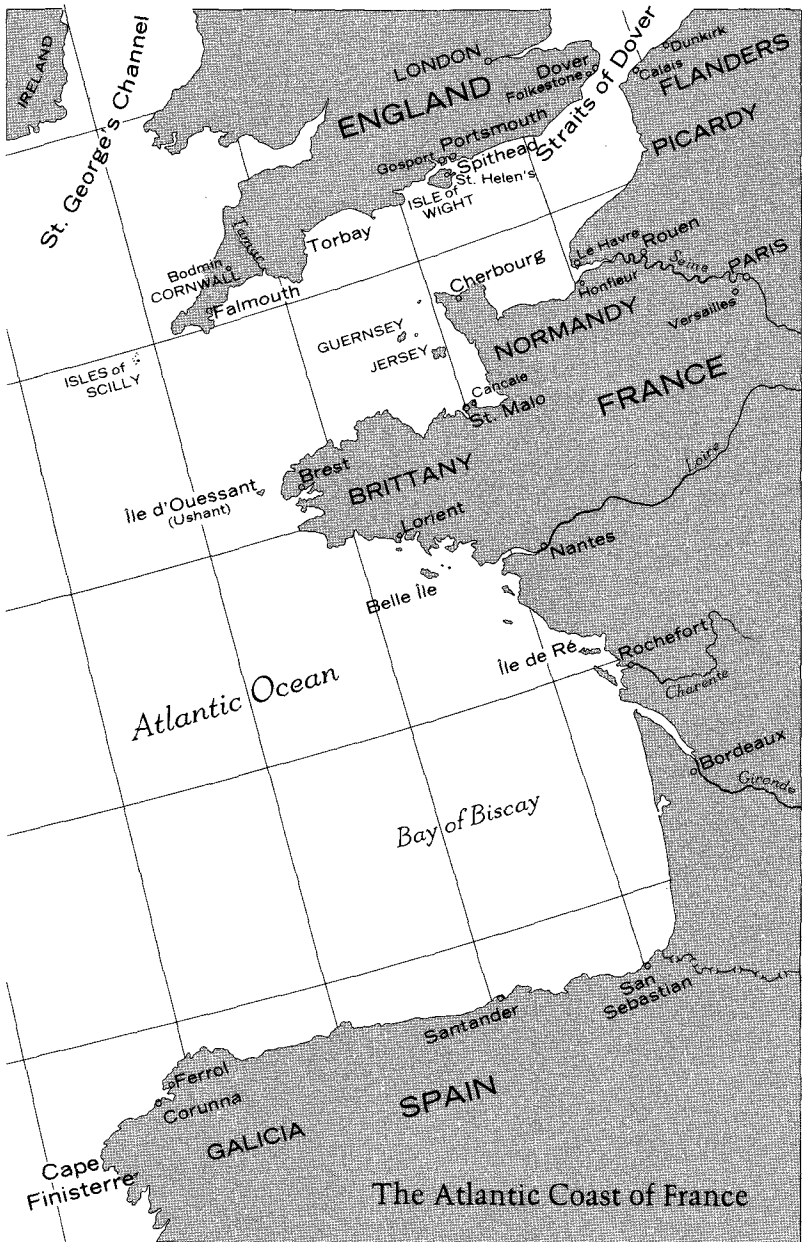
usage of the eighteenth century has been followed in counting 50-gun ships as ships of the line, although they were not always used as such. All English figures have been adjusted to correspond to this usage. A "three-decker" is a ship of the line with at least 90 guns (on 3 decks). Smaller warships, such as the frigate of 22 to 44 guns and the corvette of up to 20 guns, were used for scouting, convoy escort, etc. *La gabare* has been translated as "store ship" and *la flûte* as "transport." These ships did not generally engage in combat, although a warship serving temporarily as an armed auxiliary (*en flûte*) would generally have her guns returned on reaching her destination and revert to her former designation.

Windward and Leeward Islands: Eighteenth century French usage has been followed in referring to those islands east of Porto Rico as the Windward Islands and Porto Rico, Santo Domingo, Cuba, and Jamaica as the Leeward Islands. It should be remembered that sailing ships sail easily to destinations to leeward but must laboriously tack to windward.

MAPS

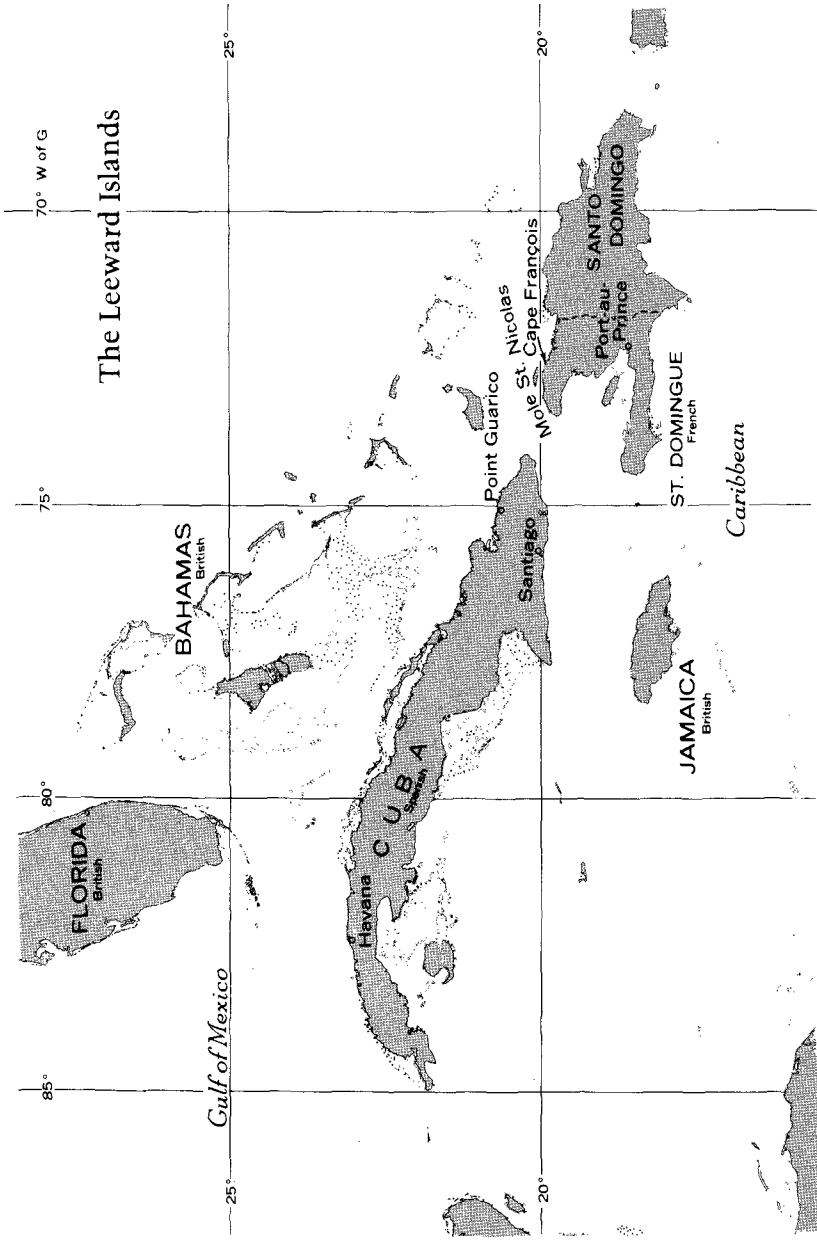
The Windward Islands





The Atlantic Coast of France

The Leeward Islands



THE FRENCH NAVY AND AMERICAN INDEPENDENCE

CHAPTER ONE

1774—*The Inheritance of Louis XVI*

1. The Diplomatic Inheritance

NINE days after the death of Louis XV, the royal council of state heard a report prepared by a senior member of the ministry of foreign affairs. This report had been drafted to inform the new king, Louis XVI, of France's diplomatic position. It began:

Sire, I believe it is my duty to place under the eyes of Your Majesty the state of foreign affairs of your kingdom and its relations with foreign powers. It will be seen that they find themselves in a fortunate calm. No disagreement in fact menaces its [the kingdom's] tranquility and neither the dignity of its crown nor the interest of its people have any blow to carry or to fear.¹

Peace was always precarious in eighteenth century Europe, whose states were dominated by aristocracies justified by war, but in May 1774 no major crisis seemed near.² The six-year-old war between Russia and France's ally, the Ottoman Empire (Turkey, but including the Balkans), had exhausted both combatants; the final campaign, already be-

¹ French foreign ministry archives, *Memoirs and Documents collection*, France 584: 76, "Tableau succinct de la situation politique de la France vis-à-vis des autres puissances de la Europe," read to the king in council, 19 May 1774 (drawn up by M. Gérard for M. Bertin, interim secretary of state). I will follow a simplified format for footnotes from primary sources, giving the series (by country for documents from the foreign ministry archives, by letter for documents from the naval archives) followed by volume number and page number. The documentary series are described in the first section of the bibliography.

² The best introduction to eighteenth century diplomacy is Albert Sorel, *Europe and the French Revolution*, vol. 1, *The Political Traditions of the Old Régime*, trans. Alfred Cobban and J. W. Hunt (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday and Co., Anchor Books, 1971).

gun, ended in July 1774 with the Treaty of Kutchuk-Kainardji. The other Eastern powers, Prussia and Austria, were ruled by monarchs grown old and cautious. The situation in Western Europe was even more reassuring. France had fought four major wars in the past eighty-five years against Great Britain. Numerous sources of dispute still remained from the Peace of Paris of 1763: the presence of an English commissioner to prevent the fortification of Dunkirk, English harassment of French fishermen off Newfoundland, unresolved disputes in India. At the moment, however, English attention was concentrated on resolving a worsening series of crises in North America, which had culminated in the Boston Tea Party of 1773 and, at virtually this very moment, Parliament's responding Coercive Acts. Throughout 1774, French diplomatic reports stressed the current British desire for untroubled relations with France. Charles-Jean Garnier, the first secretary of legation (and acting French diplomatic representative)³ in Britain wrote in a dispatch of July 1774 about contested fishing rights off Newfoundland: "By principle the English ministers in general can hardly be favorable to our fishing which they regard with reason as the nursery of our best sailors and one of the most firm supports of our navy, but they love peace above all things and desire nothing so much as to live with us in the best harmony."⁴

The following month Garnier wrote that England, far from desiring any new conquests, could only regard a foreign war as fatal to its existence. This was because of its current debts, its growing public expenses, and its declining credit, as well as because of the disproportion between the

³ The French ambassador, the Count de Guines, was in France awaiting a hearing on charges of *malfesance* of which he was cleared in July 1775.

⁴ French foreign ministry archives, Political Correspondence collection, England 506: 11, Garnier to the French foreign minister, the Count de Vergennes, 1 July 1774. All further diplomatic correspondence cited will be from the Political Correspondence collection unless noted as *Memoirs and Documents*.

Diplomatic Inheritance

home island and its extended possessions with their universal spirit of revolt. Garnier believed that the only things that could currently determine England to war would be the necessity of repelling a violent insult or the certainty that she was to be attacked.⁵

If no storm seemed likely to intrude on the new reign, neither did it seem likely that the nineteen-year-old king would set about attracting one. The last three years of Louis XV's reign were dominated by domestic affairs. His grandson immediately abandoned the attack on the Parlements upon which Louis XV's domestic policy had hinged, but it quickly appeared evident that Louis XVI would also concentrate on strengthening the domestic position of the monarchy. This likelihood was based not only on Louis' unmartial character and interests but upon the choices for his chief political appointments.

The most critical were not necessarily the secretaries of state who headed the great departments which administered executive policy—the army minister, navy minister, foreign minister, controller general of finances, and minister of the king's household.⁶ These positions despite their great importance did not guarantee entry into the body which advised the king twice weekly on the great questions of state, the royal council of state. During 1774 Louis XVI appointed seven men (called ministers of state) to the body; of those, two were holdovers from the preceding reign and two were secretaries of state of short duration. The last three were to contest domination over the young king and thus domination over French domestic and foreign policy, since Louis exercised his theoretically absolute powers through the council (which monitored the departments of state).

The king, inexperienced and insecure, depended for psy-

⁵ England 506: 155-156. Garnier to Vergennes, 10 August 1774.

⁶ Technically there was another secretary of state at Louis XVI's accession, Henri-Léonard-Jean-Baptiste Bertin, having charge of mines, manufactures, etc. His post was abolished in 1780 and had never been important.

chological support and political advice most heavily on Jean-Frédéric Phélypeaux, Count de Maurepas (1701-1781). Maurepas, having been French naval minister for twenty-five years, had been dismissed from public life by Louis XV in 1749. Although Louis XVI wished to be his own chief minister and gave Maurepas neither a department nor title of superiority over his fellow ministers of state, he became in fact equivalent to a prime minister.⁷ His political acumen, his intelligence, and his influence with the king gave him great power which he devoted solely to the maintenance of his own position. Lacking interest and experience in foreign affairs, indolent, basically solitary, he had little inclination for risking his own position to the chances of war.

The most active member of the council promised to be Anne-Robert-Jacques Turgot (1727-1781), naval minister for six weeks and then controller-general of finances. With the king's support Turgot soon undertook a program for the regeneration of the monarchy and state. By his character and fate Turgot resembled not a bureaucrat but a tragic hero: no royal servant since Colbert had equaled his genius, his vision, and his energy, but Turgot's arrogance and ambition aided his enemies in undercutting the king's trust and in preparing the destruction of his political life, his program, and finally his king. As a *philosophe* his personal philosophy was opposed to war; his political program was menaced by it; his last political act was to fight courageously and hopelessly against French involvement in Britain's war with her American colonies.

The last of Louis' influential advisors was Charles Gravier, Count de Vergennes (1717-1787), minister of state and the new foreign minister. He too seemed an unlikely advocate of war. During the 1760s French foreign policy had been aggressively anti-English. The French foreign minister, the Duke de Choiseul, had even sent a secret

⁷ Maurepas, however, was named in 1776 head of one of Louis' other advisory councils, the Council of Finances.

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agent to report on dissatisfaction in British North America. Following Choiseul's fall in December 1770 and the diversion of Louis XV's attention to his domestic opponents, Anglo-French tensions had diminished. Although Louis XV's last foreign minister, the Duke d'Aiguillon, was dismissed by the new king, Choiseul, the archenemy of Louis XVI's deceased father, failed to recover his position. Instead, Louis XVI gave the department to Vergennes, who had served Choiseul as ambassador to the Ottoman Empire and Aiguillon as ambassador to Sweden. Vergennes was a markedly different sort of man than his bitter enemy, the flamboyant and aggressive Choiseul. In many ways Vergennes represented at its best the conservatism of the state servant of Old Regime France. Vergennes had been raised from childhood in the diplomatic corps and had spent his life in indefatigable service to it and its traditions.⁸ It is difficult in reading his correspondence not to acquire great respect for this man of deep kindness, urbanity, gravity, and dedication. What perhaps takes longest to fully comprehend is the cohesion and simplicity of the principles which underlay his conduct of diplomacy. For Vergennes the function of diplomacy was to maintain the security of his monarch's possessions, which in turn depended on the maintenance of peace in Europe. Peace in Europe depended on preserving the balance of power from whomever would disturb it—in the last analysis, upon maintaining the status quo. Vergennes' ideal was Cardinal Fleury, foreign minister during his childhood, who through cooperation with Britain had brought France her greatest security in

⁸ The best description of Vergennes is Orville T. Murphy, "Charles Gravier de Vergennes: Portrait of an Old Régime Diplomat," *Political Science Quarterly* 83 (1968): 400-418. The traditions I mention include those eulogized in Sir Harold Nicolson, *The Evolution of Diplomatic Method* (London: Constable and Co., 1954)—civility, confidentiality, professionalism. It should be noted that Vergennes had participated in the secret diplomacy pursued by Louis XV without the knowledge of Choiseul and Aiguillon. For Vergennes' admiration of Fleury see *Memoirs and Documents, France* 446: 352, Vergennes to Louis, c. January 1781.

the last century. By his ability Vergennes would gradually win from the king considerable independence to implement his system—a system grounded in a contradiction.

Vergennes was a man dedicated to peace who assumed office at a moment of calm and yet ironically he, more than anyone, was to be responsible for bringing France into the American war—a war which so weakened the financial base of the monarchy as to lead to the crisis that finally destroyed all he so faithfully served.

The explanation of Vergennes' tragedy is the perilous disequilibrium of Vergennes' diplomatic universe. The moment of calm at Louis' accession presented to Vergennes not stability, but a brief opportunity to right that universe before disaster struck. The French war for America was a preventive war, fought not to forestall immediate danger, but to reverse the gradual disintegration of the system upon which in the long run French security was based.

French diplomacy, like all Old Regime diplomacy, was based on the concept of the balance of power—the belief that international order was effected through the cooperation of the relatively weak against the threateningly strong. France had two particularly strong reasons for believing her security menaced should another of the great states of Europe threaten the balance of power by disturbing the status quo. First, the security of French borders was protected by a cordon of minor states, from the semiautonomous Austrian Netherlands to the Republic of Genoa, separating her from those who might invade her. No document was more vital to France than the Treaty of Westphalia, dividing Germany into two great states of Prussia and Austria to be played off against each other and hundreds of minor states to be protected. Second was the isolation of France among the great powers of the continent. In theory, Louis of France and Maria Theresa of Austria were allied much as were Frederick of Prussia and Catherine of Russia. In fact, the eighteen-year-old alliance with France's ancient enemy was now directed against Austria itself. It was used

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solely to gain leverage to restrain any Austrian expansion. The façade would be broken should England end her diplomatic isolation (and break her own nominal links with Prussia) or should the conservative Maria Theresa die. Her son Joseph was already her coregent; his ambition and his unstable character threatened crises the French-Hapsburg alliance could not absorb.

France's other major ally was Spain, linked with France not only by the Family Compact of 1761, but by ties of blood between their two kings, both members of the House of Bourbon.⁹ Spain was of great potential use against England, but of almost no weight in continental affairs. The Spanish navy could add enough support to the French to match England's fleet; Spanish trade was a powerful motive for England to keep peace; Spain held an English ally, Portugal, a perpetual hostage. To the powers of the continent, on the other hand, Spain was a poor country without a major army and of no importance. France's real alliance system was in fact an alliance with all the minor powers of Europe against the other great continental powers—Prussia, Austria, and Russia. French subsidies and support bolstered most of the minor courts of Europe—Stockholm, Genoa, Munich, Warsaw, Constantinople, and many more.

This alliance system was utterly dependent on the ability of France to intimidate those who would disturb it and to use the mutual jealousy of the other great powers to find support for any endangered member. In both respects the system had suffered tremendous shocks. By the Treaty of

⁹ Under the terms of the Family Compact Spain was obligated to provide 20 ships of the line, six frigates, 10,000 infantry, and 2,000 cavalry to France should France be attacked; France was to provide similar aid (except 6,000 cavalry) if Spain were attacked. Edward Corwin, *French Policy and the American Alliance of 1778* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1916), 35-36. Louis referred to King Charles III of Spain as his uncle, and I will follow this usage. Actually, Louis' great-grandfather was the brother of Charles' father. "The Bourbons" signifies Louis and Charles only, although another member of the same royal house occupied the throne of the Kingdom of Naples.

Paris England had not only defeated France, but humiliated her. Vergennes wrote: "The consideration and the influence of any power is measured and regulated by the opinion one has of its intrinsic forces."¹⁰ Could one respect the intrinsic force of France when an English commissioner sat in Dunkirk, when English warships interfered with French fishermen in the French fishing grounds of Newfoundland, when English ambassadors treated France contemptuously? The English blows to French prestige represented as real a loss to France's diplomatic weight as had the French expulsion from Canada. Even more dangerous for France was the despoiling of Poland in 1772 by Austria, Prussia, and Russia. Vergennes agonized, "If force is right, if convenience is a title, what will henceforth be the security of states?" Heretofore the major states had protected the minor lest a rival gain an advantage; now the major powers had proportioned the spoils of a helpless neighbor. Vergennes looked on this brave new world with horror and sought to restrain its forces.

As he realized, the solution to his problems lay in reconciliation with England. Such a reconciliation would permit diversion of French resources from the navy to the army. Of ever greater importance, Anglo-French cooperation could greatly limit the power of the other continental powers which had great armies but not the finances to engage in major wars. Only from France or England with their numerous colonies and enormous trade could come subsidies. A half-century before, the England and France of Walpole and Fleury had cooperated as equals; France had been se-

¹⁰ The Treaty of Paris (1763) ended the Seven Years War. For the French alliance system and Vergennes' view of the current diplomatic scene see both his instructions to his ambassador in Vienna and his brilliant memoir to Louis XVI (from which the quotations are taken): France, Commission des Archives Diplomatiques, *Recueil des instructions données aux ambassadeurs et ministres de France depuis les traités de Westphalie jusqu'à la Révolution Française*, 1: 454-500 (hereafter cited as *Recueil*), instructions for the Baron de Breteuil, 28 December 1774; French national archives, general holdings, K 164 (papers of Louis XVI) item no. 3, Vergennes to Louis, December 1774.

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cure, but now England was the England of Pitt: arrogant, aloof, contemptuous of France. To reduce England to a position of equality, France had to take from her a share of her strength, her monopoly of American trade and markets. This book will tell how Vergennes sought and won a war which finally failed to weaken England, which failed to bring about the rapprochement he sought, and which raised dangers from within the monarchy far greater than those which threatened it from without.

2. The Naval Inheritance

In Old Regime France, naval affairs passed through cycles. A period of concentration on naval construction, repairs, and operations was generally followed by a diplomatic crisis or war, which in turn was often followed by a period of inattention to the navy. The last fifteen years of Louis XV's reign were those of such a cycle. The French navy was almost completely destroyed by the British navy in a series of battles in 1759. In October 1761, Choiseul, the foreign minister, became naval minister as well. For nine years he and his cousin, the Duke de Choiseul-Praslin (naval minister from August 1766 to December 1770) rebuilt the French navy. They added new ships, filled the dockyards with matériel, and reformed naval administration. When the crisis with England for which they had prepared finally occurred (over the possession of the Falkland Islands), Louis XV and his Spanish allies backed down and Choiseul fell from power. During Louis XV's last three years naval affairs were downgraded. Not even enough ships of the line were built to replace those scrapped because of age or lost by accident and repairs were not undertaken to offset the aging of the fleet.¹ Garnier reported in

¹ For the definition of "ship of the line" see the Glossary. The theoretical life span of a ship of the line was about a dozen years (although this varied according to the port of construction); ships were frequently rebuilt, but kept their original name. Alexandre Lambert de

1774 that England had 142 ships of the line, of which 72 were in service or ready to be immediately armed;² the French naval ministry could report only 64 ships of the line, of which 34 could be readied if needed.³ In fact the French navy was even less prepared for hostilities than its numbers suggested. To save expenses the French navy had consumed the reserves of masts, wood, hemp and other naval supplies that the Choiseuls had accumulated. Until the dockyards were refilled, the French navy was barely capable of fitting a fleet for the most limited operations.

An even more immediate crisis almost prohibited even the routine movement of ships. Louis XV's last minister, Bourgeois de Boynes, had attempted extensive reforms of naval administration. Although many were excellent in theory, their implementation produced such chaos that the navy could barely send ships from one port of France to another.⁴ Four sets of measures were chiefly responsible. First, Boynes attempted to organize France's naval forces like the French army. He divided its ships and officers into eight brigades. The brigades were so autonomous that officers could be promoted only within their own brigade and ships equipped only from the brigades' stores. In practice the system had to be ignored even to outfit a small training squadron.

Members of the naval officer corps were outraged not

Sainte-Croix, *Essai sur l'administration de la marine de France, 1689-1792* (Paris: Calmann-Lévy, 1892), 269. During these three years, six new ships of the line were completed, but eight were sold, accidentally destroyed, or demolished.

² England 596: 163, Garnier to Vergennes, 10 August 1774. This includes 50-gun ships and ships in construction.

³ Naval holdings of the French national archives, B⁵9: unpagged, "Etat de la marine, 1774." I have made slight adjustments to the figures, since the source lists two ships of the line already demolished. The ships of the line and frigates of the French navy in August 1774 are listed in Appendixes B and D.

⁴ Vincent-Félix Brun, *Guerres maritimes de la France: Port de Toulon, ses armements, son administration depuis son origine jusqu'à nos jours* (Paris: Henri Plon, 1861), I, 526-529.

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only by interference with their chances of promotion but also with the insult of seeing naval traditions violated. A second set of measures also increased the navy's similarity to the army. The navy was given increased responsibility for providing its own infantry and artillery support and regiments of naval troops were assigned to the brigades and naval "colonels" named to command them.

Another set of measures produced still further resentment. The majority of French naval officers had been trained as naval cadets aboard ship.⁵ Boynes threatened their status by establishing a competing naval academy at Le Havre with a fixed curriculum supplemented by training cruises.

The most sweeping and disastrous of Boynes' reforms pertained to the administration of the naval ports. The naval ports (Brest, Toulon, Rochefort, Lorient, and some smaller ports) had functioned by a system of competition established a century before by Colbert. Power was divided along clear lines between a civilian official, the intendant, generally devoted to economy, and a military officer, the port commandant, devoted to the fleet's preparedness. The intendant commanded a body of civilian officers (the corps of officers of administration or "officers of the pen"), the port commandant, a body of military officers (the "officers of the sword"), some of whom were "officers of the line," others port officers restricted to service in the ports. Choiseul had given increased power to the military officers but had preserved Colbert's basic system. Boynes sought to replace the competition between "pen" and "sword" by co-operation, but in practice produced only a breakdown of lines of responsibility and a struggle for power between intendant, port commandant, the "colonels" and the head of the port officers. In January 1774 he even tried to com-

⁵ Of 944 naval officers (1 January 1776), 832 had been naval cadets ("gardes du pavillon" or "gardes de la marine"). Didier Neuville, *Etat sommaire des archives de la Marine antérieures à la Révolution* (Paris: L. Baudoin, 1898), 357.

bine naval engineers, port officers, and officers of administration into a single corps, in effect attempting to solve disputes over power by giving everyone the same uniform.

Louis XVI, though not of a martial temperament, was extremely concerned with naval affairs, largely because of his childhood interest in geographical exploration. The brilliant Turgot was placed at the head of the naval department, but since the problem of royal finances was even more pressing he was soon moved. His replacement was selected for the purposes of reorganizing naval administration and overcoming the navy's factional struggles. On 22 August 1774, Louis chose as naval minister another proven administrator with no previous experience of naval matters, Antoine-Raymond-Gualbert-Gabriel de Sartine (1729–1801), the lieutenant-general of the Paris police. The son of a Catalan intendant and long a friend of Diderot, Sartine had been responsible for the administration of the city of Paris since 1759. He became one of the most capable naval ministers in French history: a firm yet tactful leader, a prudent and courageous war minister, an innovative and meticulous administrator, a man who took particular pride in the health of his ships' crews. He took as an assistant one of the navigators whose work so interested the king, Charles Claret, Chevalier de Fleurieu, who himself became naval minister in August 1790. Sartine had a wide range of responsibilities. In addition to the navy proper, the twelve bureaus of the navy department handled the administration of colonies, maritime commerce, fisheries, a number of consulates, commercial establishments in the Levant and even the Chamber of Commerce of Marseille, which had an official function in Mediterranean commerce.⁶ Sartine eventually also headed committees to reform colonial legislation and to overhaul the French Levantine establishments and

⁶ In 1775 these bureaus employed ten first secretaries and 105 under-secretaries and clerks. G. Dagnaud, *L'administration centrale de la Marine sous l'ancien régime* (Paris: M. Imhaus et R. Chapelot, 1913), 35; Neuville, *Etat sommaire*, xxv–xlii, 313–315, 449–450.

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sat on the Council of Dispatches, the Royal Council of Commerce and, after 1778, the Council of Prizes.⁷ He brought to these new tasks the same abilities and dedication he had devoted to improving the administration of Paris. His prior lack of knowledge or interest in naval matters was thus irrelevant; Sartine quickly became as much a spokesman for naval interests as if he had been trained from childhood to be naval minister as had Maurepas.

Sartine's first priority was to reestablish order in the administration of ports. In November 1774 he successfully requested from Louis a return to the administrative forms of Choiseul, pending a comprehensive review of the working of the ports.⁸ In November 1774 the administration of ports and arsenals was reestablished according to the ordinances of 1765. Two ordinances of 26 December 1774 regulated the service of the navy's infantry and artillery, reducing the former from 144 companies to 100 and returning much of the responsibility for the latter to the army.⁹ Finally, on 2 March 1775 Sartine abolished the Royal Academy of the Navy and cut in half the number of naval cadets.¹⁰ As order returned, Sartine turned to a more recalcitrant set of problems—the limits of his department's budget, the lack of naval matériel, and the disrepair of the fleet.

⁷ See the *Almanach Royal* (Paris: D'Houry) for 1775–1781.

⁸ G 127: 214–221, untitled and undated memoir, identified G 127: 204 as Sartine to Louis, November 1774.

⁹ Gabriel Coste, *Les anciennes troupes de la marine (1622–1792)* (Paris: L. Baudoin, 1893), 231.

¹⁰ Abbé (Albert) Anthiaume, *Un ancêtre du Borda au Havre* (Paris: Ernest Dumont, 1920), 11–13. Sartine argued with some justification that the school was poorly situated for training cruises (which were held in the Bay of Biscay) and could not produce enough officers.

1775—*An Empire at Peace, An Empire at War*1. The French Navy and the Defense
of the French Empire

IT is a measure of the lack of immediate danger from Britain that at the beginning of 1775 the French navy needed at sea or fitting for cruises only a single ship of the line, half a dozen frigates, and a small number of corvettes, transports, and storeships. These ships were assigned an area of responsibility from the English Channel and Bay of Biscay to the Caribbean, Eastern Mediterranean, and Indian Ocean. The first responsibility of the French navy naturally was the protection of France's own coasts. During the last war the British had raided French seaports and in 1759 had even captured Belle Île off Brittany. Although the French had a fleet at Brest to protect against a surprise attack on their coast, they in fact relied upon their 170,000-man peacetime army as their chief deterrent. The British with only 10,612 troops in England and Wales¹ kept 20 ships of the line partially manned to act as "guard ships"; the French in 1775 did not even have regular coastal patrols. Only naval supply ships or an occasional warship changing ports joined the merchantmen passing along her coast.²

Far more dependent on the French navy were the French possessions in the Caribbean. There were five major French colonies: Saint Domingue (now Haiti), Martinique, Guadeloupe, Saint Lucia, and Cayenne (on the South American

¹ French figures are for 1 May 1774. Léon Mention, *Le comte de Saint-Germain et ses reformes* (Paris: L. Baudoin, 1884), 318. British figures are for April 1775. Piers Mackesy, *The War for America, 1775-1783* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1964), 524-525.

² For example, the ships of the line *Saint-Michel* and *Artésien* were used in early 1775 to transfer 1,100 troops from Brest to Rochefort and remained there for overhaul. B¹⁸⁰: 39-40, untitled memoir of September 1774; see also B²⁴⁰⁴: 85.

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coast). These islands had a white population of 50,000 to 60,000, roughly comparable to the white population of the English colonies of Jamaica, Antigua, Saint Christopher, Dominica, Saint Vincent, Barbados, Grenada, and Tobago. From these a militia of 24,000 was drawn,³ but the colonies' chief protection was four colonial regiments (two at Saint Domingue and one each at Martinique and Guadeloupe), under the control of the navy department which had to replace annual losses from disease of up to 10 percent of their 6,000 troops. The militia and troops had the collateral function of protecting the French colonists against revolts by their slaves (outnumbering colonists by five or ten to one, depending on the island); slave labor was the source of the colonies' trade which together accounted for about two-fifths of all French imports and one-tenth of her exports.⁴ The less-productive English colonies had far smaller garrisons; until late 1776 there were less than 2,000 British troops in the West Indies.⁵ Given the preponderance of French military strength, the French navy maintained only a token force in the Caribbean. At the beginning of 1775 the only French warships in the West Indies were a frigate and a corvette sent from Toulon to visit Martinique, Saint Domingue, and Jamaica.⁶ They were relieved by a frigate sent from Brest in June.

³ There were 13,000 at Saint Domingue, 7,000 at Martinique, and 4,000 at Guadeloupe. J. Saintoyant, *La colonisation française sous l'ancien régime* (Paris: La renaissance du livre, 1929), 2: 318.

⁴ This is based on the average of 1764-1776 computed from the figures in Ruggiero Romano, "Documenti e prime considerazioni intorno alla 'balance du commerce' della Francia dal 1716 al 1780," in *Studi in onore di Armando Sapori* (Milan: Istituto Editoriale Cisalpino, 1957), 2: 1274, 1291. These figures do not include reexports of their sugar, coffee, and other colonial products, which may have accounted for another two-fifths of French exports. See also Jean Tarrade, *Le commerce colonial de la France à la fin de l'Ancien Régime* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1972), 2: 739.

⁵ Mackesy, *War for America*, 524; England 509: 49 and England 516: 393-394, Garnier to Vergennes, 6 March 1775 and 21 June 1776.

⁶ Brun, *Port de Toulon*, 1: 533. This was below the usual assignment for the Caribbean of a frigate and two corvettes (B481: 46).

The remaining French possessions in the Western Hemisphere, the tiny islands of Saint Pierre and Miquelon off Newfoundland, received no French naval protection because they were indefensible. The Newfoundland fisheries for which they offered a base employed over 250 ships and some 10,000 fishermen, a vital source of crews for the wartime French navy.⁷ In 1755 the British had seized without any warning the Newfoundland fishing fleet; given the proximity of the English naval base at Halifax, the only way to prevent a similar catastrophe would be to recall the fishing fleet at the first danger of Britain's reversing her policy of peace toward France.

Almost as indefensible were the French trading posts in India, which by the Peace of Paris of 1763 the French were forbidden to fortify. As late as 1777 their chief post at Pondicherry had only 700 Europeans capable of bearing arms. The French did have a relatively secure point of support in the Mascarene Islands (Île de France and Bourbon, now Mauritius and Réunion) with some 6,500 colonists and a colonial regiment apiece. The French kept a frigate and some auxiliary ships on regular station in the Indian Ocean and occasionally sent out a small ship of the line "en flûte," that is with part of its guns removed so it could carry supplies. The *Flamand* left Toulon in this manner for Île de France via the colonial recruit depot at Île de Ré in mid-April 1775. She carried masts, artillery, munitions, and 300 recruits as troop replacements and did not return to France until June 1776.⁸

The largest French naval commitments were in the Mediterranean, where French commerce still had to be protected from corsairs. An occasional frigate was sufficient to protect the North African trade, but trade with the Levant (eastern Mediterranean) entailed the regular use of at least

⁷ Charles de la Morandière, *Histoire de la pêche française de la morue dans l'Amérique Septentrionale* (Paris: G. P. Maisonneuve et Larose, 1962), 2: 999.

⁸ Brun, *Port de Toulon*, 1: 514.

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four frigates or corvettes. They were sent out in pairs at staggered intervals for six to eight-month cruises, convoying each way the trade with the privileged French entrepôts of the Ottoman Empire.⁹ With the end of the Russo-Turkish war this trade became more secure.¹⁰

Finally, France maintained a slaving station at the island of Gorée off Senegambia on the west coast of Africa. This post was not fortified and received only an occasional visit by a warship.

The largest concentration of French naval strength occurred when training squadrons were fitted out, such as the training squadron of a dozen small ships during the summer of 1775. This squadron, which included four frigates and four corvettes, exercised under the command of a newly promoted commodore, the Count de Guichen. The summer of 1775 represented the peak of naval activity during Sartine's first year as minister. In addition to the ship of the line en route to the Indian Ocean, eight frigates or corvettes were off the French coast, five were on cruise in the Mediterranean, one was in the Indian Ocean, and one in the Caribbean.

The real basis of French naval deterrence obviously lay not in the number of ships at sea, but in the presence of 60 unmanned ships of the line resting at Brest, Toulon, and Rochefort (plus, to a certain extent, 50 or so Spanish ships of the line). Some were ready for manning, others were in overhaul or still in construction, and the majority were in various stages of disrepair. Given time for repairs, most could eventually be used in case of war. In the past the

⁹ This trade accounted for about ten percent of French exports and imports. Romano, "Documenti," 1275, 1287. See also Paul Mason, *Histoire du commerce français dans le Levant au XVIII^e siècle* (Paris: Hachette et c^{ie}, 1911), 348.

¹⁰ To aid the Turks, Turgot while naval minister had secretly sent two ships of the line to Constantinople. The Ottoman Empire purchased the *Ferme*; the *Flamand* returned to Toulon. B²405:141-142, Turgot to Bourgeois de Guendreville, intendant at Toulon, 10 August 1774; Brun, *Port de Toulon*, 1: 534.

French navy had not defeated the English navy, but had been formidable enough to cause Parliament to impose such levies on the English taxpayer that Parliament would not lightly count the French navy as an enemy.

Soon after Sartine made his first administrative proposals, he began to urge improving the readiness of the French navy through an increase of its supply of naval matériel and the overhaul of a number of its unrepaired ships. Sartine's motives in urging extra expenditures seem to have been basically bureaucratic empire-building rather than a response to any immediate danger. He seems to have been initially concerned with standardization of the French fleet, which contained ships of varied sizes as well as vastly differing ages. In March 1775 someone within the naval ministry drafted for Sartine's use such a plan. According to this proposal, the navy would still contain 64 ships of the line, but these would consist of eight ships of 80 or more guns, twenty-four 74s, twenty-four 64s and eight 50s. This would necessitate replacing four old 74s, one 70, one 68, one 60, and two 56s by a reconstructed 116 and 74, three new 64s, and four new 50s. Thereafter, the navy would annually replace eight ships of the line and four frigates.¹¹ Such a program with its symmetry of numbers indicates a greater concern for orderliness than for preparing for a possible war. Were war a current danger no one would consider constructing 64s and 50s, ships of marginal utility in a line of battle, while disposing of 74s.

There is no indication of whether Sartine even presented this proposal to the council of state. Far less ambitious proposals had already been rejected. Sartine's initial budget request for 1775 had included funds for construction or repair of six ships of the line, but only the overhauls to the *Marseillais* and *Triton* and the reconstruction of the *Sphinx* were initially approved.¹² Sartine's budget had requested

¹¹ B⁵10: unpagéd, "Résumé du tableau ci-joint pour faire connaître ce qu'il y aurait à faire pour compléter la marine," 26 March 1775.

¹² B⁵9: unpagéd, untitled memoir, 28 October 1774. Appendix C

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over 13,500,000 livres for the variable expenses of the navy, some 4,000,000 above normal. The navy department as a whole was normally assigned 27,900,000 livres, about 7.5 percent of the royal revenue of 362,000,000 livres in 1774.¹³ Of this amount, 10,100,000 went for colonies, 8,000,000 for fixed expenses,¹⁴ and 300,000 for secret or extraordinary expenses, leaving only 9,500,000 for the ordinary naval expenses. These included the expenses of the ports, the purchase of matériel, the costs of overhauls and construction, the expenses of preparing, provisioning, and manning of squadrons, and miscellaneous expenses such as hospitals, civil works, and care of convict labor.¹⁵ As long as Turgot remained dominant on the council, however, the reconstruction of the navy had to remain secondary to his program of retrenchment of royal expenditures.

Sartine's failure to obtain additional money also precluded any resupply of naval matériel. As one example, between his initial and final budget requests Sartine was forced to reduce his request for funds for wood for construction from 1,119,000 livres to 800,000 livres.¹⁶

lists all overhauls requiring a month or longer that were undertaken for ships of the line.

¹³ J. F. Boshier, *French Finances, 1770-1795* (Cambridge: At the University Press, 1970), 90.

¹⁴ Under this category came such items as pay for officers and naval cadets (1,800,000 livres), the Royal Corps of Infantry (1,400,000), the employees of the ministry at Versailles (885,000), the officers of administration (865,000), and a variety of other expenses, such as pensions and the cost of consulates. E 205: unpagéd, "Les dépenses fixes de la marine au mois du 7^{bre} [September] 1774," 15 April 1784.

¹⁵ B⁵10: unpagéd, "Mémoire au roi," 15 July 1777; B¹81: 327-336, untitled memoir, 23 December 1775; B²14: 85, memoir of Fleurieu, July 1777. The cost of building a 74 was about 850,000 livres. E 205: unpagéd, "Dépenses possibles du département de la marine. . ." November 1780. The navy, moreover, still owed 13,282,298 livres in debts from the partial mobilization of 1770. E 204: unpagéd, "Mémoire sur la situation du département de la marine relativement au fonds," August 1774. See Appendix A for the naval budget and debt.

¹⁶ B⁵9: unpagéd, untitled memoir of 28 October 1774; B²405: 237-241, "Extrait du projet arrêté par le Roi des dépenses variables à faire dans les différents ports pendant l'année 1775," 16-23 December 1774.

The lack of naval matériel was an ever firmer guarantee than the disrepair of the fleet that the French navy would be used only for normal peacetime operations. In fact the depletion of Choiseul and Choiseul-Praslin's stocks of matériel rendered difficult even these routine movements.¹⁷ The shortages were selective.¹⁸ The navy had sufficient pitch and tar, and the shortages of anchors and sail canvas (under normal usage, two years' supply and one year's supply respectively) could be fairly easily rectified. The most serious deficiencies were masts, hemp, and wood for construction.

The least serious of these deficiencies was that of masts. From a high point of over 4,300 in 1766, the number of large masts had declined to less than 1,800 in August 1774. This, however, still represented a three-year supply under normal peacetime usage, and the navy was able to purchase masts from Scandinavia. The number of large masts on hand rose to about 2,250 by the end of 1774 and 2,650 by the end of 1775. Although France was still dependent on Scandinavian mast imports, which could be interrupted by war, the supply of masts had risen by almost 50 percent in sixteen months.

The problem of hemp was more challenging. At the end of 1768, there had been a four-year supply on hand, 65,305 cwt. (hundredweight). By August 1774 this supply had dropped to 16,000 cwt. The navy was barely able to meet current needs for rigging and line, let alone accumulate greater reserves of the hemp from which they were made. Although the supply rose to 24,000 cwt. by the end of 1774,

¹⁷ B^s10: unpagéd, "Mémoire sur les dépenses variables de la marine pour 1776," no date but toward the end of 1775, complained that ships could not even be rigged without the use of various expedients.

¹⁸ Information following is based on these sources: B^s10: unpagéd, "Tableau des forces navales du roi dans le courant des treize années," no date but end of 1775 or beginning of 1776; B^s10: unpagéd, "Comparaison de l'état où se trouvoit la marine du roi au mois d'août 1774 avec son état actuel," no date but end of 1775. Masts include only those above a certain size.

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it dropped again to 17,250 cwt. by the end of the following year. The naval ministry pressed the intendants of hemp-producing provinces to increase production,¹⁹ but the provision of hemp continued to be a problem.

The key matériel problem was that of wood for construction. This category included all the wood, generally oak, used in the construction, repair, and overhaul of the navy's ships. The ministry computed the average peacetime need at 750,000 cubic feet (ft.³) per year. Choiseul-Praslin had built a reserve of 1,900,000 ft.³, but by August 1774 the amount on hand had dropped to barely 1,000,000 ft.³. Under Sartine the supply rose with agonizing slowness—1,139,866 ft.³ at the end of 1774; 1,262,104 ft.³ at the end of 1775. The basic reason for Sartine's failure to build up the supply of wood for construction was financial. Since France's domestic supply of timber was inadequate, much of Europe had to be searched for wood. Toulon eventually received wood not only from Dauphiné, Burgundy, Franche Comté and Corsica, but also from Italy and Albania.²⁰ The Atlantic ports received wood not only from the forests of northern France but from all over Germany as well, including wood from Prussia sent via Hamburg and Amsterdam. Commissioners were sent abroad to visit forests and deal with contractors,²¹ but they had to deal in a seller's market. The navy simply did not have the necessary funds to make the purchases, by one estimate 4,500,000 livres worth, needed to create an adequate reserve.²² These difficulties would naturally be increased by any building program. The great drydock at Toulon, the major project of 1775, de-

¹⁹ Brun, *Port de Toulon*, 1: 543.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 542.

²¹ See for example B³⁸⁰: 34, a memoir dealing with the request for more money by commissioner Charlot de Granville, visiting forests near Cassel, 5 December 1774; B³⁸¹: 127-128, Commissioner Brun de Ste. Catherine at Rome to Sartine, 10 February 1775.

²² B⁵¹⁰: unpagéd, "Tableau général de la situation des arsenaux de la marine," no date but apparently late 1775. As a rule of thumb, calculate the cost of wood for construction at 2.75 to 3 livres per ft.³

manded over 2,000 pieces of wood and 258 masts. The navy had to borrow 1,200,000 livres from the Company of Barbary to build the vital 300-foot-long drydock and the lack of funds and wood forced deferment of two more drydocks.²³

Unless the king appropriated more funds, the most Sartine could do was to maintain naval operations at their current levels, to guarantee prompt payments to contractors, and to begin to pay off existing debts in order to improve credit and lower prices. The changing diplomatic scene, however, gave Sartine reason to urge more attention to the navy and, over the course of 1775, to ask supplementary appropriations.

2. French Precautions after the Revolt of British North America

If no danger of war seemed to justify the expenses of rebuilding the French navy's ships or of refilling its dockyards, relations with Britain apparently at least necessitated prudence. In February 1775 Garnier asked Vergennes if he wished to continue paying 19,760 livres a year for a network of agents to report on the British navy. Sartine urged Vergennes to continue underwriting the expense. Sartine believed that a change from the current ministry of Lord North or an English accommodation with the Americans could lead to a dangerous diversion of the fleet assembled in America. The safety of the French navy and of French commerce demanded that France take precautions to keep informed.¹

²³ Work began in May 1774, the outer shell was sunk in place in August 1775, and the drydock (which, unlike the Atlantic drydocks, was built to operate without the help of tides) was finished in 1778. There is a model of it at the superb French naval museum at the Palais de Chaillot in Paris. See Brun, *Port de Toulon*, 1: 539; Léon Guérin, *Histoire maritime de France* (Paris: Dufour, Boulanger, et Legrand, 1863), 5: 10-11. The Company of Barbary was repaid by loaning it the use of part of the Toulon dockyard.

¹ England 508: 241-250, Garnier to Vergennes, 10 February 1775; England 508: 281-288, Sartine to Vergennes, 20 February 1775.

French Precautions

There were some grounds for such concern. Garnier reported as of 6 March 1775 there were 12,184 British troops in North America² and 16 British ships of the line, 22 frigates, and 32 corvettes at sea.³ On the other hand, the total number of all categories of British warships was virtually unchanged from the annual report of the previous year,⁴ and in March 1775 Parliament voted lower extraordinary naval appropriations and the use of fewer seamen than in March 1774.⁵ Sartine, at any rate, moved to ascertain how many ships could be readied should France need them. On 17 March 1775 he wrote the intendants of Brest, Rochefort, and Toulon to ask how many ships at their ports could be readied for sea.⁶ Sartine's inquiries produced near panic and he had to assure the intendant at Brest that his questions did not mean war was imminent, that no fleets would have to be dispatched, and that in fact there was nothing to make one suspect the possibility of war.⁷

Although Lord North's ministry was conciliatory toward France, its treatment of the American colonies was less politic. Its reliance on force to solve the political disputes

² England 509: 49, "Nombre et répartition des troupes d'Angleterre et d'Irlande le 6 mars 1775." This is an overestimate. Mackesy, *War for America*, 524-525 lists only 6,991 effectives in North America as of April 1775.

³ England 509: 52-60, Garnier to Vergennes, 6 March 1775.

⁴ *Ibid.*; see also above, Chapter One, Section 2, Note 2.

⁵ England 509: 90, Garnier to Vergennes, 14 March 1775. Garnier reported a total British naval budget of £2,039,915, which he computed as 48,155,370 livres. Money was voted to pay 18,000 sailors, compared to 20,000 the previous year. Actual expenditures and number of sailors maintained were larger than those appropriated.

⁶ For example, B²406: 48, Sartine to Intendant Ruis-Embitto of Brest, 17 March 1775.

⁷ B²406: 74, Sartine to Ruis-Embitto, 9 April 1775. Brest reported that 17 ships of the line, seven frigates, and six smaller ships could be made ready within three months, and another three ships of the line and a frigate could be made ready within a fourth month if overhauls were promptly begun. Rochefort responded that within three to four months it could finish overhaul or construction of three ships of the line. Toulon responded that 13 to 17 ships of the line could be prepared, depending on the supplies provided. B⁴181: 24-25, 04-05, 218-219, Intendant Ruis-Embitto, Intendant d'Auberton, and Commissioner-General Dasque to Sartine, 7-14 April 1775.