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Chancellor's Update

The Legacy of the French Revolution

According to an official publication of the French Government, 'News from France', "The concept of secularism in France was an idea born amidst the revolutionary fervor of 1789 as a reaction to the immense influence the Catholic Church had wielded for centuries in every aspect of French society. Indeed, under the kings of France, Catholicism was the state's religion and so enjoyed many privileges." The intellectuals driving the Revolution promoted the idea of a modern government without religious influence, with spirituality only in the private sector. In 1801 Napoleon and Pope Pius VII signed a Concordat in which the Catholic Church was an equal religion in a pluralistic society. Also in the 19th century, education, which previously had been in the domain of the Catholic Church, became compulsory, state-funded and secular. In 1905 a law separating church and state and recognizing freedom of worship was passed "in order to preserve the *Liberté, Egalité, Fraternité* of all human beings – not as members of a group, but as individuals."

Another aspect of French culture is *Le Patrimoine*, also known as heritage. Items included in the historic and cultural heritage are prehistoric caves, military forts, the Arch of Triumph, cathedrals, *chateaux*, parks and gardens. According to the same 'News from France', "The French State's direct involvement in the protection of the nation's *patrimoine* stemmed from the French Revolution, when the revolutionaries decided that the holdings of the aristocracy, the royal family and the church would become property of the state and thus accessible to all. They did this to save these precious holdings from destruction, and also to reinforce the ideals of community and common heritage among the citizens of France."

A Failed Attempt to Export the French Revolution

In this young country, the United States, news of the revolt in France was greeted with enthusiasm. After all, France had assisted the colonial patriots in the final battles against England to achieve their freedom. In 1778 America and France had even signed a treaty of wartime alliance. Since the colonies had thrown off the king from their backs, they looked forward to hearing news that the French people had done the same. Politically, the French revolutionaries had strong sympathy from the Anti-Federalists, known also as Republicans, with the most vocal being Thomas Jefferson, James Madison, James Monroe and Thomas Paine. Benjamin Franklin originally supported the revolutionaries, but slowly became apprehensive about the safety of his personal friends in France. Most Federalists were suspect of the new movement in France with the most vocal opponents being President Washington, Alexander Hamilton and Henry Cabot Lodge.

Vice-President John Adams hoped for the best, but had serious misgivings about the French Revolution. As his biographer Page Smith noted, Adams predicted, "The French must

become the adherents of balanced government, or they will have no equal laws, no personal liberty, no property, no lives.” He also wrote a series of essays on the French Revolution and predicted that it would “end in disaster unless it was based on a balanced government.” Later as President he stated **that the principles of the French Revolution and ours were not the same. “Ours was resistance to innovation, theirs was innovation itself.”**

As related by William Hoar in Architects of Conspiracy, “The new French Minister, Citizen Edmond Genêt, had plans to use this country as a base from which to organize raids on the commerce and colonies of Britain and Spain, to fit out ships for attacks against the British fleet, and also to enlist Americans aboard French ships. Secret instructions from Revolutionary France directed Genêt to propagandize among the Americans to influence them so they would favor France in her struggle. He had orders to tamper with American domestic politics for whatever advantage might accrue to France...

“Genêt, who had been received with wild approval in several large U.S. cities, was busy inland as well as at sea. And the French Revolution became even more entangled in our affairs with the rise here of French-hatched communes – or Democratic Clubs, as Citizen Genêt called them. Despite America’s neutrality policy, these revolutionary anti-Federalist societies were pro-French and anti-British, and their incendiary propaganda was soon pandemic...

“At a gathering in Philadelphia, guests toasted Citizen Genêt but refused to extend the same courtesy to President Washington.” The more patient Washington eventually spoke more directly that the principles of Jacobinism existed in the Democratic Societies, which had been set up by Revolutionary France. He even suspected that these Democratic Clubs were responsible for the Whiskey Rebellion.

President Washington eventually asked the French to recall Genêt and they agreed in return for the recall from Paris of the American minister Gouverneur Morris. The French resented Morris because of his contempt for their revolution.

Adding to this scenario was a number of boardings on American commercial ships on the high seas by both the British and the French. Tensions continued and persons in government thought seriously about diplomatic negotiations or perhaps even going to war. Some viewed America as at war *de facto* if not *de jure*. Since America was a young nation, neither President Washington nor President Adams at a later date wanted to engage in such a complex, costly and risky operation as war. In the meantime the Anglophiles wanted to avoid war with England and pursued instead the possibility of war with France to stop her intrigues in the United States. The Francophiles, on the other hand, pursued the thought of war with England to support the progress of the Revolution in France and to curb the horrid thought of resurrecting a monarchy in the United States.

This concern about possibly going to war caused Congress to pass a naturalization act and the Alien and Sedition Acts. The motivation for these acts came not from an over-protective attitude of a young nation, but rather was influenced by the activities of the Jacobins in America.

With Napoleon’s rise to power and the settling of some problems diplomatically the fad of Jacobinism eventually waned.

[To be continued](#)

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Jerusalem 1048-1291, Cyprus 1291-1310, Rhodes 1311-1523, Malta 1530-1798, Russia 1798-1907, U.S.A. 1908-