

Comte de Vergennes: Considerations on the Affairs of the English Colonies in America, Versailles, 12 March 1776

The position of England vis-à-vis her Colonies in North America and the possible and probable results of whatever the outcome of this quarrel undoubtedly merit, in every way, the most serious attention on the part of France and Spain.

The political calculations that can be made regarding this great crisis are in effect such that it is perhaps problematical whether They should desire the subjection or the independence of the English Colonies, and that They find themselves threatened in either hypothesis by dangers that it is perhaps not within the nature of human foresight to prevent or deter.

We shall not reveal for discussion what brought about the development of these reflections; we will limit ourselves to making them evident, while observing that while on one hand the continuation of the war can be regarded as infinitely advantageous to the two Crowns, since it will exhaust the victors and the vanquished, on the other hand it can also be feared: 1st. That the English Ministry, foreseeing the insufficiency of its means, may extend its hands in conciliation; 2nd. that the King of England, by conquering English America, may make of it an instrument for also subjugating European England; 3rd. that the English Ministry, beaten on the Continent of America, may seek compensation at the expense of France and Spain, which would obliterate both her shame and give her a means of conciliation with the Insurgents, to whom it would offer the commerce and the provisioning of the Islands; 4th. that the Colonies, having become independent and maintaining no ties with England, may become conquerors by necessity, and that, overburdened with commodities, they may seek an outlet for them in the Sugar Islands and in Spanish America, which would destroy the bonds which attach our Colonies to their Mother Countries.

These different Suppositions could almost equally lead to a war at some future time with France and with Spain. The first, because with the forces that the Court of London has prepared, she may be tempted to employ them in the too easy conquest which the West Indies offer her. The Second, because subjugation by the Mother Country can only operate by encouraging national hatred and jealousy through a war, the duration of which would form a yoke and the success of which would assure it. The 3rd., finally, out of despair and the necessity of saving the heads of the Ministry, and perhaps even the person of the King from the rage of the English people, by procuring for him a conquest as useful as it is brilliant, which would salve the shame of a feigned accommodation by the indemnity of defeat or the token of reconciliation.

Such is in fact the state of the Colonies of the two nations that with the exception of Havana perhaps, not one is in a state to resist in any way at all the forces that England is sending to America, and the physical possibility of conquest appears only too evident.

As for the moral probability of an invasion, which would be unprovoked, and which would be contrary to public honor and to the Treaties, one would be deceiving oneself extraordinarily to believe the English susceptible of being restrained by such motives; gratitude or a just reciprocity of behavior would have no more power over them than the sacred laws of morality. They seem to applaud ours only with a sort of derision. Experience has only proven too well that they believe just and honorable all that they regard as advantageous to their Nation and destructive to their rivals. One knows the maxims of most of their Statesmen, who do not take into account the actual harm that France is doing them, but that which she might do them one day. They feel that if England is exhausted by the present war, and France and Spain take the measures which their power and their wisdom set for them, they will find themselves at the end of the battle unready to fight against those two Powers. Already this reflection has been made; Already the Opposition party has prepared to reconcile itself in these general maxims with those of the present Ministry; Already there is reason to fear that the latter, sensing its weakness, may seize upon the only means to withdraw itself from the Labyrinth in which it is engaged by yielding the reins to the opposition, and Lords Chatham, Shelburne, Weymouth, Sandwich, and Richmond will also hope to maintain their popularity and to dominate thereby by reaching an accommodation with America, and by employing the enormous mass of forces set in action to rectify the conditions of the last Treaty of Peace,ⁱ against which they have not ceased to rise up stubbornly. The English of all parties appear unanimously persuaded that a popular war against France or the invasion of Mexico would end, or at least quiet, their domestic debates and extinguish their national debt.

In the midst of so many dangers, the preferential love which the King and the King of Spainⁱⁱ have for the preservation of tranquility seems to prescribe the most measured approach. If the dispositions of these two Princes were warlike, if they were disposed to give in to the impulse of their interests, and perhaps to the justice of their cause, which is that of humanity, so often offended by England; if their military and pecuniary means were at the point of development and energy required, and proportionate to their effective Power, one would have to say to them without doubt that Providence has marked this moment for the humiliation of England, that it has struck her with blindness, which is the most certain precursor of destruction, and that it is time to avenge upon that nation the evils which she has done since the beginning of the Century against those who have had the misfortune to be her neighbors or her rivals; one should then neglect no possible means to render the next campaign as vigorous as it can be made, and to procure advantages for the Americans. The degree of animosity and of exhaustion of the two parties which will result therefrom would then determine the moment to strike the decisive blows which

will return England to the order of secondary Powers, would take away from her the Dominion that she claims to exercise in the four parts of the world with as much pride as injustice, and would deliver the Universe from a greedy Tyrant who wants to devour all the power and all the riches at one time.

But if that is not the viewpoint upon which the two Monarchs wish to place themselves, their role appears at this juncture to have limited itself to circumspect but active foresight.

If this maxim is adopted, it remains to be determined what conduct is the most suitable to achieve this end.

One should, it seems, before deciding, draw forth some results from the succinct explanation that has just been made. 1st. One should avoid compromising oneself and not provoke the evils one wants to ward off. 2nd. One must furthermore not deceive oneself that the most absolute and rigorous inaction would shield us from all suspicion. We know that our present conduct is not exempt. The English, accustomed to conducting themselves on the impulse of their interest and to judging others by themselves, will always think that we will not let escape such a fine occasion to destroy them; even if they did not think it, they would feign it if they had the need to attack us, and Europe would be persuaded of the Truth of their imputation despite our denials. 3rd. the continuation of the war, at least for a year, appears desirable for the two Crowns, both because it is essential that the forces which are being sent to America find employment against the Colonies, and because the [English] Ministry would necessarily change if an accommodation should be reached at present, and because the English Army, weakened by its victories or by its defeats, will not be in condition to undertake a vigorous endeavor, and finally because a year gained for vigorous and prudent measures can, in many regards, change the aspect of affairs. 4th. The most certain means to achieve this end would be, on the one hand, to persuade the English Ministry that the intentions of France and Spain are pacific, so that it does not fear to embark upon the operations of a brisk and expensive Campaign, while, on the other hand, the courage of the Americans would be sustained by some secret favors and by vague hopes which would prevent the steps that they seek to induce them to take to reach an accommodation, and which would contribute to the budding of the ideas of independence which are still only germinating indistinctly among them.ⁱⁱⁱ The evils that the English cause them to experience will sour their tempers; they will be the more relentless in war, and should the Mother Country be victorious, she would long have need of all her forces to dampen the spirit of independence of the Americans, and She would not dare to expose herself to the combined efforts with a foreign enemy that they would make to recover their liberty.

If all these considerations were deemed to be as true and as solid as they are probable, the most natural inferences would seem to be:

1st. That we ought to continue to maintain with dexterity the Security of the English Ministry regarding the intentions of France and Spain.

2nd. That it would be appropriate to give the Insurgents secret Help in munitions, in money, &c. The presupposed utility would justify this small Sacrifice, and no reason of dignity or equity would oppose it.

3rd. That it would not be in keeping with the dignity of the King, nor in his interest, to make a pact with the Insurgents. Certain reflections taken from among all the others seem to demonstrate it. This pact, in fact, would only be worthwhile insofar as they make themselves independent and do not find it in their interest to break it, as the system does not change into an administration both mobile and necessarily unstable, and finally, as the navigation act does not become the basis for a reunion of the Mother Country and the Colonies. Such an arrangement can only be solidly based in mutual interest, and it seems that it will only be time to decide this question when the liberty of English America has acquired a positive consistency.

4th. That if France and Spain give aid, They should seek recompense for it only in the momentary political end that They propose, subject to being resolved later after the events and according to circumstances.

5th. Perhaps it should be considered, as a matter of good policy, that too marked an apathy in the present crisis will be interpreted as the effect of fear and of that immoderate love of peace which, for the past few years, has produced so many evils and injustices; and that England, judging that the incapacity of our means and the pusillanimity that She will attribute to us will be guarantors of each other, may become still more demanding than she already is, and that she may dare anything, either directly and in the open, or by the insolence of her searches and of her cruisers, and by insults in detail which She would not and cannot atone for, and which we cannot and would not swallow. The English respect only those who can make themselves feared.

6th. The result which the whole and the composite of facts and reflections seems to present most obviously is the necessity of placing ourselves in a position which can either contain the English, or render their attacks uncertain, or ensure the means to punish them. Measures of foresight, wisely combined, which would augment the effective and active forces of the two Monarchies to the level of their real power, would at all times be useful and appropriate; but at a moment when public affairs are deteriorating in so many ways, this providential activity perhaps becomes indispensable. It seems to offer the only means which can at the same time efficaciously prevent

possible evils, and repair those that we will not be able to prevent; all the more so that of all probable conjectures which circumstances may permit, the least apparent is that the peace may be kept, whatever the outcome of the war between England and her Colonies. Such are the principal points of view to which this very important problem appears susceptible and which it is simply proposed to indicate to the Wisdom and penetration of the King and his Council.

i The Treaty of Paris of 1763 ending the French and Indian War (the Seven-Years War).

ii King Louis XVI of France and King Charles III of Spain were allied in the Family Compact that brought together two lines of the Bourbon family.

iii Thomas Paine's *Common Sense* was published in January 1776 which greatly accelerated the idea of American independence.

Questions To Consider

- To what extent is America or the American Cause invisible in Vergennes' thinking?
- In your view is Vergennes dismissive of the Americans or the American Cause?
- To what extent is mercantilism seen in Vergennes' thinking?
- Is the amount of content related to post-war considerations surprising to you?
- In your view, is it surprising to see Vergennes' consider the internal/domestic politics of England when thinking about the role of the French in the conflict?