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THE COMING OF WAR BETWEEN BRITAIN AND FRANCE, 1792–1793

The outbreak of war between Britain and France in February 1793 offers a fascinating opportunity to consider both a case-study of the causes of war and, more generally, the question of the impact of the French Revolution on international relations. Britain, under George III and the ministry of William Pitt the younger, had refused to join in the Austro-Prussian attack on France in 1792, and had maintained a determined neutrality that summer. That neutrality was to unravel, however, under the impact of changes in French policy and the unexpected success of her armies.

Before the news of the Prussian check at Valmy and their subsequent retreat on 20 September 1792 reached London, the French had already advanced. On 22 September they invaded Savoy. The outnumbered and dispersed defenders retreated in confusion across the Alps into Piedmont and on the 24th the French occupied Chambéry. Nice, then part of the kingdom of Sardinia (Savoy-Piedmont), also fell to them. Victor Amadeus III hired Austrian troops, but he also sought British assistance[1]. The reply was negative, for the British government did not have a defensive treaty with Sardinia and wished to retain its freedom. Pitt changed the reply in draft in order to make it ›more general, and [to] leave it clearly to ourselves to determine what consequences are too important to let us remain spectators‹. The French envoy, Chauvelin, was able to report that Britain would make no opposition to French advances into Savoy and the independent city republic of Geneva[2]. Further north the French overran the middle Rhine. Speyer fell to Custine on 30 September, followed by Worms, Mainz and Frankfurt (22 October).

Most seriously for Britain, the French followed up Valmy by invading the Austrian Netherlands again. Lebrun, the foreign minister, did not see this as a necessary cause of Anglo-French differences. He was interested in the possibility of a quadruple alliance of Britain, France, Prussia and the Dutch. Arguing that France and Prussia had a shared interest in an independent Austrian Netherlands not under

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1 John Trevor, envoy in Turin, to Lord Auckland, envoy in The Hague, 1 Oct. 1792, London, British Library, Department of Manuscripts, Additional Manuscripts (hereafter BL Add.) 34445 f. 3–4.

2 Pitt to Lord Grenville, Foreign Secretary, 16 Oct. 1792, BL. Add. 58906 f. 141; Chauvelin to Lebrun, 31 Oct. 1792, Paris, Ministère des Affaires Etrangères, Correspondance Politique Angleterre (hereafter AE. CP. Ang) 583 f. 139.

Austrian control, and that Pitt might be willing to second Prussian schemes, Lebrun informed Chauvelin that France was willing to support independence and to promise not to annex any of the Austrian Netherlands. The British government was also to be reassured about British intentions towards the Dutch[3].

Such diplomatic speculations are interesting evidence of the attitudes of participants and the willingness of some to consider new ideas, but the pace of events made them redundant. Replacing Lafayette as commander of the Armée du Nord, Dumouriez, supported by Belgian and Liègeois patriot forces, invaded the Austrian Netherlands on 1 November. Five days later at Jemappes near Mons Dumouriez, with an army of 45000, defeated the main Austrian field force in the Austrian Netherlands, an army of only 13200. The Low Countries were open. The Austrian Netherlands were to fall to the French far more rapidly than when last attacked by them in 1744. Then they had acted as a buffer for the United Provinces, which had not been invaded until 1747. In 1744–7, however, much of the resistance had been mounted by British, Dutch and Anglo-Dutch subsidised forces, while, though some towns and fortresses had fallen rapidly, for example Bruges, Brussels and Ghent, others, such as Ostend, had delayed the French advance. The situation was very different in 1792. There were no British, Dutch or Anglo-Dutch subsidised units. The fortifications were mostly suffering from over 40 years of neglect. The Austrian government left Brussels, its forces moved towards the Rhineland, abandoning the Austrian Netherlands and exposing the Dutch frontier. Brussels fell on 13 November. A French warship entered Ostend without resistance on 16 November. Only isolated posts, principally the citadel in Antwerp, were left[4].

This was an unprecedented crisis for the Dutch and their British allies. There was no time for political calculation and diplomatic negotiation, nor indeed for moving troops to the United Provinces. On the day of Jemappes Lord Grenville, the Foreign Secretary, had written personally to Auckland, reiterating his conviction that neutrality was the best policy. He observed of the Dutch,

> *Their local situation, and the neighbourhood of Germany, Liege, and Flanders may certainly render the danger more imminent, but it does not I think alter the reasoning as to the means of meeting it – and those means will I think be always best found in the preservation of the external peace of the Republic, and in that attention to its internal situation which external peace alone will allow its government to give to that object*[5].

Valmy had revealed the failure of a counter-revolutionary strategy. Had Britain been a member of the league then France would have been in a parlous state, blockaded, subject to colonial losses and amphibious attacks on her mainland, but it is doubtful that this would have altered the fate of the struggle on her eastern frontier: the course of the revolutionary war after Britain's entry in 1793 certainly points to this conclusion. The Duke of Brunswick's failure led Grenville to congratulate himself on British neutrality. On 7 November he revealed his thoughts in a letter to his older brother the Marquis of Buckingham. Predicting the continuation and spreading of

3 Lebrun to Chauvelin, 31 Oct. 1792, AE. CP. Aug. 583 f. 133–4.
4 A. Chuquet, Jemappes et la Conquête de la Belgique, Paris 1890.
5 Grenville to Auckland, 6 Nov. 1792, BL. Add. 34445 f. 197.

the war, Grenville was also confident that Britain would not be involved and that neutrality was the best policy for her[6].

Yet, if Valmy indicated the unpredictabilities of international developments and the consequent hazards of interventionism for Britain, the collapse of the Austrian Netherlands was to indicate the dangers of the opposite policy. It was to prove impossible in a situation made volatile by military developments and the pressures of domestic French politics to establish a satisfactory compromise with France, or, as Auckland wished, negotiate a truce[7], while British isolation and events elsewhere in Europe hindered the creation of new and effective diplomatic links directed against France.

In response to pressure in early November from the Dutch envoy, Nagel, Pitt sought to follow a policy of diplomatic deterrence, a promise of support to the Dutch that it would not be necessary to fulfil. On 12 November the news that the Austrian government had left Brussels reached London. Next day, Grenville responded with a series of initiatives. The Dutch government was sent a public assurance of support in the event of invasion or any attempt ›to disturb its government‹, the latter an interesting testimony to fears of French subversion. Grenville wanted the message to be known in France as soon as possible, though to that end he relied on ›ordinary channels of communication‹ via The Hague, rather than the direct message suggested to Pitt by Nagel, and advocated by the Under Secretary, James Bland Burges. Grenville also adopted Auckland's idea of approaching Austria and Prussia in order to establish their views and thus assess whether there was a basis for possible cooperation. The Prussians were informed of French intrigues in Berlin. Grenville was confident that the declaration of British support would have its effect on France, but if not he knew Britain was *committed*. At the same time Burges sought to put pressure on France by urging the Dutch to emulate Britain's ban on grain exports. He defended it as a response to the policies of *modern Frenchmen*, their attempts to produce crises by intervention in domestic affairs; in short Burges had no doubt that the nature of international relations was altering in response to revolution[8].

The decisive move towards war was therefore made in mid-November. The British government had indicated publicly that it was ready to fight in a contingency that it knew might occur in a matter of weeks, if not days. The relationship between this crisis and the response to domestic radicalism is problematic. Concern over the latter had been rising rapidly. Radicalism was believed to have been revived and encouraged by Valmy, and Valmy and its consequences doubtless played a role in this belief. Some of the leading Whigs were so concerned that they were willing to offer the government support in *strong measures*[9]. Reports reaching the ministry

6 Grenville to Buckingham, 7 Nov. 1792, RICHARD, 2nd DUKE OF BUCKINGHAM ed., Memoirs of the Courts and Cabinets of George the third, 4 vols. London 1853–55, II, 222–4.

7 Auckland to Grenville, 9 Nov. 1792, BL. Add. 58920 f. 165.

8 Grenville to Auckland, 13 Nov., Grenville to Alexander Straton, envoy in Vienna, 13 Nov., Grenville to Morton Eden, envoy in Berlin, 13 Nov. 1792, London, Public Record Office, Foreign Office (hereafter PRO. FO.) 37/41, 7/31, 64/26; Auckland to Grenville, 9 Nov., Grenville to Auckland, 13 Nov., Burges to Auckland, 13 Nov. 1792, BL. Add. 34445 f. 253–6, 58920 f. 168; Auckland to Burges, 16 Nov. 1792, Oxford, Bodleian Library , Bland Burges papers (hereafter Bod. BB) 30 f. 197.

9 William Windham to Thomas Grenville, 14 Nov. 1792, Bod. MS. Eng. Lett. c. 144 f. 306; Grenville to Richmond, 11 Oct., Pitt to Grenville, 18 Nov. 1792, BL Add. 58906 f. 146, 58937 f. 164.

from around the country spoke of a rising tide of agitation, before which the local authorities were often hopeless. There was an increasing sense that the issue would come to one of force. On 11 November Pitt, worried about accounts from South Shields and the ›want of force‹ on the part of the authorities, suggested that it might soon be necessary to call out the militia. On the same day George, Marquess Townshend, the Lord Lieutenant of Norfolk, offered an echo of the baronial past,

The method I took on a late occasion and shall endeavour to apply again on any similar, was to summon immediately the high constables and others, and to collect tenants and neighbours to suppress any tumults and riots, to read first the Proclamation and warn them of the consequence of persevering. I armed my tenants and attendants; 3 or 4 especially about me with short swords in case of any personal assault[10].

The relationship between the aristocracy and military power is not the most obvious theme in eighteenth-century British, especially English, history; though as recently as the War of American Independence the domestic correspondence of Lord Amherst, who was in effect Commander-in-Chief of the British army 1778–82, gave the impression of a society in which aristocratic Lords Lieutenant played a major military function, while the readiness of pro-Hanoverian aristocrats to raise regiments had been a feature of the 45[11]. The American, and then the French, Revolution had led to fresh consideration of constitutional issues and political strategies. In 17890 the Duke of Richmond, a member of the Cabinet, had agreed with Grenville on the importance of the ›aristocratical‹ part in the British constitution. Three years later his Cabinet colleague Henry Dundas, concerned about the situation in Perth, Dundee and Montrose, warned Pitt that *if the spirit of liberty and equality continues to spread with the same rapidity* that it had done since Valmy, then it would be impossible to suppress sedition by force only. He added, *the safety of the country must I am persuaded depend on the body of the well effected to the Constitution*, (which with few exceptions is every body of property or respect) *in some shape or other taking an open, active and declared part*[12]. In the crisis of late 1792 the British government was to turn in many directions as it sought to recruit support. If reliance on the landed elite might appear conservative, the attempt to encourage a mass movement of loyalism revealed a willingness to turn to and an ability to use the public politics of the present[13].

The domestic situation pointed to the need for continued peace. Grenville had outlined the relationship in his letter to Auckland on 6 Novmeber 1792, and Jemappes and its consequences had not altered that. He wrote to Buckingham that war and resulting taxation would jeopardise the situation, but that *from policy and*

10 Pitt to Grenville, [11 Nov. 1792], BL. Add. 58906 f. 144–5; Townshend to John Blofeld, 11 Nov. 1792, Bod. Ms. Eng. Lett. c. 144 f. 274.

11 On Amherst see War Office corresp. 34 in PRO. and on 1745, P. Luff, The Noblemen's Regiments: Politics and the Forty-Five, in: Historical Research, 65 (1992) 54–73.

12 Richmond to Grenville, 14 Sept. 1789, BL. Add. 58937 f. 108; Dundas to Pitt, 22 Nov. 1789, PRO. 30/8/157 f. 142–3.

13 R. Dozier, For King, Constitution, and Country. The English Loyalists and the French Revolution, Lexington, Kentucky 1983; H. T. Dickinson, Popular loyalism in Britain in the 1790s, in E. Hellmuth (ed.), The Transformation of Political Culture: Germany and England in the Late Eighteenth Century, Oxford 1990, pp. 503–34; D. Eastwood, Patriotism and the English state in the 1790s, in: M. Philp (ed.), British Popular Politics, Cambridge 1991, pp. 146–68.

good faith the British were obliged to defend the Dutch. Grenville hoped that if a few months *could be tidied over the bubble of French finance* would burst, but he pointed out that such hopes had been deceptive in the past. He was concerned about the spread of radical clubs in Britain, and the situation in Ireland[14].

And yet, despite the domestic situation, the British government had indicated its willingness to fight. It was not ready to abandon the Continent, to leave its Dutch ally, and the decision seems to have been taken with no difficulty and with little discussion. It was clear that the domestic situation pointed in an opposite direction, but this does not seem to have deterred Pitt or Grenville. They hoped to reconcile competing pressures by relying on deterrence, but they were aware that it might not work, and that prudence might suggest a more passive course.

As John Ehrman has pointed out, the pace of communications helped to increase tension[15]. On 13 November 1792, Grenville's instructions were sent to Auckland, who wanted discussions with the French government[16]. News of them had not reached Paris by 16 November when the Executive Council decreed that the Austrians should be pursued wherever they retreated, a threat to neutrals such as the Elector of Cologne and, more particularly, the Dutch, and that the estuary of the Scheldt was to be open to navigation, a clear breach of the Peace of Westphalia. Four days later, and with the French still unaware of British policy, these decisions were ratified by the National Convention. It is unclear whether an earlier British communication of their views, or a direct one initiated on 13 November would have made any difference. The logic of their new ideas and their rejection of the past, made the French radicals unwilling to accept the apparent denial of the natural right of the Belgians to trade enforced by the closure of the Scheldt. Lebrun argued that he was not seeking to harm the rights of the Dutch, but that the Belgians were not obliged to maintain engagements made by their former Habsburg masters, whose yoke had now been rejected[17]. In light of Joseph II's well-known attitude towards the Scheldt, Lebrun's argument was weak, but it indicated his wish to dramatise the breach between ancien régime and revolutionary diplomacy. Lebrun had already revealed in his attitude to the cession of Tobago a concern with the rights of inhabitants that was at variance both with ancien régime diplomacy and with the practice of the government of revolutionary France.

British hesitation in dealing directly with Paris reflected an unwillingness to accept the position of the French government. This was prudential rather than ideological. On 6 November Grenville indicated to Auckland that, if pressed, the British would not acknowledge the republican government of France, but in terms that would not preclude later recognition if it became firmly established, *in which case*, he added, *it must at last be sooner or later recognized by all the other countries of Europe, as those of Switzerland and Holland have been, and as the revolutions of this country* [1688] *and Portugal* [1640] *are now even by France and Spain*[18]. Three years earlier, the then

14 Grenville to Buckingham, [16 Nov. 1792], San Marino, California, Huntington Library, Stowe manuscripts (hereafter HL. STG.) Box 39 (6). The letter is not printed in Courts and Cabinets.
15 J. EHRMAN, The Younger Pitt. The Reluctant Transition, London 1983, p. 208.
16 Auckland to Grenville, 15, 16 Nov. 1792, BL. Add. 58920 f. 171–2.
17 Lebrun to Chauvelin, 23 Nov. 1792, AE. CP. Ang. 583 f. 302.
18 Grenville to Auckland, 6 Nov. 1792, BL. Add. 34445 f. 197.

Foreign Secretary, Francis 5th Duke of Leeds, had been willing to maintain direct, though informal, links with the Belgian insurgents. They were rebels against a ruler with whom George III had diplomatic relations. He had written to Fitzherbert, the envoy in The Hague,

it will be highly expedient for the Allies to keep up (though privately) a direct intercourse with the Insurgents, as to establish the most favourable impression on their minds of the importance of our friendship.

On the other hand, the context was different to that in late 1792. Leeds was concerned that Britain should not loose the chance of influence in Belgium to other powers, while he was also hopeful that she might be able to mould the new Belgian constitution. He therefore suggested the dispatch of agents to Ghent and Luxemburg[19].

There was no ideological hostility on Grenville's part to dealing with a republican France, but he wanted it to be stable and he did not wish to move out of line with the other European powers. Both attitudes were sensible: on 13 November Grenville launched an attempt to improve relations with Austria and Prussia, as well as one to deter France. And yet, in the circumstances of late 1792, such a position provided little basis for preventing a deterioration in relations between the two powers. Grenville replied coolly to Chauvelin's attempts to discuss matters[20]. The contrast with the Dutch crisis of 1787, when the two powers had last come close to war, was instructive. Then British diplomats had remained in Paris, negotiating actively, there had been diplomatic negotiations in London and Grenville himself had gone on a special mission to Paris. These negotiations had helped to ease the path for a crucial backdown on France's part, but British success in the crisis was due ultimately to Prussian action. In late 1792 the future security of the United Provinces would clearly depend in part on Prussia being willing to fulfil her defensive obligations under the 1788 treaty, and on an acceptable solution to the situation in the Austrian Netherlands. While Austria and Prussia were at war with France, such co-operation was not going to be eased by a British recognition of the republic.

The French decrees of 16 November directly threatened the Dutch. That day Auckland reported fears of a French amphibious attack on Zeeland and Emden. The message reached London on the 20th. On 17 November a British agent, Gideon Duncan, wrote from Ostend that France was to send warships up the Scheldt in order to aid in the attack on the citadel. He also reported that it was thought that the French would attack the Dutch[21]. The French had taken the crucial decisions that were to bring relations with the Dutch and British to a crisis point, but they also continued to issue decrees that individually and collectively helped to raise tension and increase suspicions. On 19th November, in response to appeals for help from radicals in Zweibrücken and Mainz, the National Convention passed a decree declaring that the French people would extend fraternity and assistance to all peoples

19 Leeds to Fitzherbert, 1 Dec. 1789, PRO. FO. 37/27 f. 38–9; Fitzherbert to Leeds, 8, 15 Dec., Leeds to Fitzherbert, 15 Dec. 1789, BL. Egerton mss. 3500 f. 127–35.

20 Chauvelin to Grenville, 19, 22 Nov., Grenville to Chauvelin, 21 Nov. 1792, BL. Add. 34445 f. 352–6; Grenville to Auckland, 23 Nov. 1792, PRO. FO. 37/41.

21 Auckland to Grenville, 16, 20 Nov. 1792, PRO. Fo. 37/41; Duncan to George Aust, Under-Secretary at the Foreign Office, 17 Nov. 1792, BL. Add. 34445 f. 348.

seeking to regain their liberty. As a general principle this was subversive of all international order; in specific terms it challenged the Dutch government, for Dutch Patriot refugees in Paris continually pressed for action on their behalf. The decree also threatened the British position in Ireland. Eight days later Savoy was incorporated into France, a worrying augury for the fate of the Austrian Netherlands; on 3 December the decision was taken to try Louis XVI, a major extension of the competence of the National Convention, and on 15 December a decree to ensure that peoples liberated from the ancien régime sought ›reunion‹ with France was promulgated.

While pro-government newspapers suggested that French moves might lead to war[22], despite the wish of the British ministry to maintain its neutrality, Grenville sought to avoid an alarmist response. On 23 November he ordered Auckland to inspire *confidence and resolution* into the Dutch government, but he added,

am strongly inclined to believe, that it is the present intention of the prevailing party in France to respect the rights of this country and of the Republic, but it will be undoubtedly necessary, that the strictest attention should be given to any circumstances, which may seem to indicate a change in this respect[23].

Two days later, Grenville suggested that Duncan's reports of French plans were exaggerated, and revealed that he was less than keen to send British frigates to Flushing in order to forestall a possible French attack, a move that had been made in 1747[24]. On the 25th, there were still encouraging signs of a French willingness to keep the peace. Chauvelin had approached Grenville, but, more acceptably, Emmanuel de Maulde, a protégé of Dumouriez who was French envoy in The Hague, had visited Van der Spiegel and opened up a channel for negotiations. Acknowledging *the vapouring and bravado so naturally to be expected* in public from the French, Grenville was keen on talks via Maulde as they would avoid the necessity of receiving a French minister in London. He thought that the fate of the Austrian Netherlands would be the most delicate issue, itself a sign of a lack of concern about the Dutch situation, and did not understand how any equivalent could be made to Francis II for that loss[25]. Such an argument might appear anachronistic in the new dawn of the principles being enunciated in France, but in fact equivalents were to be the basis not only for the diplomacy surrounding the Second and Third Partitions of Poland, but also for the redrawings of the map of Europe over the following 23 years. Pitt agreed as to the value of responding to the French approach, but George III was more sceptical,

I feel the advantage of a General Peace if it can be effected to the real satisfaction of the various parties concerned, but at the same time not less forcibly a disinclination to France gaining this point and perhaps laying a foundation to encourage other countries to attempt the same game; for it is peace alone that can place the French Revolution on a permanent

22 Diary, 21, 24 Nov., Times, 24, 29. Nov. 1792.
23 Grenville to Auckland, 23 Nov. 1792, PRO. FO. 37/41.
24 Grenville to Auckland, 25 Nov. 1792, PRO. FO. 37/41.
25 Grenville to Auckland, 25 Nov. 1792, BL. Add. 34445 f. 382.

ground as then all the European states must acknowledge this new Republic ... I am far from sanguine either that the French General will venture to speak out or that if he would we can manage the business in a manner to satisfy the various courts concerned, or even escape blame from an appearance of being the first to acknowledge the French Revolution[26].

George III was properly sceptical about the likely success of negotiations; but the alternative, as he recognised in his letter, was bleak.

On 26 November the news of the Scheldt decree reached London, and Grenville changed his tone abruptly. War seemed imminent, diplomacy a matter less of averting it than of ensuring that it broke out under the most propitious circumstances. That day he wrote to Auckland,

If the French are determined to force us to a rupture, it seems of little moment what is the particular occasion that is to be taken for it, except with a view to the benefit of standing on the most advantageous ground, with respect to the public opinion in the two countries. But it is a much more material question to determine to what degree it would be more or less advantageous to us, or the French, in point of our respective state of preparation, that things should come to their crisis now, or a short time hence, supposing that such a crisis cannot ultimately be avoided.

Negotiations to gain time seemed a prospect, but Auckland was also informed that naval preparations had been put in train. He was asked to find out from the Dutch, who traded actively with France, what the state of naval preparations at Brest were[27]. Thus, war was definitely seen as on the cards from 26 November, and all subsequent negotiations took place against this background, though various figures, such as Auckland and the Dutch Pensionary, Van de Spiegel, still pressed for peace[28]. Meanwhile, the situation in the Low Countries continued to deteriorate. Austrian force continued to retreat, while French gunships entered the Scheldt estuary. Auckland argued that the navigation of the Scheldt was a point of little real importance, but he accepted that Dutch rights on the matter were indisputable[29].

On 29 November the Cabinet met and Grenville saw Chauvelin. No minutes of the former appear to have survived, but support seems to have been given to a policy of firmness and naval mobilisation. Grenville told Chauvelin that British non-intervention in French affairs had always been part of a policy centring on the maintenance of the rights of Briain and her allies, a point that was indeed born out by what Chauvelin had been told earlier in the year. Chauvelin was more diffuse. He told Grenville that the French republic was solidly established, governed by immutable principles, such as eternal reason, and more concerned with reality than with forms. He defended the opening of the Scheldt, but found Grenville unwilling to discuss the issue. Having complained about the distant attitude of the British government over the past year, Chauvelin told Grenville that France did not want war. Grenville replied that it would be the fault of France if it broke out[30].

26 Grenville to George III and reply, both 25 Nov. 1792, BL. Add. 58857 f. 57–9.
27 Grenville to Auckland, 26 Nov. 1792, PRO. FO. 37/41, BL. Add. 34445 f. 396–7, 58920 f. 176; Grenville to Buckingham, 26–7 Nov. 1792, HL. STG. Box 39(7).
28 Auckland to Grenville, 26 Nov., Van de Spiegel to Auckland, 27 Nov. 1792, BL. Add. 58920 f. 178–80.
29 Auckland to Grenville, 28 Nov. 1792, BL. Add. 58920 f. 186.
30 Minutes of a conference with Chauvelin, 29 Nov. 1792, BL. Add. 34445 f. 441–3; Chauvelin to Lebrun, 29 Nov. 1792, AE. CP. Ang. 583 f. 349–58.

The inviolability of treaties was the sticking point. Lebrun ordered Chauvelin to explain the opening of the Scheldt to Pitt, but he did so in language that would not be acceptable. France, Lebrun declared, would examine treaties by the light of the eternal principals of the law of nature and nations; the navigation of the Scheldt belonged to the Belgians by the indefeasible laws of universal justice[31]. Meanwhile other links were being established and tested as the various French agents in London manœuvred for position. François Noël was especially keen to displace Chauvelin, while a number of British officials, politicians and would-be politicians were ready to lend an ear to these approaches. On 30 November, for example, Charles Long, the joint Secretary of the Treasury, saw Scipion Mourgue, a French agent who had been educated in England, while William Smith, a Pittite Dissenter, met Hagues Maret, an official from the French foreign minister. Unlike Mourgue, Maret was conciliatory. He explained that France could not back down over the Scheldt, as it would discredit the government with the Belgians, but he added that she was not stirring up sedition in Britain and that the decree of 19 November referred only to Germany[32].

The last point was of consequence for the ministry was becoming increasingly concerned about the domestic situation and the extent to which it might be manipulated by France. In a hand-written letter sent to Auckland on 27 November, Grenville suggested that there was *a concerted plan do drive us to extremities, with a view of producing an impression in the interior of the country*[33]. This echoed the ministerial response to the last period of subversion, the Jacobite period, when foreign war had been seen as serving Jacobite ends. In 1792, a poor harvest was steadily working through into higher prices and this was leading to rising social discontent. Much of it was not politically specific, but some was, and the spread of radical agitation led to concern at every point[34]. Political clubs, such as the London Corresponding Society, were growing in size and prominence, and some were in touch with the National Convention[35]. Congratulatory addresses were dispatched prominently[36]. None of the means or media of public politics employed by the radicals in late 1792 were new, but they were alarming for three reasons. First they were definitely focused on non-parliamentary rather than parliamentary action and thus represented a rejection of existing constitutional mechanism. Secondly, they were focused on a foreign power, the traditional national enemy, a formidable military force that had beaten Britain in the last war and was currently demonstrating its military strength. Thirdly, the very volatility of international, especially French, developments made the situation in Britain appear more precarious.

31 Lebrun to Chauvelin, 30 Nov. 1792, AE. CP. Ang. 583 f. 361–3.
32 Smith notes on interview, 30 Nov. 1792, Cambridge University Library Add. 7621; Maret to Lebrun, 2 Dec. 1792, AE. CP. Ang. 584 f. 19.
33 Grenville to Auckland, 27 Nov. 1792, BL. Add. 34445 f. 401, 58920 f. 184.
34 EHRMAN's (see n. 15) chapter ›1792: The Dimensions of Unrest‹, Pitt, 91–171, is an excellent introduction to this subject.
35 A. GOODWIN, The Friends of Liberty, The English Democratic Movement in the Age of the French Revolution, London 1979; M. THALE, ed., Selections from the Papers of the London Corresponding Society 1792–1799, Cambridge. 1983; H. T. DICKINSON, British Radicalism and the French Revolution 1789–1815, Oxford 1985.
36 J. T. MURLEY, The Origin and Outbreak of the Anglo-French War of 1793, Oxford thesis, 1959, 153–4.

Discontent and agitation was not restricted to England; much of Scotland and Ireland appeared unstable[37]. After Valmy the situation became more acute, and from 26 November on the prospect of an imminent war with France made the domestic situation especially alarming. The army was too small to cope with insurrection, defend Britain from invasion and campaign in the Low Countries. When last tried in 1745, it had proved necessary both to bring back most of the army from the Low Countries and to send for Dutch and Hessian forces. The margin of safety was far tighter by the end of November 1792. Concerned about the situation in Britain, George III refused to send any troops thence to Ireland[38]. In response, the government moved troops nearer to London and embodied parts of the militia, a step that obliged the government to summon Parliament. On 19 December a bill to regulate the arrival and conduct of aliens was introduced. The development of loyalist associations was more encouraging for the government. On 20 November The Association for Preserving Liberty and Property against Republicans and Levellers was launched at a meeting at the Crown and Anchor Tavern in London: It was encouraged by the government, though far from dependent on its support. On 28 November John Hatsell, Clerk of the Commons, wrote,

I wish every county was like Devonshire – but I fear, that in Ireland, Scotland, the manufacturing parts of Yorkshire and particularly in London, there is a very different spirit rising ... the Society at the Crown and Anchor. This appears to me a better plan than trusting to the soldiery and brings the question to its true point – a contest between those who have property and those who have none. – If this idea is followed up generally and with spirit, it may, for a time, secure us peace internally[39].

Loyalism was to sweep the country. About 1500 Loyalist associations, involving about 15 000 active members, were formed between November 1792 and February 1793[40]. It was far from the case that everyone was a Loyalist, but in much of the country a network of Loyalist associations was established and this provided a crucial prop to the government. It was one that the French underrated, for their agents in London stressed the vitality and French sympathies of British radicalism. Thus, the French government deluded itself as to the likely consequence of any war with Britain, while its British counterpart was encouraged by signs of Loyalist vitality[41].

Relations, however, continued between the two governments. Pitt agreed to the suggestion that he meet Maret and the two met on 2 December. Pitt presented the Scheldt resolution as likely to lead to war with first the Dutch and then the British, and argued that the resolution of 19 December was a hostile act. Maret, who saw Pitt as an opponent of war and its supporters, whom he grouped around Lord Hawkesbury, a minister close to George, told him that French public opinion was ready to

37 J. Brims, From Reformers to »Jacobins«: The Scottish Association of the Friends of the People, in: T. M. Devine, ed., Conflict and Stability in Scottish Society 1700–1850, Edinburgh, 1990, pp. 31–40.
38 George III to Grenville, 26 Nov. 1792, BL. Add. 58857 f. 62.
39 Hatsell to John Ley, 28 Nov. 1792, Exeter, Devon County Record Office, 63/2/11/1/53; A. Mitchell, The Association Movement of 1792–3, in: Historical Journal 4 (1961), 56–77; D. E. Ginter, The loyalist association movement of 1792–3, in: Historical Journal, 9 (1966) 179–90.
40 Dozier, For King, Constitution and Country (see n. 13) p. 62.
41 Grenville to Auckland, 4 Dec. 1792, 15 Feb. 1793, BL. Add. 58921 f. 10,107.

demand British diplomatic recognition of the republic, and urged Pitt to treat with France publicly. Maret repeated what he had told Smith about the Scheldt and 19 November decrees. Pitt's desire for negotiations emerged clearly from the discussions, as did his determination to keep them secret. Grenville concluded from the meeting that the French would probably send someone to open ›a communication‹, and that it was therefore unnecessary for Charles Long to go to Paris in order to negotiate there, as had been planned after Grenville's meeting with Chauvelin on 29 November. George III thought this prudent as it would be easier to control discussions in London, but he added that any negotiation would probably fail and that, in light of this, it was necessary not to allow the French to embarrass the British government by revealing how far they might have been willing to make concessions[42].

Two days after the meeting between Maret and Pitt came news of a fresh provocative French step, the demand that Dumouriez's army be granted passage through the Dutch possession of Maastricht. The British government urged the Dutch to refuse such a breach of their neutrality which it saw as provocative to the Austrians and likely to lead to fresh demands[43]. Convinced that the French were relying on sowing subversion in Britain and encouraged by ›rising‹ loyalism, Grenville was sure that firmness was the best policy[44]. Certainly public negotiations with the French could only have discouraged the loyalists. In addition, whatever the messages from individual French agents, French policy and pretensions continued unacceptable. On 5 December Lebrun outlined a policy towards the Dutch that was totally unacceptable to Britain. He argued that the Dutch had the right to have the most advantegous form of government, and that no other power should intervene to maintain the old constitution. Chauvelin was instructed to explain that any guarantee by which a power sought to submit a people to a destructive system of government was a blow against the eternal rights of the nation and therefore null and void. Anglo-Prussian support for the Orange dynasty and the attitude of the partitioning powers towards Poland were cited as examples[45].

Such arguments were regarded not only as subversive of all international order, but also as bogus, for self-interest was seen as the central objective of French policy, force as its *modus operandi*. The hostile French treatment of neutrals, such as Frankfurt, was commented on, and invasion, rather than self-determination, was believed to be their plan for the Dutch. On the 3rd a somewhat excited William V of Orange told Auckland that Dumouriez was to attack through Breda *as a signal for insurrection*, that the Princess was to be killed and that *he would resist to the utmost, and die upon the spot*[46]. In fact he managed to survive the collapse of his state before the French, dying heroically being more fashionable in both Neo-classical and

42 Maret to Lebrun, 2 Dec. 1792, AE. CP. Ang. 584 f. 20–2; Grenville to Auckland, 4 Dec. 1792, PRO. FO. 37/41; Grenville to George III, 2 Dec., reply, 3 Dec. 1792, BL. Add. 58857 f. 69–71; undated instructions for Long, PRO. FO. 27/40.

43 Grenville to Auckland, 4 Dec. 1792, PRO. FO. 37/41.

44 Grenville to Auckland, 4, 18 Dec., Auckland to Grenville, 4 Dec. 1792, BL. Add. 34446 f. 32–3, 58921 f. 28, 34446 f. 43.

45 Lebrun to Chauvelin, 5 Dec. 1792, AE. CP. Ang. 584 f. 51–2.

46 Auckland to Grenville, 5 Dec. 1792, PRO. FO. 37/41.

Romantic iconography than for the monarchs of the period, but William's language indicated that it was not only the French who were being excitable.

Absorbed by the trial of Louis XVI and affected by the rhetoric and experience of success, the French government failed to appreciate the impact of its policies and statements on the neutrals. On 9 December Lebrun expressed his conviction that a wish to tackle domestic problems would keep Britain peaceful and he linked this to Pitt's readiness to see Maret[47]. In fact, a rising tide of loyalism, support from prominent opposition politicians, concern about French intentions and the need to consider Austrian and Prussian attitudes were pulling the British government in an opposite direction, as Chauvelin warned Lebrun on the 7th.[48]. That day the Austrian envoy Stadion reported that Grenville had urged him on the 6th on the need for a collective security system designed to block French aggression[49]. Such a move left little room for easing Anglo-French tensions. Lebrun, though over-confident about the British response, was aware of the need to prevent war with her. Maret was instructed to tell Pitt that the French wanted good relations, but a clear preference for formal negotiations with Chauvelin and thus recognition of his credentials from the republican government was expressed[50]. Lebrun's instructions to Chauvelin did not address British concerns. A promise not to attack the Dutch was linked to the expectation that Britain would not intervene in Dutch affairs and would not protect the 1787 Orangist settlement. Chauvelin was to declare that there was no chance of France changing her position over the Scheldt, a position dictated by natural law. The 19 November decree was only to apply to powers France was at war with, but the dignity of the republic precluded any acceptance of Pitt's wish for secret negotiations[51].

On 12 December 1792 Noël returned to London after a trip delayed by adverse winds and bad roads. He resumed contact with the British government via William Miles, a British would-be diplomat with French links and an exemplar of perpetual motion, and Smith. On the 12th Noël told Miles that France was justified over both the Scheldt and the right to pursue the Austrians into the United Provinces. He also warned that if war broke out between the two powers Britain would not benefit from seizing French colonies, as the contagion of revolution would spread from them to the British colonies. That afternoon Noël and Maret saw Smith. Despite Noël's tone, his report to Lebrun urged caution. He noted that the people had become markedly loyalist and on the 14th Noël, Maret and Chauvelin all sent warning reports: France must not live in false security. Noël stressed the strength of loyalism and argued that the French would be foolish to count on disorder in Britain. Maret saw Pitt that evening, but the minister, who argued that Chauvelin was not accredited as an envoy, kept the meeting short. Nevertheless, Maret's report stressed the necessity of avoiding any step that led the British ministry to think that France was conniving with the opposition. Chauvelin stated that his instructions over the

47 Lebrun to Chauvelin, 9 Dec. 1792, AE. CP. Ang. 584 f. 92.
48 Chauvelin to Lebrun, 7 Dec. 1792, f. 67–77; Loughborough to Pitt, 9 Dec. 1792, PRO. 30/8/153 f. 71.
49 A. Vivenot, Quellen zur Geschichte der deutschen Kaiserpolitik Oesterreichs während der französischen Revolutionskriege, 1790–1801, Wien 1873–90, II, 393.
50 Lebrun to Maret, 9 Dec. 1792, AE. CP. Ang. 584 f. 96–7.
51 Lebrun to Chauvelin, 9 Dec. 1792, AE. CP. Ang. 584 f. 92–5.

last fortnight had been inappropriate for the maintenance of peace. He reported that the British government would not recognise the French republic as a preliminary to negotiations, that rising Loyalist feeling was encouraging the ministry to take firmer steps and that it would not treat the opening of the Scheldt as anything other than an aggressive measure. Chauvelin also argued that the execution of Louis XVI would increase support for war with France[52].

Chauvelin also focused on a major problem that was of rising importance as the weather deteriorated: the impact of delayed communications. Noël's letter of the 13th, for example, did not reach Paris until the 18th. Chauvelin argued that distance and contrary winds combined with a volatile situation, which rendered any general instruction impossible, to ensure that by the time a dispatch was replied to, the situation had changed markedly[53]. Communications were scarcely a new problem: they had posed major difficulties for the British government during the Ochakov crisis. In addition, the Calais–Dover route posed fewer problems than the Helvoetsluys-Harwich crossing. The former was shorter and less subject to interruption, especially to the westerlies that stopped the Harwich passage. Yet, in the frenetic atmosphere of the last weeks of 1792 when differences were great and discussions possible, distance and delays between London and Paris were major problems.

This was demonstrated in mid December. The cautious reports sent on 14 December had obviously not reached Paris by the next day when Lebrun wrote to Chauvelin ordering him to obtain from the British government a firm explanation of their conduct towards France, though he did offer a conciliatory explanation of the 19 November decree. The Dutch would not be attacked while they remained neutral, indeed on the 13th Dumouriez had been ordered into winter quarters; but Lebrun was firm over the Scheldt, which he argued should be decided by justice and reason. Lebrun claimed that the issue was not very important and that if the British government treated it otherwise it was clear that it wanted war. Lebrun added prophetically that it was foolish to fight over the Scheldt as Britain would loose the Dutch, and that the war might not go as well as the British expected. Chauvelin was ordered to spread knowledge about his new instructions, though not to give them great publicity. The principle of appealing to the British nation against its ministry in the event of war was advanced[54]. Also on the 15th the Convention passed a decree on the occupied territories which swept away their existing social order and subordinated their governments to the task of supplying French forces. This made peace with Austria and Prussia less likely and also made it clear that Belgium (and the United Provinces if conquered), were to be incorporated into the French system. Any political settlement acceptable to the Republic would guarantee continued French influence over Belgium.

Against this background, the continuing informal discussions in London seemed pointless. Smith went to see Noël on the 16th, told him that France must not attack the Dutch or press the Scheldt issue and warned him that the nation would rally round the government if convinced that the war was the work of France. The pro-

52 Chauvelin to Lebrun, 14 Dec., Maret to Lebrun, 14 Dec., Noël to Lebrun, 14 Dec. 1792, AE. CP. Ang. 584 f. 157–65.

53 Chauvelin to Lebrun, 14 Dec. 1792, AE. CP. Ang. 584 f. 156–7.

54 Lebrun to Chauvelin, 15 Dec. 1792, AE. CP. Ang. 584 f. 177–8.

French Marquis of Lansdowne was also clear that it was up to the Republic to avoid war[55]. Noël's report reached Paris on the 21st, but the previous day Chauvelin was sent instructions to insist on the recognition of his credentials and to find out officially if Britain saw the Scheldt and 19 November decrees as a cause of war.

This attempted resort to public diplomacy was unwise if the Republic wished to keep the peace. Recognition was an extremely sensitive issue at this point because of the trial of Louis XVI. In addition, the opening of the parliamentary session on 13 December and the consequent opportunities for opposition attacks made the government vulnerable if it negotiated publicly, and this was emphasised further by suspicions, fanned by Miles, of links between the opposition and prominent French republicans[56]. The risks of negotiating with the French were demonstrated on 19 December when Lebrun told the National Convention that discussions had taken place and had been initiated by Pitt. Adopting an aggressive approach, he threatened to turn to the British people and insisted that their government should not defend the Dutch *status quo*[57].

Thus, while the order of 13 December to Dumouriez to respect Dutch neutrality and to move into winter quarters served to defuse immediate tension over Dutch security and therefore to prevent an immediate outbreak of war between France and Britain, the general context was one not only of a failure to settle or negotiate major differences, but of a number of steps that made the general tenor of relations worse, the atmosphere more charged and bitter. British moves to block grain exports to France were resented, not surprisingly given the sensitivity of food supplies. The Alien legislation also aroused anger, while the French were concerned about British military preparations. The issue of relations with France played a major role in Parliament and this in turn increased divisions, for the nature of negotiations was focused on by opposition critics. Thus the »Morning Chronicle« of 20 December stated that the

> *only difference between Mr. Pitt and Mr. Fox, is that Mr. Pitt is doing secretly, by means of confidential secretaries, who assumed no diplomatic character, what Mr. Fox is for doing publicly by an Ambassador ... Mr. Fox's mode could only fail of success from the determination of the French to concede none of the points in dispute: Mr. Pitt's may fail on a mere point of punctilios ... for the sake of a mere ceremony.*

The French demand for recognition forced a crisis in Anglo-French relations which Dumouriez's inactivity had postponed, but the situation was becoming more serious anyway both because of attempts to improve British relations with powers opposed to France and because of a growing mutual mistrust. On 27 December the British government received Chauvelin's demand for recognition transmitted in accordance with Lebrun's instructions of the 20th. The response was hostile. Chauvelin was not to see Pitt or Grenville; that seemed to be too like a *de facto* recognition. Instead, after a delay that was indicative of the sense that war could not be avoided and that covered a period when the Foreign Office was sending off appeals for foreign co-operation, Grenville sent Chauvelin a note on the 31st. The French claim to annul

55 Noël to Lebrun, 16 Dec 1792, AE. CP. Ang. 584 f. 183–4.
56 Sheffield to Auckland, 3 Jan. 1793, BL. Add. 34446 f. 442.
57 Archives Parlementaires de 1787 a 1860, 127 vols., Paris 1879–1913, 55, 164–5.

treaties on the basis of a natural right that they alone were to judge was presented as destructive to all relations. France must abandon her expansionist schemes in the Low Countries. These essentials were seen as more important than French assurances that the decree of 19 November did not apply to neutrals and the promise that the Dutch would not be attacked if they remained neutral[58].

Meanwhile, on the 28th and 29th Grenville had given new energy to the attempt to create an anti-French system. The hostile aspect of this policy was indicated by the instruction sent to Ostervald at Lisbon on the 29th: he was to urge the Portuguese to arm their navy[59]. Such a measure was clearly intended as a preparation for the deployment of a large British fleet in the Mediterranean that was seen as desirable, not least by potential allies. In order to permit that it was necessary for Britain and her allies to be clearly superior to France in home waters, and Grenville became increasingly interested in obtaining information on French naval preparations. The Dutch government was asked via Auckland to obtain reports of the situation in Brest through commercial channels. Thus, negotiations were giving way to war, diplomats were serving the ends of the forthcoming struggle. Indeed on 27 December the Cabinet decided to send warships to Flushing in order to help the Dutch against any attack on their territory or ships, the last a clear prospect if they sought to enforce the closure of the Scheldt. Grenville argued that *whatever the question may be, as to the policy of putting off the war, if it were in our power, surely we see enough to be sensible that it may come upon us every day*[60].

It was easy to approach Portugal. She was not yet at war with France, her relations with Britain were reasonably close and she was not suspected of having views of her own. Austria, Prussia and Russia were very different. On 19 December the Russian envoy, Vorontsov, had approached the government on behalf of Catherine II with the suggestion that Britain join an anti-French coalition. Grenville saw this as a very important development which, if utilised, might have favourable consequences[61]. On 28–29 December Grenville replied with messages to Vorontsov and to the British envoys at Berlin, Madrid, The Hague, St. Petersburg and Vienna,

in order to put a stop to the farther progress of the French arms, and French principles, and to oblige that nation to renounce its view of aggrandizement, and to desist from that regular, and settled plan which they appear to be pursuing, and which they have lately avowed by a public decree, of encouraging, and assisting all attempts which may be made against any established governments.

Whitworth was to tell the Russian government first that Britain was already arming and intended to fulfil obligations, and was pleased that Catherine shared these views, and secondly that Russian envoys should be given powers to negotiate in pursuit of agreement on necessary measures. Grenville continued, *the most adviseable step to be taken, would be, that sufficient explanation should be had, with the powers at war with France*[62]. They, rather than France were seen as the key to a satisfactory peace, for Britain could only bring sufficient diplomatic pressure to bear on France if she

58 Grenville to Chauvelin, 31 Dec. 1792, BL. Add. 34446 f. 389–92.
59 Grenville to Ostervald, 29 Dec. 1792, PRO. FO. 63/15.
60 Cabinet Minute, 27 Dec., Grenville to Auckland, 29 Dec. 1792, BL. Add. 58857 f. 75, 58921 f. 34.
61 Grenville to Auckland, 29 Dec. 1792, BL. Add. 58921 f. 34.
62 Grenville to Whitworth, 29 Dec., Grenville to Vorontsov, 28 Dec. 1792, PRO. FO. 63/23.

was fully informed of Austrian and Prussian plans and enjoyed their confidence; while, if war with France was necessary, it could only be waged successfully in co-operation with them. France was to be asked to return to her 1789 frontiers and to pledge publicly not to stir up discontent in other states; in return, other powers were to promise both non-interference and the recognition of the Republic.

This proposal encapsulated the spirit of the Pitt ministry as clearly as their earlier attempt to oblige Russia, Austria and Prussia to accept the *status quo ante bellum* in eastern Europe. The anxiety about Austrian and Prussian plans in western Europe that had surfaced in the late summer of 1792 was reflected anew in the desire to limit the role of those powers. There was to be no restoration of monarchy supported by Austrian and Prussian bayonets, no larger version of the Dutch crisis of 1787 creating a new constitutional and international order. Grenville hoped that if war broke out the Dutch army would be sufficiently strong to avoid the necessity of having to rely entirely on Prussia to protect the United Provinces[63]. Instead, Austria and Prussia were only to be allowed to seek territorial indemnification for their efforts against France if the latter power refused the terms that it was to be offered by the neutral powers, a group among which Britain was most prominent and now most active. Her role was acknowledged from a surprising quarter. The papal nuncio in Lisbon sought a British declaration to France that the Papal States were under British protection, and a British fleet in the Mediterranean to give substance to the declaration[64].

The British proposals of 29 December 1792 were abortive but they are of great interest for the light they throw on the motivation of the Pitt ministry. Its cautious approach to change was clearly indicated, as was its willingness to resort to interventionist diplomacy based on a collective security system. What was not proposed was even more striking. At this juncture, Britain was offered a tremendous opportunity to crush France. The domestic and diplomatic circumstances both seemed propitious. In Britain the opposition was divided, the ministry united and enjoying the confidence of both Crown and Parliament. The navy was ready for action, government finances were strong. The Royal Navy was in the unprecedented position of having 100 ships of the line, nearly half of which were new and the rest fully repaired[65]. The international situation was unprecedented. Britain had the opportunity to play a major role in what would be the strongest European coalition hitherto created, one that would include Austria, Prussia, Russia, the Empire, Spain and the Dutch. Only France and a desperately weak Poland were truly outside this system. The Familiy Compact was decisively broken, while Russia was no longer diverted by war with the Turks, and the Habsburg empire was considerably more stable than it had been in early 1790. As in 1745–8, it might be difficult to mobilise strength sufficiently fast to counteract French advances in the Low Countries, but the difficulties that the French were already encountering on the middle Rhine suggested that they would be unable to retain their recent gains, while it was widely

63 Grenville to Auckland, 18 Dec. 1792, BL. Add. 58921 f. 29.
64 Ostervald to Grenville, 1 Dec. 1792, PRO. FO. 63/15.
65 Grenville to Auckland, 4 Dec. 1792, BL. Add. 58921 f. 9; Webb, Construction, repair and maintenance in the battle fleet of the Royal Navy, 1793–1815, in J. Black and P. L. Woodfine, eds., The British Navy and the use of Naval Power in the Eighteenth Century, Leicester 1988, pp. 207–10.

assumed that domestic, particularly financial, problems would gravely hinder their war effort. On 27 January 1793 Richmond told Grenville that 351,000 troops were *collecting against France* north of the Alps, and that this figure could be swelled by 50,000 Russians, 20,000 Dutch and 10,000 British troops[66].

In short, the opportunity for action appeared excellent. The Nootka Sound crisis had suggested that France would not find it easy to mobilise her fleet, and her colonies, especially the crucial ones in the West Indies, were known to be rife with discontent. Thus, Britain could join in the conflict and both revenge her losses during the American War of Independence and make fresh gains, in the West Indies and the Indian Ocean. The adhesion of Spain to the anti-French coalition would be crucial in giving Britain the margin of naval strength required to enable her to mount a whole series of amphibious operations.

And yet such a prospect was not sketched out at the end of December 1792, no more than it had lay behind government planning during the Dutch (1787) and Nootka Sound (1790) crises. As then, the Pitt ministry was motivated by defensive considerations. In the winter of 1792–3 it was the fate of the United Provinces, not of Saint-Domingue, that was the principal issue. Indeed British ministerial concern for the Indies was still largely defensive. In the instructions for what was the last British government attempt to keep the peace, the projected discussions between Auckland and Dumouriez, Grenville undertook that Britain would not commit hostilities while hopes of peace remained,

unless such measures should be adopted on the part of France in the interval, as would leave His Majesty no alternative. Among these must unquestionably be reckoned the plan said to be now in agitation in France, of sending immediately to the West Indies a squadron of ships of war, some of them of great force, together with a very considerable body of land forces. Even in time of the most profound peace, and with the utmost confidence that could be entertained in the good dispositions of France, such a measure would place His Majesty's colonies in that quarter in a situation of the greatest uneasiness. In the present moment ... it is impossible that he should forego the advantage of his naval superiority in these seas, and suffer a large force to proceed on a destination eventually so injurious to the security of his own dominions, and to the property and interests of his subjects[67].

Six weeks earlier there were no British plans to use the international crisis in order to destroy their principal maritime and colonial rival. Instead, it was the *status quo* that was envisaged. The planned return to the frontiers of 1789 in western Europe and the recognition of the Republic would probably have led to a position of tension between Austria and France, especially as Habsburg power was reintroduced into Belgium. Although there is no sign that it played any role in British policy, such a situation would be in Britain's interest especially as the reintroduction of Habsburg power would cover the United Provinces from France, while, more generally, the failure to recreate the Austro-French alliance would weaken France in western Europe and make her a less formidable rival to Britain.

Whatever the long-term implications of the British plan, it was the short-term practicality that was of consequence. As in the Ochakov Crisis of 1791, the British plan arguably failed to address the concerns of the combatants adequately. In 1790–1

66 Richmond to Grenville, referring to meeting of previous day, 28 Jan. 1793, BL. Add. 58937 f. 166–7.
67 Grenville to Auckland, 4 Feb. 1793, BL. Add. 34447 f. 433–4.

there was a naive estimate of Catherine II's willingness to yield to intimidation and to abandon her gains, at the end of 1792 a failure to appreciate the degree of Austrian, Prussian and French commitment to their views. More to the point, it is arguable that there simply was not time to mount such a complex negotiation. To consult with Austria and Prussia *before* offering France terms would delay matters considerably, and by then the conflict might have spilled over into the United Provinces. On the other hand, it was necessary to bind Britain closer to Austria, Prussia and Russia. Without them, negotiations with France would not be meaningful, not least because British ministerial experience of French volatility and distrust of France was such that no settlement with her would be regarded as acceptable unless guaranteed by other powers. Thus, distrust of France and the desire to win the co-operation of the major continental monarchies combined to ensure that the major diplomatic initiative launched by Britain at the end of 1792 was directed not at France, but at her opponents. This can be seen as a missed opportunity, but French policy over the previous two months, both in general and in the specific case of discussions with British ministers, had done nothing to inspire confidence.

On 6 January 1793 Auckland observed, *At present there is a period of calm; but it is like the sudden interruption of a blustering storm, I have no faith in it*[68]. He was right to be sceptical. By this stage it was regarded as increasingly likely that the war would spread to include the British and the Dutch[69], and the subsequent game of might-have-beens as well as the historian's quest to ascribe responsibility seems more and more pointless[70]. Near midnight on New Years Day Auckland had not felt certain that war would take place, but the letter he sent Burges was striking for its cool-headed realisation that French domestic policy, or rather the savagery and pain of revolution, was affecting his response. It served as a parallel to the tide of loyalism in Britain and also prefigured the emotional response to the fate of Louis XVI, increasingly seen as man as much as monarch, *It is a detestable nation: almost all within it for whom I felt affection or respect are either killed or killing, or (like Madame de Rayneval and Madame de Montmorin) dead or dying broken hearted. I feel so completely antigallican that I am in danger of losing with regard to that nation every sentiment of candour and humanity, and even that coolness of judgement which we all wish to preserve in the political measures to which they force us*[71]. Had Auckland been able to see Lebrun's instructions to Chauvelin of that day, he would have been more pessimistic about the chances of preventing war. Uncertain of the position that the British ministry had left the Republic in, Lebrun, nevertheless, thought that it wanted France to declare war for domestic reasons, and he gave Chauvelin permission to return as soon as he thought he should[72]. In one respect the differences over Chauvelin's status were indeed a trivial quarrel over a matter of form, but yet also, far from preventing substantive discussions over the points at

68 Auckland to Loughborough, 6 Jan. 1793, BL. Add. 34446 f. 471.
69 Grenville to Auckland, 1 Jan. 1793, BL. Add. 58921 f. 36.
70 For a similar thesis about the War of the Spanish Succession, W. Roosen, The Origins of the War of the Spanish Succession, in: Black, ed., The Origins of War in Early Modern Europe, Edinburgh 1987, pp. 151–75.
71 Auckland to Burges, 1 Jan. 1793, Bod. BB. 31 f. 1.
72 Lebrun to Chauvelin, 1 Jan. 1793, AE. CP. Ang. 586 f. 4–8.

issue, the differences reflected what were now the crucial problems: a general mutual distrust and a commitment by both governments to positions from which they were not willing to recede. Far from detracting from negotiations, the dispute over recognition encapsulated the points at issue.

On the evening of 6 January 1793 George III wrote to Chatham stating that in light of signs that the French government intended to go to war with Britain *in the actual state of things it seems the most desirable conclusion of the present crisis*[73]. The following day Chauvelin, who now saw war as inevitable, again compromised the attempt to discuss issues by insisting on recognition. He made protests against the Aliens Bill and the prohibition of grain exports to France[74], but they were rejected because he presented them *in the character of Minister of the French Republic, although he had before been formally apprized that he could not be admitted to treat in that character*. Grenville informed the King that *it was the opinion of all your Majesty's servants that no time should be lost in returning him his note as inadmissible, as any delay would have had the appearance of hesitation*. George III supported the step.

On 8 January Lebrun sent Chauvelin fresh instructions in response to Grenville's[75] note of 31 December. Ehrman suggested that they *refrained from closing the door*, and from a French perspective they were somewhat conciliatory. The French position on the Scheldt was restated, but Lebrun disclaimed the idea that France was the universal arbiter of treaties, stated that she would respect other governments as she was treated and renounced any territorial gains: French troops would occupy conquests only for the duration of the war. The Scheldt dispute should be settled in direct negotiations between the Maritime Powers and Belgium when the independence of the latter was fully established[76]. These were totally unacceptable terms as far as the British were concerned. They entailed a separate but precarious neutrality, while the war continued, and gave Britain no role in the eventual peace settlement, and, correspondingly, no likelihood that any Anglo-French or Anglo-Belgian settlement would be guaranteed by the other powers. In addition, the possibility that a French military presence in Belgium would lead to the destabilisation of the United Provinces remained strong. Lebrun had little confidence that his instructions of the 18th would lead to amicable negotiations and a resolution of differences for, before he could receive a response from Chauvelin, he sent the latter fresh instructions on the 10th stating that Britain was to be left eight days to give her final resolution as to war or peace[77].

Grenville sent an instruction on the 9th that gave a clue as to his thinking at this point and suggested that there was no way forward while the French insisted on recognition. As so often, an instruction in one of the generally-overlooked ›minor‹ diplomatic series can throw light on the general principles motivating policy.

73 George III to Chatham, 6 Jan. 1793, A. Aspinall, ed., The Later Correspondence of George III, I, Cambridge, 1963, no. 821.
74 Chauvelin to Lebrun, 7 Jan. 1793, AE. CP. Ang. 586 f. 56.
75 Grenville to George III, 7 Jan. 1793, Aspinall, George III (see n. 73) no. 822; George to Grenville, 8 Jan. 1793, BL. Add. 58857 f. 79.
76 Lebrun to Chauvelin, 8 Jan. 1793, AE. CP. Ang. 584 f. 77–9; Ehrman, Pitt (see n. 15), 249.
77 Lebrun to Chauvelin, 10 Jan. 1793, AE. CP. Ang. 584 f. 92.

Referring to a note exchanged between Lebrun and the Spanish *chargé d'affaires* at Paris, Grenville informed Ostervald at Lisbon that, if authorised, this meant that Spain was the first to recognise the Executive Council and to apply to it on behalf of Louis XVI and in favour of good relations, adding

The contemptuous manner in which this overture was received by the National Convention sufficiently proves how little a conduct of this nature was calculated even to answer the object of present security.

Grenville sought an Anglo-Portuguese concert to obtain an explanation from Spain and the arming of Portugal, whose neutrality, he warned, would not be respected by France. In response to the earlier Portuguese argument that they were not affected by or guarantors of the state of Scheldt, Grenville argued that

there are many circumstances independent of the desire for opening the Scheldt which are considered by His Majesty as calling for vigorous and decisive measures on his part ... this act is considered by the King as affording one instance only of the general system adopted by the present rulers in France for overturning all existing governments, for carrying their principles into all the different countries of Europe, and for extending their own dominion by acquisitions of the utmost value and importance.

The recent Russian overtures and the current situation of Austria and Prussia were seen as giving grounds for *a concert of measures* involving the three powers and Britain. In light of recent discussions in the National Convention, Grenville thought that his return of Chauvelin's note as inadmissible because he assumed the character of Minister Plenipotentiary might be followed *by immediate hostilities on the part of France*. This, he argued, should lead Portugal to take a different role than if war began only on account of the Scheldt dispute. Thus, in place of the interest in mediation expressed in the instructions of 31 December, there was now a more immediate stress on the threat of war. Grenville sought Portuguese concurrence *in a general system ... between the leading powers of Europe for their common interest and security*, but it was clear from his instructions that this was to be aimed explicitly against France[78]. It was also clear that the precise steps by which Britain and France moved towards war would be of importance not only for the domestic political situation, but also because of the impact on Britain's allies.

Meanwhile the French continued to seek discussions with the British government. Chauvelin's request for a meeting on 9 January and his threat that the Eden treaty would be revoked if he did not obtain satisfaction within three days, were both without effect: the first was received with the statement that French answers to British complaints were a prior condition, the second was returned without comment[79]. In accordance with Lebrun's instructions of the 8th, Chauvelin sought a meeting with Grenville to explain the situation, and this took place on the 13th, though on an unofficial footing. Chauvelin made it clear that poor communications were playing a major role in the crisis,

M. Chauvelin, as soon as he came into my room, began by stating that he was desirous of explaining, that all his steps subsequent to the date of my letter of the 31st ult had been taken in consequence of particular instructions from the Conseil Executif, given before they had received

78 Grenville to Ostervald, 9 Jan 1793, PRO. FO. 63/16.
79 Chauvelin to Lebrun, 13 Jan. 1793, AE. CP. Ang. 584 f. 123–4.

that letter. That they had seen in that letter one thing which had been satisfactory to them, notwithstanding the other things of which they might complain. This was the assurance which enabled them to reject the idea entertained by some persons in France of its being the intention of the government here to declare war at all events. Under this assurance they had authorised him to give to their answer a form which was not liable to the exceptions which had before been taken. He then gave me the dispatch from M. Lebrun.

Chauvelin also said *that one of the difficulties of the present situation of the two countries was the want of a proper channel of communication. That he himself, from having no access to the king's ministers was frequently unable to give accounts of their real views and intentions.* Chauvelin complained of the manner in which he was treated in the British press; and asked crucially if he could see Grenville often *sous le même forme.* He did not ask for permission to present his credentials. Grenville listened in silence, then stated that the seriousness of the issue meant that he could not answer at once, and the two men, their final meeting having drawn to an uneventful close, parted[80].

On the same day, Miles saw Pitt. He had been sent a statement for the minister by Lebrun, as well as a letter from Maret, now Lebrun's deputy in Paris. Though *at a loss to imagine how a paper which you term an official dispatch can have been addressed to you*, Pitt had *no objection to seeing any information respecting the sentiments of persons in France*, but he warned Miles that he would be unable to discuss the contents with him. Miles was optimistic about the French wish to negotiate and thought an honourable peace a prospect, but, after what he claimed was an initially welcoming response by Pitt, he found the minister hostile, a change Miles attributed to Burke's attendance at the Cabinet that day. According to Miles, Pitt banned him from corresponding with the Executive Council, and thus closed a potentially crucial channel for negotiations[81].

Grenville certainly thought the approach via Miles unsatisfactory and his expertise and scepticism may have had considerable influence on Pitt. On the 15th Grenville sent Auckland a private letter in which he revealed clearly that satisfactory French assurances would not be sufficient. Britain required ›better security‹ which could only come from a guarantee by the major continental powers as part of a peace settlement on terms that it was readily apparent that the Republic would not accept. Grenville wrote,

the Republic ought to convince herself of the impossibility of our acquiescing in all that has happened, with no better security against its recurring than a tacit disavowal or even an express assurance. By the very messenger which brought Chauvelin's last humble paper, a sort of confidential dispatch was sent to be communicated to us through a private agent [Miles]. We disliked the mode of intercourse and have stopped it for the future. But it gave us then the previous knowledge of the substance and tone of Chauvelin's communication – and in this … dispatch … it is expressly said that if England perseveres in expecting too much from France the latter will attack her where she is vulnerable namely in Holland … the danger to which she [United Provinces] would inevitably be exposed from smothering again, without extinguishing,

80 Minutes of a Conference with M. Chauvelin, 13 Jan. 1793, BL. Add. 34447 f. 25–6; Chauvelin to Lebrun, 13 Jan. 1793, AE. CP. 584 f. 125–6.

81 Pitt to Miles, 13 Jan. 1793, PRO. 30/8/102 f. 190; Miles to Pitt, 13 Jan. 1793, C. P. Miles, ed., Correspondence of W. A. Miles on the French Revolution, 1789–1817, 2 vols., London 1890, II, 40.

the fire which had so nearly consumed all the countries in Europe, if a barrier had not been found here to its progress.

If we were to desist now without providing some effectual security for the future I would not answer for raising again here the same spirit which has enabled us to act so effectually ... my personal and sincere abhorrence of war where it can be avoided – But I am satisfied that nothing but vigorous and extensive and systematic measures can save us now.

That was the British response to the French approaches of the 13th. Grenville sought security, a security to be obtained from the collapse of France or the creation of a strong barrier against her, not one gained from negotiations with her. Peace or war with France was in some respects less important than *effectual security for the future*, and the last could not be gained from the Republic for it was distrusted[82]. The abrupt and declamatory style of French policy in November 1792 had had a major effect: the Republic was seen as unpredictable and inexorable, its claim to interpret treaties itself in the light of universal principles that it alone declared and interpreted aroused an outrage on Grenville's part comparable to that which others felt from the trial of Louis XVI. If there was peace it would have to be, as Fife pointed out, *an armed one*[83], an expensive option that invited domestic political criticism from a number of directions, and if Britain remained neutral her government would have to watch without being able to influence the struggle on the Continent and the subsequent negotiations.

And yet, having not declared war on France when she proclaimed the Scheldt open, there was no obvious reason for Britain to do so in mid-January. The need to win as much political support as possible in Britain and among her allies made this factor of some consequence. Far from taking new provocative steps, the French approach via Miles had been conciliatory in intention. George Rose commented on the 15th, *the concessions they are making are convincing proofs they now wish to avoid a rupture with us*[84]. The British response was negative. Anger with the fashion in which the French conducted negotiations, the tone and style of their diplomacy, the contradictory attitude of their different agents and the Republic's unpredictability, combined with the sense that discussions had been tried without success, the strength of loyalism and government finances and the feeling that war could and increasingly should be waged, to produce a negative response to Chauvelin, while the other approaches were ignored.

In a letter dated 17 January 1793 and *L'an 2eme de la Republique francaise*, Chauvelin had sought an interview with Grenville, and had asked whether George III would receive his credentials, because he feared that he would otherwise have to leave under the alien Act[85]. The following day, Grenville clarified the situation by replying to the paper Chauvelin had left on 13 January. He pronounced it unsatisfactory, because the Republic had not renounced her offensive claims of the previous November, specifically the opening of the Scheldt. Grenville argued that offering to negotiate this once Belgium was independent was unsatisfactory, and he was similarly dissatisfied with the idea that only then should French troops be with-

82 Grenville to Auckland, 15 Jan. 1793, BL. Add. 34447 f. 37–8, 58921 f. 55–7.
83 Fife to William Rose, 16 Jan. 1793, Aberdeen UL. Tayler papers 2226/131/925.
84 Rose to Auckland, 15 Jan. 1793, BL. Add. 34447 f. 64.
85 Chauvelin to Grenville, 17 Jan. 1793, BL. Add. 34447 f. 98–9.

drawn. The French threat to see British preparations as a possible cause of war was declared unacceptable and Chauvelin was informed that they would be continued in order to preserve the security, tranquillity and rights of Britain and her allies, and to create a barrier to ambitious views that threatened the rest of Europe, and that were made more dangerous by the propagation of principles that threatened the destruction of all social order[86].

The Republic was therefore expected to renounce its November decrees, to evacuate the Austrian Netherlands, and to accept that Britain would remain armed. These were unrealistic assumptions; but in returning to his message of 31 December and not seeking to find common ground with Chauvelin's note of 13 January and the approach via Miles, Grenville was reflecting not only the domestic British situation and British ministerial assumptions, but also the fact that discussions and moves since November had given ground for no realistic hopes about the prospect of a secure and lasting peace. The French had made efforts to find some common ground, but they were muddled, equivocal and changeable. That would have mattered less had the general situation been free from immediate threats, but Britain's principal ally was faced by Dumouriez's army, the campaigning season was nearing and the British ministry had to decide how best to negotiate with Austria, Prussia and Russia. Britain was arming fast, which Chauvelin reported proved that she sought war[87].

On Sunday 20 January 1793 Pitt saw Lord Loughborough, part of the process by which the ministry was seeking to recruit leading Whigs or at least ensure that they did not attack government policy, a process whose success Dundas had reported on to George III that morning [88]. Returning to Lord Malmesbury's house, Loughborough told him that *war was a decided measure; that Pitt saw it was inevitable, and that the sooner it was begun the better.* The favourable state of public opinion, the prospect of gaining the French West Indies, the buoyancy of public revenue, the greater forwardness of British, compared to French, naval preparations, the favourable dispositions of the Dutch, Russia and Spain were all mentioned. Three days later, Malmesbury wrote to Pitt, promising his support for ministerial policy[89]. Unlike in 1775, 1754–6 and 1739, the opposition was disintegrating as the government moved towards war.

At the same time there was no trust in French intentions. Burges warned Auckland on the 22nd that Dumouriez planned to have an army of 800 000 men and that there was *every reason to believe that a serious attack will be made upon Holland.* Returning from a reconnaissance mission, Captain Kempthorne reported that day that French troops were moving forward towards Antwerp and that the Batavian Legion of Dutch Patriots were preparing to invade the United Provinces[90]. Any attack could only be deterred either by the arrival of Austrian and Prussian armies on the Rhine, and, not least for this reason, those powers could not be excluded from

86 Grenville to Chauvelin, 18 Jan. 1793, BL. Add. 34447 f. 110–12.
87 Chauvelin to Lebrun, 15, 23 Jan. 1793, AE. CP. Ang. 586 f. 147, 223.
88 Dundas to George III, 20 Jan. 1793, ASPINALL, George III (see n. 73) no. 827.
89 3rd EARL OF MALMESBURY, ed., Diaries and Correspondence of James Harris, first Earl of Melmesbury, 4 vols., London 1844, II, 501–2; Malmesbury to Pitt, 23 Jan. 1793, PRO. 30/8/155 f. 95.
90 Burges to Auckland, 22 Jan., Kempthorne to Aust, 22 Jan. 1793, BL. Add. 34447 f. 185, 198.

British calculations; or, Grenville suggested, by *raising difficulties* in the Austrian Netherlands. Far from being averse to the idea of encouraging insurrection, Grenville wrote privately to Auckland on the 22nd to express the hope that it would be possible *to bring the Austrian government and the Vandernootists to a complete good understanding, and to cooperation in a plan for expelling the French,* which he felt Britain should facilitate[91].

The news of the sentence of death on Louis XVI being pronounced by the National Convention on 17 January reached London on the 21st. It was clear that this would lead to a crisis in relations. Chauvelin, who reported that newspaper attacks in pro-government papers, especially the *infamous* »Sun«, amounted to incitments to his assassination, paid his bills and packed. He was sent instructions by Lebrun on the 22nd to leave Britain without delay, but before these arrived he had been ordered to go by the British government[92].

Louis XVI was executed in what is now the Place de la Concorde on Monday the 21st. News of it was one of the few messages that crossed the Channel swiftly that turbulent winter. It arrived in London on the 23rd. Chauvelin had already written that day that the government wanted war and would use the execution to stir up public support. Before the news arrived, George III told Pitt that, whenever it did, he would call a Privy Council to order Chauvelin's expulsion. When it came, the royal audience in the Drawing Room was cancelled, as was a planned visit by George III to the theatre, while the play at the Haymarket came to an abrupt end when the audience shouted out *No Farce, No Farce* and left[93].

The Privy Council met with the King present on 24 January and Chauvelin was ordered to leave by 1 February. It was decided to prepare more warships, while George III ordered the assembly of a force of 13 000 Hanoverians that was to serve in the Low Countries. Grenville repeated his interest in the idea of a Belgian rising, now seen as the best way to protect the Dutch[94]. Pro-government newspapers acted as if war had already been declared by and in response to the execution of Louis XVI. The »Times« announced on the 25th that the execution would *invoke vengeance on his murderers. This is not the cause of monarchs only, it is the cause of every nation.* Rulers owed it *to the happiness of their people to crush the savage regicides* and to combine in a *coalition of all regular and well established governments and of every civilised people, against a system of anarchy.* The following day, the »Westminister Journal« was certain that the *murder* of Louis XVI would *be felt in the heart of every Englishman* and that *the approaching war with France will unquestionably be the most popular in which this country has ever been involved. We have justice and expediency on our side, and the call of Europe to step forward and check, the career of blood hounds ... The country is infinitely indebted for its present safety to Mr. Burke.*

On 24 January 1793 Grenville wrote to Auckland, expressing his conviction that

91 Grenville to Auckland, 22 Jan. 1793, BL. Add. 34447 f. 186, 58921 f. 73–4.

92 Chauvelin to Lebrun, 19 Jan., Lebrun to Chauvelin, 22 Jan. 1793, AE. CP. Ang. 586 f. 187, 208; Aust to Auckland, 22 Jan. 1793, BL. Add. 34447 f. 197.

93 Chavelin to Lebrun, 23 Jan. 1793, AE. CP. Ang. 586 f. 223; Grenville – George III corresp. on 24 Jan., Pitt to Grenville, 24 Jan. 1793, BL. Add. 58857 f. 80–5, 58906 f. 149.

94 George III to Pitt, 24 Jan. 1793, ASPINALL, George III (see n. 73) no. 829; Grenville to Auckland, 24 Jan., Grenville to Chauvelin, 24 Jan. 1793, BL. Add. 34447 f. 232–7.

war would break out and drawing attention to his feeling that military preparations had a dynamic of their own,

The business is now brought to its crisis and I imagine that the next dispatch to you, or the next but one will announce the commencement of hostilies. Probably the French will commence them, but if not, after all lines of communication are interrupted, of necessity, and after all hope of satisfactory explanation is over I do not see how we can remain any longer les bras croisés with a great force ready for action; that force avowedly meant against France, and the language and conduct of that power giving every day more instead of less ground of offence to us and all the world.

This last horrible act of unnecessary cruelty and outrage on all men's feelings will have its effect[95].

Next day the Cabinet resolved on a reply to the Spanish proposal for establishing a close union, made on 1 January to Francis Jackson, Minister Plenipotentiary in Spain. Lord St. Helens was to be authorised to discuss *a permanent system of alliance*, but in the meantime a preliminary agreement should be proposed, including *a concert to prevent the progress of French arms and principles* in which each power agreed to come to the assistance of the other if this led to war[96]. The idea was vague, it was not clear what opposing French principles entailed, but this did not matter greatly, as the British government was clearly preparing for war, a conflict in which foreign assistance would be vital and it was necessary to ensure that Spain remained opposed to France.

And yet, war had been declared by neither side, and hostilities had not begun, either along the Dutch frontier or on the high seas. The British government was resolved to make no last diplomatic effort, and instead to prepare for war, but it did not declare it. The response from the Continental powers had been discouraging. On 12 January Stadion and Jacobi, the Austrian and Prussian envoys in London, jointly declared to Grenville that they sought the reintroduction of monarchy in France and indemnification for themselves. The former would make any attempt by the neutral powers to mediate hopeless, the latter threatened to compromise the projected coalition against France with extraneous territorial interests and would make any alliance with Britain difficult to negotiate. The Russian government informed Whitworth that they would not negotiate with the Republic and that they expected Britain to declare war. Austria sought support for the Bavarian Exchange scheme, Prussia and Russia wanted a fresh partition of Poland[97]. Russian troops had moved into Poland in May 1792; the Prussians followed in mid-January 1793 and on 12 January both powers signed the Second Partition treaty. Prussia received Danzig, Thorn, and ›Great Poland‹, the region around Poznan. Russia gained the western Ukraine and Belorussia. For the first time, Austria and Russia had a common frontier, while Poland lost hers with the Turkish empire. Austria received nothing, bar the promise of support for the Bavarian Exchange.

These developments were unwelcome to the British government for both prudential and ideological reasons. Grenville told Jacobi and Stadion *in the most unequivocal terms* that Britain was against another partition, but it was clear that George III

95 Grenville to Auckland, 24 Jan. 1793, BL. Add. 58921 f. 75.
96 Cabinet Minute, 25 Jan. 1793, BL. Add. 58857 f. 86.
97 Straton to Grenville, 8, 20 Jan. 1793, PRO. FO. 7/32.

would not take *any active measures* accordingly[98]. Resources devoted to subjugating Poland could not be used against France; the Bavarian Exchange would make the future security of Belgium an even greater problem; and a ministry that sought stability in international resources and believed that it was an ethical and well as a prudential goal could not be expected to welcome the reorganisation of eastern Europe by rulers who had already shown themselves to be aggressive, unpredictable and heedless of British views. British envoys in central and eastern Europe were especially concerned about the changes. Morton Eden, who had little confidence anyway in the Prussian government, was provoked by the Second Partition to *regret that the cause of the French is so very bad and wicked as to force us into the war.* William Gardiner, who had succeeded Hailes at Warsaw, was opposed to the Partition and felt that the Scheldt issue was not being pushed sufficiently hard by the French to justify war. Eden was worried about the likely political impact in Britain, and indeed the partition was treated at the meeting between Pitt and Loughborough on 20 January 1793 as unjust and ill-timed[99].

Critics of British participation in the French Revolutionary War were to make much of the contrast between the government's acceptance of the Second Partition and its willingness to fight France, but in late January 1793 this was not a crucial issue. Poland was far distant, Prussian and Austrian support was crucially required for the defence of the United Provinces, and the doubts about policy voiced by Eden were not shared by ministers more directly involved in the crisis. The previous November Eden had suggested that it was *altogether impracticable ... to reduce France*[100]. He had glanced into the abyss, there saw death, and not felt at peace. Two months later, the chance of victory and the means to obtain it seemed little clearer, but that was not the issue. War itself seemed inevitable and necessary, even if the means by which it was to bring victory, and the definition of victory itself (other than in the vague, albeit urgent, terms of security), were obscure.

The French were to make a last effort to keep the peace. When Chauvelin was recalled on 22 January, he was informed that Maret would be sent to London to negotiate with Pitt. The following day Dumouriez wrote to Auckland from Paris suggesting a conference of the two of them, and possibly Van de Spiegel, on the Dutch frontier, that could be useful for the three powers, *à L'Humanité*, and possibly for the whole of Europe[101]. Maulde, carrying this letter, set off from Paris for The Hague on the 24th, Dumouriez left for Belgium the next day, and Maret set off for London. *When he got to Dover* [29th], *he published with great industry and ostentation that he had letters of credence from the Executive Council, and authority to propose terms of pacification*[102]. Maret did not know that Chauvelin had been expelled, but when he discovered this at Dover he decided to press on to London and to await fresh instructions there[103]. Unsure now about what he should do, Maret

98 Grenville to Morton Eden, 4 Febr. 1793, BL. Add. 34447 f. 480.
99 Eden to Auckland, 23 Nov. 1792, 22 Jan. 1793, Straton to Auckland, 22 Jan., Gardiner to Auckland, 2 Feb. 1793, BL. Add. 58920 f. 193, 34447 f. 209, 206, 413–14; MALMESBURY, (see n. 89) II, 502.
100 Eden to Auckland, 23 Nov. 1792, BL. Add. 58920 f. 193.
101 Dumouriez to Auckland, 23 Jan. 1793, BL. Add. 34447 f. 230.
102 Burges to Auckland, 2 Feb. 1793, BL. Add. f. 402.
103 Maret to Lebrun, 29 Jan. 1793, AE. CP. Ang. 586 f. 298.

simply informed the Foreign Office that he was *charged ... with the care of the French archives and correspondence*[104]. He saw Miles who had been warned by Pitt not to act as a go-between. Nevertheless, on the 31st Maret reported that Pitt and Grenville were willing to see him. He added that the execution of Louis XVI had led to the success of the government's anti-French hate campaign, that the *populace* sought and demanded war, that for fear of attack he could not leave the embassy, but that the City merchants and the gentry wanted peace. As so often with French envoys, Maret discerned a government divided into two parties, the party *purely royalist*, which sought a war of counter-revolution and did not think of anything else, and a group essentially composed of Pitt that feared the financial consequences. Maret also argued that Pitt knew that he lacked the knowledge necessary to be a war minister, that the death of Louis XVI had hit his influence in the Council, that the current armaments were less than those of 1790 and 1791, that the government press was not hostile to his mission, that the ministry was disposed to listen to Maret and to receive Dumouriez's approach, and that he, Maret, sought either his recall or instructions[105].

Maret was certainly misled by Miles. The government ordered him to leave Britain at once on 4 February, by which date he had not received fresh instructions. Grenville explained the expulsion by reference to the French embargo on British shipping, and to the speculations in public funds caused by rumours arising from Maret's presence[106]. It was not until two days later that the ministry learnt of what was, according to the less than reliable Miles, Maret's offer, namely the return of French conquests and negotiations with Dumouriez[107]. There had been no opportunity to find out exactly what he was willing to propose: no informal negotiations had taken place.

Meanwhile, on 27 January Maulde had given Auckland Dumouriez's letter and had ensured the envoy that the general wanted to make peace. Auckland was sceptical – *I have too little faith in his powers, or in my own talents, to have any sanguine hope of such results, even if the conference should not be obviated by existing circumstances*[108] – but willing to negotiate. Delayed by poor weather in the North Sea, his letters did not reach London until 2 February. Burges was sceptical and certain that war would break out. He argued that Dumouriez, like Maret, had left Paris before he could know that Chauvelin had been expelled,

> *The knowledge of this latter circumstance must have convinced the French rulers, that the flimsy kind of negotiation they had been carrying on with us was at an end; and it is therefore reasonable to suppose, that the whole arrangement they had made with Dumouriez, for the purpose of bringing you to a conference, and by that means gaining time for the accomplishment of their design upon Holland, must have been changed.*

Though his interpretation of French intentions is open to question, Burges was correct in his assumption that Chauvelin's expulsion had changed matters. He added the news that France had declared an embargo on British, Dutch, Prussian and

104 Burges to Auckland, 2 Feb. 1793, BL. Add. 34447 f. 402.
105 Maret to Lebrun, 31 Jan. 1793, AE. CP. Ang. 586 f. 344–7.
106 Grenville to Auckland, 4 Feb. 1793, BL. Add. 34447 f. 428.
107 Miles Corresp., II, 57–63.
108 Auckland to Grenville, 29 Jan. 1793, BL. Add. 34447 f. 333.

Russian shipping, with the exception of packet-boats, and he argued that last-minute negotiations could not serve any purpose,

All this forms, to my judgement, a mass of evidence conclusive on the question. And it in some measure consoles me for the delay, which must inevitably take place in your receiving the instructions you require on this curious request of M. Dumouriez; as I think it now evidently appears, that a conference with him could have been asked solely with a view of gaining time and of amusing us while he forwarded his preparations for an attack upon Holland[109].

Nevertheless, it was decided to respond to Dumouriez's approach and to send Auckland accordingly. It was in part a case of *amusing* the general in order to delay an attack on the United Provinces. The Dutch were not in a position to withstand a major attack, and no other allied forces were yet able to offer much help. The British were unable to respond to Nagel's demand for the immediate dispatch of troops. However, in addition, Britain, which was not yet at war with France, was being given a chance of negotiating informally with a senior French official who was not demanding recognition of the Republic.

On 4 February 1793 Auckland was sent fresh instructions. Events elsewhere had already made them redundant, but they are more than a footnote on history, for they cast light on British government thinking at this crucial moment, offering another snapshot, like the instructions of 29 December, and thus providing valuable evidence in the controversy as to British intentions and, specifically, whether the ministry sought war. Grenville argued that it was unclear that any French government, however pacific, could answer for the future conduct of the state, and that in all French explanations there had *appeared no disposition to give any real satisfaction*, but, in light of the British wish to obtain her objectives without war, Auckland was instructed to meet Dumouriez. Such a meeting would avoid the problems of recognising the Republic, while the general was sufficiently important to give rise to hopes that he might be able to give effect to any engagements that he might contact, which was certainly not true of Chauvelin, Maret and the other agents who had been sent to London. Auckland was to say that no negotiation could take place until the embargo on British shipping ceased, that it was best to have just one channel for negotiations, that he was authorised to hear any suggestions Dumouriez might have and that the papers which had passed between Grenville and Chauvelin were to be the basis of the British position. The end of the war was seen as the best security against the renewal of unwelcome French moves. France must disavow her offensive decrees and settle with Austria, Prussia and Sardinia on such terms as they might reasonably expect. As long as French conduct was acceptable, Britain would not begin hostilities while negotiations lasted, but would continue her preparations[110].

On the next day, Grenville wrote to Morton Eden, who had been appointed to Vienna in order to seek better relations there. The Austrians were to be told of Dumouriez's approach and to be given assurances that the British government wanted it to lead to a general peace on terms Austria might expect. If France refused terms an alliance against her was to be proposed and Britain might be able to support

109 Burges to Auckland, 2 Feb. 1793, BL. Add. 34447 f. 402–4.
110 Grenville to Auckland, 4 Feb. 1793, BL. Add. 34447 f. 426–37.

indemnification for Austria and Prussia[111]. Thus, relations with France were to be placed in, and secured by, the context of a general policy that centred on winning the support of the major Continental powers. The isolationism that had characterised British policy in the last months of peace and in the first months of the French Revolutionary war was to give way to a new system. Yet, this system was understandably less than fully thought out. It was already clear that Austria, Prussia and Russia had interests of their own to pursue. It was also unlikely that the total victory required to bring France to the *status quo ante revolution terms* outlined by the British would be secured readily. Failing that, it was not obvious how Britain was to ensure that her putative allies served her interests.

On 5 February 1793 Grenville sent Auckland a private letter that threw considerable light on his instructions of the 4th. He was pessimistic about the possibility that Dumouriez's approach would lead to anything, but, nevertheless, felt it necessary to respond *for the advantage which a week or two may give to Holland*. As throughout most of the first decade of the Pitt ministry, the key to British policy was to be sought in the Low Countries; as, more particularly, since mid-November 1792 the key was the immediate needs of the defence of the Dutch. Grenville suggested that the approach might have been designed to embarrass the British government domestically, a suggestion that was evidence of crisis paranoia, the knowledge of French attempts to inspire discontent and sensitivity to the domestic situation. The problems posed by revolutionary diplomacy were revealed in Grenville's comment that,

> *the facility of assertion which prevails among all those now employed by France gives them much advantage in all verbal communications, especially with our extreme delicacy in not disclosing ... things which we have engaged to keep secret ... a man ought to have Parliament quite present to his mind to feel the full force of all that might be said on this subject*[112].

The ministry's concern about parliamentary attitudes had been revealed a month earlier when an unprecedented idea had been advanced by Grenville: *laying before a Secret Committee of the two Houses* (very small in number) *some particulars of the designs which have been in agitation*. Auckland was asked accordingly to provide material and told that it would *be very useful in the view of embarking the nation heartily in the support of a war, if unavoidable*[113]. It is unlikely that the British reply to Dumouriez's approach could have led to anything bar abortive discussions. The political atmosphere in Paris was not conducive to an abandonment of ideals, statements and conquests. Though some politicans were worried about the prospect of expanding the war, there is no sign that they were strong enough to force through the concessions demanded by Britain. Influential speakers in the Convention were convinced that Britain was weak, that the people, especially in Ireland and Scotland, would support France and the British war-effort would collapse under the weight of internal divisions and strain, as much as thanks to French efforts. These were the themes of Kersaint and Brissot. Moderates and moderation were at bay in Paris[114].

111 Grenville to Eden, 5 Feb. 1793, PRO. FO. 64/27, BL. Add. 34447 f. 474–80.
112 Grenville to Auckland, 5 Feb. 1793, BL. Add. 34447 f. 483, 58921 f. 87–8.
113 Grenville to Auckland, 1 Jan. 1793, BL. Add. 58921 f. 38.
114 Archives Parlementaires, 56, 110–17, 57, 16–25, 58, 112–23.

The expelled Chauvelin was received in this atmosphere on 29 January and the response was furious. The Eden treaty (the Anglo-French trade treaty of 1786) was annulled, an embargo was placed on British shipping and it was agreed that Dumouriez would be ordered to attack the Dutch. On the 31st the Executive Council decided that this attack would be mounted and the Patriots were told to incite risings. The Maret and Dumouriez peace initiatives were therefore superseded: all these decisions were taken before they could report to Paris. The process culminated on 1 February when the National Convention decided unanimously to declare war on Britain and the United Provinces. The British people were also to be asked to rise by an address composed by, among others, Tom Paine. The following day Lebrun recalled Maret. He claimed that Chauvelin's expulsion, planned British military preparations and British steps against French shipping had left no doubt of British intentions. Lebrun argued further that, having tried unsuccessfully all means of conciliation with Britain, it was clear that Dumouriez would not succeed, and that only French military success would lead the British government to appreciate the justice of her cause[115]. The news of the Convention's declaration of war reached London on 7 February 1793. George III found the news

highly agreeable ... as the mode adopted seems well calculated to rouze such a spirit on this country that I trust will curb the insolence of those despots and be a means of restoring some degree of order to that unprincipled country, whose aim at present is to destroy the foundations of every civilized state[116].

Dundas had already sent instructions to the Governor of St. Helena to detain any French ship that might call there, and had persuaded Nagel to send similar orders to the Governor of Cape Town[117]. The world war that had begun was to place immense strains on British society and yet leave Britain as the most powerful state in the world.

The causes of the Anglo-French conflict touched off a major controversy and the issue has subsequently attracted a reasonable measure of historical attention. The controversy of the time was so acute because the issue was politically crucial. The war came at once to dominate British politics; indeed relations with France had played a crucial role in the crisis of the Whigs that had become so marked since 1791. This was a crisis of divison, loss of direction, and uncertainty that led those who were unhappy with either Fox's determination to maintain opposition to the government during the international crisis or his reluctance to condemn the direction of the Revolution to look increasingly with Pitt. Some were willing to join the government, more were ready to support it or at least not to oppose it, but, whatever the decisions of individuals, they helped to weaken and fragment the Whigs. There were other causes of the crisis. The failure of the Fox-North ministry, defeat in two successive general elections (1784, 1790), the prevailing success of the Pitt government, and the obvious absence of royal backing, had all caused disappointment and

115 Lebrun to Maret, 2 Feb. 1793, AE. CP. Ang. 586 f. 378–9.
116 George III to Grenville, 9 Feb. 1793, BL. Add. 58857 f. 87.
117 Grenville to Auckland, 8 Feb. 1793, BL. Add. 58921 f. 97.

lowered morale in Whig ranks from 1784 on, and the deflation of hopes raised by George III's illness in 1788–9 was especially serious[118].

The war with Revolutionary France completed the division in Whig ranks and the conflict's place in domestic politics helped to make it contentious. There was controversy even before the news of the French declaration reached London. On 5 February 1793 the »Morning Chronicle« claimed that war threatened national prosperity and the consequent reduction of the National Debt,

We might, by an open and cordial conduct, have dictated almost any conditions to France; – we might have made this country the emporium of the world ... it required only plain sense, candour and integrity, to have obtained it. But ... we have suffered ourselves to be cajoled by a set of vehement and malignant spirits, who having rank prejudices to gratify or having tasted the fruits of former wars, pursued only the gratifications of their passions, and did not disdain the jesuitical plan of obtaining their purposes through popular delirium.

The article, anonymous in the fashion of the period, did offer one interesting suggestion. A reduction of the National Debt, it claimed, would give Britain such a pre-eminence over other nations that *hardly any stroke of adverse fortune* could have affected it, an instance of the contemporary argument for the economic dominance of international relations. Nevertheless, the general feature of this, as of most other articles, was its unspecific nature, and its failure to allow for the ambiguous nature of developments, the problems of diplomacy and the halting progress of negotiations. This was also true of the bulk of the pamphlet debate which began rapidly. The barrister John Bowles rushed out his »Real Grounds of the Present War with France« (1793), an appeal for public support for the war. French gains were seen as a threat to a balance of power necessary for peace and tranquillity. Revolutionary principles, especially the decree of 19 November 1792, were a threat to all international order. France had sought negotiations only in order to lull the British government and to make war unpopular. The defence of religion was seen as a crucial theme by many pro-government writers and was central to a large number of sermons. »The Letter of ... Fox to the Electors of Westminster Anatomized« (1793) saw the Christian religion and civilization as under threat[119].

These arguments were difficult to counter, not least because Foxite writers did not wish to, and certainly did not wish to be seen to, praise the Revolution. Indeed criticism of the government was crippled by the limited appeal of France, Republicanism and atheism, as, earlier, Jacobite propaganda had been harmed by France, autocracy and Catholicism. Rather than defending France, it was necessary to criticise government policy and this was difficult to do in a fashion that had a popular

118 L. G. Mitchell, Charles James Fox and the Disintegration of the Whig Party, Oxford 1971. Recent biographies of Charles, later Earl Grey, by John Derry and E. A. Smith enable the crisis to be considered from the perspective of a rising Whig politician.

119 Scholarly discussion of the polemical debate in this period has concentrated on the response to the Revolution, rather than on the implications for British foreign policy and the moves that led to war. The literature is vast. Valuable recent works include J. E. Cookson, The Friends of Peace: Anti-War Liberalism in England 1793–1815, Cambridge 1982; M. Butler, Burke, Paine, Godwin and the Revolution Controversy, Cambridge, 1984; T. P. Schofield, Conservative political thought in Britain in response to the French Revolution, in: Historical Journal 29 (1986) 601–22; G. Claeys, The French Revolution and British political thought, in: History of Political Thought 11 (1990) 59–80.

resonance. Fox's »Letter ... to the ... Electors of ... Westminster«, written in January 1793, criticised the government for not negotiating seriously with France and argued that this course alone would provide public justification for war, as it would then be possible to establish how far the French were willing to satisfy the British. This stress on an avowed negotiation was placed in a context of public politics by Fox. He argued that, although the right to declare war was a royal prerogative, the right to grant or to withhold the means to pay for it was a *privilege of the people* through their parliamentary representatives. Furthermore, the people had to support the burden of the war. Therefore, Fox argued, it was reasonable that they should be informed of the purposes of the struggle, so that, if dissatisfied, they could petition Parliament for a change in policy. Fox also focused on the hypocrisy of the government. Poland was to provide an obvious basis for such a charge, but Fox pointed out that Britain had had an envoy at Versailles when Corsica was *enslaved*, envoys at the courts of the partitioning powers at the time of the First Partition, and diplomatic representation of the courts of Algiers and Morocco, whose standards scarcely conformed to what was generally judged acceptable. Therefore it was wrong to have withdrawn Gower. This pragmatic argument was joined by another blunter one, namely that France could not be conquered.

The last point was also taken up by the prominent Liverpool doctor and opponent of the slave trade, James Currie, who in June 1793 published »*A Letter, Commercial and Political ... to ... Pitt*« under the pseudonym of Jasper Wilson. Currie traced the conflict to Pillnitz, argued that Britain should have remained neutral and prosperous, and claimed that in the winter of 1792–3 there had been an opportunity for Britain to restore peace to Europe. Currie saw this as lost because the ›*alarmists*‹, inspired by Edmund Burke, had taken the nation out of Pitt's hands, and driven by fears of French sedition, had pressed for war. He argued further that one part of the cabinet ... was warmly and decidedly for it from the first.

Currie's mixture of prudential and ideological arguments was taken up by other Foxite writers. The lawyer Thomas Erskine argued in his »Considerations on the French War« (1794) that Britain could not trust her allies, repeated the charges of hypocrisy over Poland, contrasted Pitt's position over Ochakov with his current lack of policy in eastern Europe, claimed that the government was fighting ›for the divine right of Kings‹ and, more interestingly offered an account of how the war, if successful, might lead to a situation that was more threatening for Britain. France was seen as the only power that could seriously resist the future efforts of Russia and Austria *at almost universal empire*. If France was beaten, her victors would fall out over the terms, launching Britain into a new war that would threaten the total subversion of the balance of power. Three years later Erskine argued that it was pointless to fight so that Austria should regain Antwerp and Ostend from France, as Austria might soon be Britain's enemy, France her ally[120].

Erskine's argument was an intelligent one. Very little thought had been given to the future European order. If Britain was in part fighting for the balance of power, it was not clear that the defeat of France would restore it. If she sought a collective

120 Erskine, A View of the Causes and Consequences of the Present War with France, London 1797, p. 124.

security system, it was not clear how her allies were to be persuaded to avoid directing this to their own aggrandisement. Indemnifications could lead to fresh partitions. Such problems were avoided in ministerial pamphlets such as John Bowles' »Two Letters ...« (1796), with their stress on the present threat from France and their theme of Britain attacked.

Scholarly discussion since that period has focused on the questions of whether the war was inevitable, and if so, why, and of where responsibility for the conflict rested. A number of different arguments have been advanced, some claiming that ›diplomatic‹ causes were responsible for the war, but others seeking domestic causes. These have been found on both sides and full play has been made of conspiracy theories, a process helped by contemporary charges and counter-charges. It has been argued for example that Pitt sought war in order to split the Whigs, a groundless charge as the Whigs were weak anyway and had been divided by their response to Revolution[121].

The mutual antipathy of the two peoples and powers was an important factor in increasing and sustaining tension. Contemporary discussion of the causes of the conflict raised this point. John Gifford cited Fox's speeches against the Eden treaty and argued that an *antigallican spirit* was always seen as an honourable characteristic of a British mind. John Bowles similarly saw it as innate, crucial to British prosperity and security[122]. Yet the most recent scholarly consideration of the outbreak of war supports the ›conventional view‹ that it was concern for the Low Countries that led to war. The notion of it being an ideological war is dismissed, and it is suggested that governmental fear of French subversion led to hostility to France, but not war. Blanning also argues that the fate of the Low Countries was decisive for the French[123].

Blanning's argument can be questioned. It is clear that the Low Countries provided the occasion for war, and, it is always important to examine closely the actual steps by which conflict broke out. It is equally clear that the British government had revealed a marked disinclination to become involved in the case of counter-revolution in the spring of 1792, and this seems to lend substance to claims that it was not motivated by ideological considerations. Indeed, the chronology of confrontation points directly to that opposite conclusion.

Yet, Blanning separates British governmental fear and resentment of French support for subversion rather than the French pursuit of ›a forward policy‹ too readily[124]; while his accurate stress on the affects of mutual miscalculations that led each side to overestimate its own strength and the problems of its rival is somewhat vitiated by his failure to consider the extent to which ideological issues were also responsible for the failure to negotiate a compromise. Fear, as much, if not more than miscalculation, was crucial, and this fear, on the British side, derived from a distrust

121 Henry, 3rd Lord HOLLAND, Memoirs of the Whig Party during My Time, 2 vols., London 1852, p. 13; W. T. LAPRADE, England and the French Revolution, Baltimore 1909, pp. 184–5.

122 GIFFORD, A Letter to the Hon. Thomas Erskine, 6th ed., London 1797, pp. 158–60, 177;, A Second Letter to the Hon. Thomas Erskine, 4th. ed., London 1797, p. 35; BOWLES, French Aggression, Proved from Mr. Erskine's »View of the Causes of the War«, 2nd ed., London 1797, p. 76.

123 T. C. W. BLANNING, The Origins of the French Revolutionary Wars, London 1986, pp. 158–9 and works cited there.

124 BLANNING (see n. 122) p. 159.

that arose from the perception of the French government as being unwilling to accept limits to its ambitions and revolutionary pretensions. Blanning's emphasis on misunderstanding, on ›the mutual miscalculation of their power relationship‹ is not only too schematic; it also fails to appreciate that the British ministry was well aware of the strength of its rival. War was entered into through necessity, not as a consequence of the illusion of the ›Coppelia effect‹[125].

The points in dispute, principally the Scheldt navigation and the territorial integrity of the United Provinces, were negotiable, as preliminary discussions in the winter of 1792–3 revealed. The French, who were after all in control of Belgium, appeared less rigid, at least in so far as their agents were concerned, than Catherine II had proved over Ochakov. Given the negotiability of the issues, war can then be explained by mutual miscalculation, the Coppelia effect, war by accident, error, misjudgement and illusion. This conclusion is supported by some of the evidence, not least the professions of French agents in London and The Hague.

This was certainly the view adopted by some of the critics of the Pitt ministry, especially when they focused on the failure to keep Gower at Paris or to replace him, and the unwillingness to recognize the Republic and to continue receiving Chauvelin as an accredited envoy. Yet, it is not a view supported by the British ministerial correspondence of the period. It was not so much that, as in 1755, passion and prejudice were greater factors in the drive to war than the formal issues in dispute, but rather that for the British ministry distrust became the central issue. That distrust can be treated either as ›rational‹ or as ›ideological‹, a somewhat false counterpointing. In fact, it was both. There was a ›rational‹ assessment that the overall thrust of French policy was aggressive in cause and/or consequence, whatever the willingness of French agents to offer or suggest compromises on particular points, and also an ›ideological‹ perception of this challenge. This had two dimensions, first a rigidity in the British response to French innovations and secondly a perception of French policy as ideological in its determination to new-model international relations. The tone of French policy was different, a point brought home vividly to British diplomats by the unconventional conduct of their French counterparts – Auckland reported in June 1792, *M. de Maulde made a long visit yesterday to the Grand Pensionary, and uttered nothing but classical phrases, natural philosophy, and belles lettres*[126] – and by the manner and content of French public diplomacy, the ›megaphone‹ nature of the discussion of foreign policy in the Assembly and the Convention. In April 1792 Grenville wrote to Gower concerning a minor difference between the two powers,

You will observe that my dispatch is drawn with a view to public discussion, as I imagine that considering the present state of things in France, that can hardly be avoided however desireable it would have been[127]

125 BLANNING, see n. 122 p. 123. The quote refers to the outbreak of war the previous year, but it encapsulates Blanning's general thesis, on which see p. 28. For a different view see Black's two chapters in BLACK (see n. 70) ed., Origins of War.

126 Auckland to Grenville, 8 June 1792, BL. Add. 58920 f. 105. Three days earlier, Auckland had referred to the strange clothes Maulde wore when Auckland gave a ball and supper in honour of George III's birthday, f. 104.

127 Grenville to Gower, 6 Ap. 1792, BL. Add. 59021 f. 16.

Chauvelin shared the view, and complained that the public reading of dispatches compromised negotiations[128].

The avowed agenda of French policy was more serious. Treaties were to be recast to conform to the eternal verities of human nature, the peoples of Europe were to be given their voice, enfranchised in a new diplomatic order organised by France and supported by the bayonets of her victorious troops. This threatened Britain as much, if not more, than its immediate manifestation in the opening of the Scheldt. The threat was less concrete and less apparently immediate, but it was one that greatly concerned the British government, especially Grenville. He made it clear that it was the general thrust of French policy, their claim alone to judge the continued applicability of treaties that was central. The willingness of the French to sponsor or encourage discontent and sedition was not separable from this, not a distraction from the vital question of the Low Countries, but an indication both of the essential objectives of French policy and of the means by which they sought to effect them. Domestic sedition was thus important not only for its impact on British capability, but also as a vital sign of French intentions. The policy of French agents in this respect was a crucial source of distrust. The interception of Maulde's dispatches revealed that his protestations of good intentions towards the Dutch government did not inhibit his encouragement of sedition. They suggested that no French envoy or approach would be trusted.

Concern about the French encouragement of sedition did not begin at the close of 1792. That May Auckland had to reassure the Dutch government about radical associations in Britain, while Trevor, dining with Edward Gibbon at Lausanne, noted that his compatriot was ›more animated than usual‹, and added *Even Mr. Gibbon who in general voit assez de sang froid seems to be alarmed at the temper of the times*[129]. Such fears were mirrored within Britain, although the strength of the forces arrayed against France that summer suggested that the source of revolution would soon fall victim to the bayonets of monarchy.

This was crucial. It was not only that in late 1792 the Low Countries were threatened and British policy perforce shifted, a ›non-ideological‹ cause of conflict, but also that in late 1792 the Republic demonstrated its resilience, vitality, unpredictability and radicalism, thus lending force and focus to ›ideological‹ fears. Before this shift, the British government had been willing to negotiate with its French counterpart. In June 1792 Grenville sent a private letter to Auckland that was, like so many such letters, a crucial complement to his formal instructions,

I have given no opinion in my dispatch ... as to the propriety of our entering into any explanations with France about the views and probable conduct of the Republic. In truth I feel that it is a point on which the Dutch government ought to decide, and therefore have left it absolutely to them; but the inclination of my own opinion is, that it would be wise to make sure of this opening in order to take away from them every ground or pretence of uncertainty as to the dispositions of the States General ... you think me too tolerant of the ignorance and absurdity of the French Mission here, and you hint at the propriety of my making application at Paris for the removal of M. de Chauvelin, and of your forbidding M. de Maulde your house. I

128 Chauvelin to Dumouriez, 23 May 1792, AE. CP. Ang. 581 f. 49–50.

129 Auckland to Grenville, 15 May 1792, BL. Add. 58920 f. 86; Trevor to Malmesbury, 28 May 1792, Winchester CRO. Malmesbury 169.

own that my persuasion is extremely strong of the propriety of avoiding any sort of eclat on this subject. The quarrelling with France would give encouragement to the persons in both countries who wish to introduce French maxims of government amongst us, and would give to them the command and direction of that very prevailing wish for peace which I take to be the ruling sentiment both here and in Holland. And the showing pique and ill humour where it can be avoided, without meaning to go further, would certainly be undignified and hazardous[130].

Thus, France was not seen as an unsuitable partner for negotiations in the summer of 1792. This was underlined two and a half weeks later when Lord Gower, the British envoy in Paris, sent Grenville a ›secret and Private‹ letter, written in his own hand, that is of particular interest, not least because it is clear that is should not have survived: this raises the questions of how much and what has disappeared and of the extent to which the official diplomatic series, State Papers Foreign, creates a misleading impression. Gower wrote on 6 July,

I have had a long conference this morning with Mr. Bonne-Carrere, whose name I mention having promised him to desire you to burn this letter; He told me that he was sensible that in the present distracted state of this country it was not to be supposed that the British Ministry would be inclined to enter into any negotiation with this government ... that from his situation in office ... Directeur du Bureau des Affaires Etrangeres, he was able to facilitate, whenever an opportunity should offer any negotiation ...

Having consulted Pitt, Grenville replied favourably: Gower was to investigate what could be obtained[131]. This opening was, however, to be swept aside in the agitation and disruption that engulfed France from late July. The unsettled state of affairs in Paris had already been a factor in British governmental calculations about diplomatic discussions[132]. From late July negotiations seemed even more problematic, until the situation altered once more with the Prussian retreat from Valmy. This suggested that, at least for a while, the French government would be more stable, a point made by Auckland in mid November[133]. The context, however, was different from that of the early summer. Then the French government did not appear to be excessively radical, either in domestic or in international matters. By November the situation was very different and this conditioned the attitude of British government to the possibility of negotiations, their content and nature. The rapid changes in France in July–September, especially the overthrow of the monarchy and the September Massacres, all preceded the Prussian check at Valmy, but they combined to make the new republic seem dangerous, sinister, violent and radical to an extent that could not be comprehended in British terms. Developments in France also affected opposition politicians and many who had been sympathetic towards the early stages of the Revolution changed their attitude. Fox was prepared to accept events of 10 August 1792, but not the September Massacres. Press support for the Revolution waned[134].

Valmy and subsequent French triumphs were seen in this new context. The non-›ideological‹ position of the spring no longer seemed relevant. Military success and

130 Grenville to Auckland, 19 June 1792, BL. Add. 58920 f. 112–13.
131 Gower to Grenville, 6 July, Grenville to Gower, 13 July 1792, BL. Add. 59021 f. 31–3.
132 Auckland to Grenville, 26 May, Grenville to Auckland, 19 June, Grenville to Gower, 13 July, Princess of Orange to Greffier, 17 July 1792, BL. Add. 58920 f. 101, 113, 59021 f. 34, 58920 f. 140.
133 Auckland to Grenville, 15 Nov. 1792, BL. Add. 58920 f. 171.
134 Morton Eden to Auckland, 24 Oct. 1792, BL. Add. 34445 f. 138.

the radicalisation of the revolution made the French example appear more threatening. Grenville observed that *the example of success in France cannot but be very encouraging to those who wish to make similar attacks both here and in Ireland*[135]. The need to resist this success and to block its future progress seemed more important than the specific points at dispute, precisely because the republic could not be trusted. Auckland argued that the navigation of the Scheldt was not of much real importance, as the channel was not good for navigation, but that was not the point, for as Auckland pointed out, the rights of the Dutch were clear and the French had unilaterally abrogated them[136]. The changing nature of the French government and political nation ensured that French aspirations, even if similar in their anti-Austrian focus, had altered between the spring and the autumn. French victory made the revolutionary threat apparent and concrete, at the same time as the revolution itself seemed more alien, in no fashion a replica of the British and American revolutions. Politicians were forced to determine and express their views in response to a series of statements from Paris that appeared hostile and without likely end; each individual declaration was less significant than the series; they were proclaimed without any sense that conciliation and negotiation were a necessary part of any process of change.

The question of whether there was any viable alternative to war with France has to address not only the discussions in the winter of 1792–3 and the circumstances of that period, but also the possibility that peace could have been preserved in subsequent years. The latter is implausible, unless it can be suggested that Pitt's government would have been prepared to accept French hegemony in western Europe, a hegemony more powerful, insistent and threatening than that toppled in 1787. This would have been possible only if the analysis advanced in France of a feeble Britain threatened by domestic radicalism had been accurate, but it was not. French talk about their desire for all alliance with Britain was of little assistance; it was clear that opinion was divided in Paris as to whose alliance in Britain should be sought. The Republic's attitude to treaties scarcely encouraged any reliance on French assurances and, as the instability of her politics affected her diplomatic personnel and policy, conspicuously so in the case of her representation in London, it was difficult to see whose assurances were to be sought. By going to war in early 1793, Britain benefited from the enmity towards France of the other leading continental powers.

There was little basis for any Anglo-French understanding, either short- or long-term, in the winter of 1792–3 and the only possible positive solution to the discussions was the avoidance of conflict for a while. The idea of bringing about a generally-accepted agreement was even more implausible than it had been the previous summer[137]. Any Anglo-French understanding would be of an uncertain duration, might encourage radicalism in Britain, and would make it difficult to develop links with other powers or to influence their views. And yet, as Grenville appreciated, as French constancy, both domestic and international, could not be relied on, such links would be necessary, both for Dutch security and for the guaranteeing of any Anglo-French understanding. An Anglo-French agreement would have been viable in the long term only had it been part of a larger international

135 Grenville to Richmond, 11 Oct. 1792, BL. Add. 58937 f. 164.
136 Auckland to Grenville, 28 Nov. 1792, BL. Add. 58920 f. 186.
137 Grenville to Auckland, 19 June 1792, BL. Add. 58920 f. 113.

settlement, which would have had to address the Belgian question. Distrust was as important in Anglo-French relations in 1792–3 as it had been in 1787 and 1790, but in 1792–3 it was no longer a question of seeing the French threat in traditional and quantifiable terms, such as naval preparations. The unpredictability and potency of French aspirations, and the links, both real and imagined, between British radicals and France made the situation appear more threatening.

The challenge of Revolution explains why Anglo-French distrust developed into an acute situation in the winter of 1792–3. Crucial to this shift, for both the fears of the British political nation and the anxieties of its government, was French resilience in 1792 and the dramatic impact of French strength in an area believed crucial to British interests, or at least vital to keep out of the hands of France. The likely consequences of a revival in French strength had been an important theme in British discussion of French developments from 1787 onwards. The possible nature of French schemes in the Low Countries had similarly been a significant aspect of the discussion of French diplomatic plans. Their combination in late 1792 was a potent one, that would have been judged dangerous prior to the radicalisation of the Revolution. Much about the crisis, not least the dispute over the Low Countries and their transition into an Anglo-French battlefield, was far from novel.

The need to defend an ally was also far from novel. In 1747–8 the British had been concerned about the French advance into the United Provinces; much of their diplomatic effort in 1748–55 was designed to prevent its recurrence. Yet, the nature of the challenge was different. In 1792–3 it was feared that the Orangist regime would collapse in the face of domestic subversion, a subversion that was much more radical in its nature than the pro-Orange agitation sponsored by the British in 1747 and 1787. The German powers that Britain would need to turn to in order to help in the defence of the Dutch were already involved in a war with France in which ideological considerations played a considerable role.

Part of the problem in assessing the impact of the Revolution on international politics and, more specifically, on Anglo-French relations ist that there is a tendency to treat the Revolution as a unit. Yet the answer to the question of its role in giving relations an ideological slant depends in part on the specific conjuncture being considered. The challenge was, and appeared, very different in the summer and late autumn of 1792. In June 1792 Auckland could be pleased *to observe how providentially the conduct of the Prussian and Austrian Cabinets has tended to separate us with credit from any participation in their troubled concerns.* Seven months later it was ›*the hidden ways of Providence*‹ that unaccountably delayed the French from receiving the ›*justice*‹ they deserved. Auckland's language is significant. By November 1792 the French were *bloody barbarians*, and it was necessary to resist the *contagion* of *this new species of French disease.* And yet it was Auckland who had proposed the idea of negotiations with France in mid-November, including the dispatch of an agent to Paris, a move that would have had an effect on the public debate within Britain[138].

The nature of British policy ensured that her confrontation with France would

138 Auckland to Grenville, 12 June 1792, BL. Add. 58920 f. 108; Auckland to Burges, 25. Jan. 1793, Bod. BB. 31 f. 4; Auckland to Grenville, 26, 15, 16 Nov. 1792, BL. Add. 58920 f. 178–9, 171–2.

appear ›non-ideological‹. It was necessary to put policy in the best light possible for both domestic and international reasons, and this could be done by being seen to come to the defence of an ally in accordance with treaty obligations. And yet Grenville's stress on the common danger, his argument that French policy and pretensions represented a general assault on the international system, had considerable weight. It might appear hypocritical that this was not brought forward in the summer of 1792, but then France appeared a problem not a threat: the question then was whether order could be recreated in France, not whether she would overrun her neighbours.

To a considerable extent the British governmental response in late 1792 to the Revolution's advance was a reawakening of the attitudes that had led to opposition to Catherine II's desire for aggrandisement in 1790–1. There was a common thread, a stress on international order and on the need for its enforcement by and in defence of alliances. It was against this background that Trevor in November 1792 could call for a ›union‹ of European countries[139]. This lends force to the contemporary argument that the British ministry was therefore inconsistent and hypocritical over the Second Partition of Poland. That was a charge that some ministers and diplomats privately accepted the weight of, though pro-government newspapers denied the charge, the »St. James's Chronicle« stating on 16 June 1792, *The friends of sedition in this country are extremely solicitous to confound the Polish with the French Revolution. Nothing can be more unjust, as they very essentially differ both in principle and effect.*

›Ideology‹ was not simply at stake on the British side. The declarations by the French and the debates they sprang from reflected the application of philosophical idealism to international relations with all the cant and self-righteous response to the views of others that was to be anticipated. Lebrun's instructions revealed an unwillingness to accept the validity of other perceptions, and his wish to maintain peace with Britain was not accompanied by any consistent willingness to compromise with her to any serious extent. The French domestic developments encouraged the move towards confrontation, by creating an institution – the National Assembly and later the Convention – and a political culture that encouraged both the public expression of specific views on foreign policy and attempts to influence policy with these. The public debate on foreign policy in France in 1791–3 had a similar effect to that within Britain in 1739 and 1755: it encouraged those ministers and politicians who wished to fight and made others hesitant about expressing their opposition. Having failed to keep Prussia out of the opposing camp earlier in 1792, the French were set to repeat their failure with Britain. Here Blanning's Coppelia effect played its role, but so also did the appeal of a new ideology and its impact on the negotiating positions of the French. In addition, Blanning's Coppelia effect with its stress on the mutual miscalculation of strength can be matched by another, more potent one, that emphasises the extent to which both countries, or at least their governments and political elites, seemed more distinct and ›extreme‹ in their ideologies. Alongside reports of radicalism in Britain, French agents stressed the hostility of George III, the bulk of his ministers and most of the elite. In turn, the British were given full details of the gory and inquisitorial nature of the new republic, culminating in the trial of the

139 Trevor to Grenville, – Nov. 1792, BL. Add. 59025 f. 22–3.

king. St. Helens claimed in January 1793 that it would be *extremely difficult even to name the actual French government without giving it some appellation which would be either too honourable for its members to wear, or too coarse for His Majesty to use*[140].

The massacres and other atrocities and violent acts served an important function in that they provided the specificity, the concrete examples that could apparently make events more comprehensible, that newspapers liked in their reports, and which form so obvious a contrast to the very general nature of much comment. Under a local byline, the »Chelmsford Chronicle« of 21 September 1792 informed its readers *such great advocates are the French for levelling system, that they cannot, nor will suffer any one to appear in the nation above a common many; an English gentleman, well known in the county of Essex, being one day at Paris with his usual attendant servants, he attempted to ride in his phaeton* [carriage] *through the streets.* The account of how he was nearly hung as a consquence may have been more meaningful to some readers than Burke's diatribes.

Concern about French developments was not urgent while France seemed weak, but the revival in her power changed the situation totally and fused traditional political concerns with a new distrust and an apparent volatility that both stemmed from ideological considerations. Fox and Whig papers, such as the »Morning Chronicle«, were not able to carry the bulk of Whig opinion with them over France, as they had done during the Ochakov crisis. This was partly because in the latter the ministry had ignored traditional assumptions about the nature of British foreign policy, but more generally because the latter crisis was simply a political one in which Whigs such as Portland and Fitzwilliam could oppose government policy without, as over France, worrying about repercussions in a tense social situation and about ideological consequences. Then, foreign policy had been sealed and separate, a source of and field for political debate, but one that did not relate to questions about the nature of British society. In 1792, the situation was very different, a return to the period when the external French challenge was matched by concern over the intentions of the Stuarts whether on the throne or, as from 1688, claimants to it. The conflation of the threat posed by the traditional enemy with a sense that British society and religion were under challenge was potent. The language used was accordingly rhetorical. In May 1792 Trevor urged Malmesbury to *rally to the standard of the Constitution.* Two months later the Earl of Carlisle explained to Fox his support for *a stronger government ... the want of which all moderate men, friends and supporters of the Administration are ready to admit ... the adding that strenght ... is required of us all as a conscientious discharge of a public duty*[141]. The combination of national enmity, a widely-based desire for the maintenance of social stability and a strong religious conviction that deplored revolutionary irreligion, was a strong one and helped to sustain Britain through the years of defeat that lay ahead. Nobody on either side anticipated a conflict that would last, with only brief intervals, until 1815.

140 St. Helens to Grenville, 26 Jan. 1793, BL. Add. 59022 f. 48.

141 Trevor to Harris, 12 May 1792, Winchester, Malmesbury 169; Carlisle to Fox, 23 July 1792, BL. Add. 47568 f. 277.