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THE LIFE AND WRITINGS  
OF  
TURGOT

COMPTROLLER-GENERAL OF FRANCE 1774-6

EDITED FOR ENGLISH READERS

BY

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infamies, they would give to bad men free course to become permanently masters to oppress and pillage mankind. It becomes our duty then, to brave them.<sup>1</sup>

*To Dr. Richard Price.*<sup>2</sup>

ON THE FUTURE OF AMERICA.

[This letter is peculiarly interesting for being the last writing of Turgot of any considerable length and importance that remains to us. Two years' retirement from office, the cold neglect of him by the king and his former colleagues, his disappointed hopes of seeing France reformed, had not chilled the warmth of his sympathies in every effort made for the world's progress. The letter is even more interesting for giving the views on the future of America held by a cultured and prominent man in 1778, before the termination of the war, and thus before the constitution of the Republic. Within the scope of more than a century it is not surprising that some of his predictions in the letter have been disproved by events; it is surprising how many of them have been confirmed. In this place it may be proper to allude to the position he took on the question of the American struggle for independence, as far as France was concerned. The question was before the French Cabinet at the beginning of 1776. A Memorial was submitted to the king by Vergennes, the Foreign Minister, giving his views on the best policy to be adopted. It was communicated to Turgot, with a request to have his own views on the matters discussed. These he gives in his own Memorial to the king of April 6, 1776: 'Sur la Manière dont

<sup>1</sup> *Nouv. Biog. gén.* xiii. 934.

<sup>2</sup> Price (Richard), D.D. Born February 23, 1723, died March 19, 1791. Son of an English Dissenting minister. From 1743 to 1756 was tutor, companion, and chaplain in a wealthy private family named Streathfield. In 1757 became minister of an Independent congregation at Newington Green, London. Next year published his *Review of Questions, &c., in Morals*, which at once established for him a high reputation. Admitted to the Royal Society in 1765. In 1776 appeared his *Observations, &c., on the War with America*, of which sixty thousand copies were sold in a few months. The American Congress invited him to reside in the United States and to superintend the establishment of their financial policy, but he declined. Lord Shelburne, in his short administration of 1782, appointed him one of his private secretaries. His works on questions of the time, in morals, political economy, and finance, were numerous, and in all of them he proved himself a sagacious thinker and a constant friend of liberty in every sphere of action.

la France et l'Espagne devraient envisager les Suites de la Querelle entre la Grande-Bretagne et ses Colonies.' It is one of his longest State Papers.<sup>1</sup> The conclusion drawn in it coincided with the decision in favour of neutrality of Vergennes himself at that period. 'My views,' says Turgot, 'are exactly the same as those of M. de Vergennes on the necessity of rejecting every plan of aggression on our part. . . . I believe it essential to precipitate nothing.' Only in certain circumstances would he advise intervention—'when we shall have reason to believe, by the conduct of England, that this power intends really to attack ourselves.' M. Tissot has put the question: 'Would Turgot's policy have been more favourable to France than the one which was adopted, and which drifted to its outlet at the Peace of 1783, when the humiliated Britannic pride conceived in consequence a resentment which was later to break out? It is perhaps useless to make the inquiry. But we must at least acknowledge it was the policy of a man prudent and pacific, who in principle admits only defensive war, and who knew how to prepare for it.'<sup>2</sup> But a reflection more serious than this may be made. It was the cost of the American war to France that still further upset her finances and led directly to her bankruptcy. In a state of bankruptcy, it was no longer gradual reform but only revolution that was possible. Since the Revolution France has never yet found her equilibrium. Her history has been a series of fresh revolutions and repeated reactions. Events have made her no wiser. She still exists under a bureaucratic tyranny, the principles of real personal liberty being scarcely understood.]

Paris, March 22, 1778.

Mr. Franklin has forwarded to me, on your part, the new edition of your 'Observations on Civil Liberty, &c.' I owe you a doubly grateful acknowledgment. 1. For your work, of which I have long known the value, and which I had read with avidity at the time of its first appearance, in spite of the onerous duties that then pressed upon me; 2. For the kindness and sincerity in which you have withdrawn the imputation of 'awkwardness' (*maladresse*) which you had mingled with the good you had said of me elsewhere in your 'Observations.' I should indeed have deserved the imputation

<sup>1</sup> *Œuvres de Turgot*, ii. 551-85.

<sup>2</sup> J. Tissot, *Turgot, sa Vie, etc.* (Paris, 1862), p. 326.

if you had had in view no other *maladresse* than that of my being unable to untwist the secret springs of the intrigues directed against me by men much more adroit in this kind of work than I am—than I shall ever be, or ever wish to be. But at first it seemed to me that you imputed to me the *maladresse* of having rudely offended the general opinion of my nation, and in this respect I believe that you did justice neither to me nor to my nation, where there is much more enlightenment than your countrymen generally suppose, and where, perhaps, it is easier to lead the public to reasonable ideas than it is with yourselves. I judge thus by the infatuation of your nation on the absurd project of subjugating America which so long endured, until the result of Burgoyne's adventure began to open its eyes. I judge thus by the spirit of monopoly and exclusion which prevails among all your political writers on commerce (I except Mr. Adam Smith and Dean Tucker), a spirit involving the very principle on which your separation from your colonies took effect. I judge thus by all your polemical writings on questions which have agitated your nation for the last twenty years, and among which, until your own appeared, I can scarcely recollect to have read one in which the real point of the question was seized.

I cannot conceive how a nation which has cultivated with so much success all the branches of natural science, should remain so completely below itself in the science the most interesting of all, that of public happiness; in a science in which the liberty of the press, which your nation alone enjoys, would give to it prodigious advantage over all the other nations of Europe. Is it national pride that has prevented you from turning these advantages to account? Is it because you are somewhat less ill than others that you have employed all your speculations to persuade yourselves that you are perfectly well? Is it the spirit of party, the desire to find a support in [uneducated] popular opinions, which has retarded your progress by inducing your politicians to treat as vain metaphysics all those speculations which



tend to establish fixed principles on the rights and the true interests of individuals and of nations? How has it happened that you are almost the first among your men of letters who has advanced just notions of liberty and who has exposed the falseness of the idea, again and again pronounced by almost all public writers, that liberty is secured if men are only subject to *laws*—as if a man oppressed by an unjust law could be free? This would not be true, even supposing all the laws were the work of the assembled nation; for beyond all, the individual has also his rights, and the nation cannot deprive him of them, except by violence and by an illegitimate use of the general power. Although you have, indeed, yourself dwelt upon this truth, perhaps it still merits from you a fuller development, considering the little attention that has been given to it, even by the most zealous advocates of liberty.

Again, it is a strange thing that in England it should not be held as a common truth that one nation has never any right to govern another nation; that such a government can have no other foundation than physical force, which is also the foundation of brigandage and of tyranny; that the tyranny of a people is of all tyrannies the most cruel and the most intolerable, and the one which leaves the fewest resources to the oppressed nation; for after all a despot is limited by his own interest, he is checked by conscience or by public opinion, but a multitude [in a fit of ascendancy] never calculates, is checked by no conscience, and awards to itself glory while it more deserves disgrace.

Events are, for the English nation, a terrible commentary on your book. For some months they have rushed on with an accelerated rapidity. The end is reached in respect to America. She is independent now for ever. Will she be free and happy? Is this new people, placed so advantageously to give to the world the example of a constitution by which man may enjoy all his rights, freely exercise all his faculties, to be governed only by nature, reason, and justice?—will this people be able to form such a constitution?

Will they be able to establish it on permanent foundations, and to ward off all the causes of division and of corruption which can undermine it, little by little, and destroy it?

I confess that I am not pleased with the constitutions that have been drawn out by the different American States up to this time. You reproach with reason that of Pennsylvania for the religious oath exacted from members of the representative body. The case is even worse in other States; there are several which exact, by oath, specified belief in certain dogmas. I observe in a great many instances an imitation, without any real necessity, of the usages of England. Instead of radiating all the authorities to one centre, that of the nation, different bodies have been established, a body of representatives, a council, a governor, just because England has a House of Commons, a higher chamber, and a king. They think of balancing the different powers; as if this equilibrium of forces, which was believed to be necessary to balance the great preponderance of royalty, could be of any use in republics founded on the equality of all the citizens, and as if the establishment of so many different bodies would not be a source of so many divisions! In wishing to prevent chimerical dangers, they have created real ones. It was desirable to have nothing to fear from the clergy; they have united them under their banner of a common proscription. By excluding them from the right of eligibility [to the representative body], they have made of them a body by themselves, a body foreign to the State. Why should a citizen, who has the same interests as others in the common defence of liberty and its possessions, be excluded from contributing to the State his enlightenment and his virtues, because he belongs to a profession which itself exacts these virtues and this enlightenment? The clergy is dangerous only when it exists as an organised body in the State, when we attribute to this body special rights and private interests, and when we attempt to have a religion established by law—as if men could have any right or any

interest in regulating the conscience of others; as if the individual man should sacrifice, for the advantages of civil society, the principles to which he believes his eternal salvation to be attached—as if a people were to be saved or to be damned *in a lot*! Wherever tolerance, that is to say the absolute neutrality of the Government in dealing with the conscience of individuals, is established, there the ecclesiastic, in the midst of the national assembly, when he is admitted, is but a citizen; he becomes an ecclesiastic only when he is excluded.

The framers of American constitutions cannot study enough to reduce to the smallest number possible the kinds of affairs of which the Government of each State should take charge; to separate the objects of legislation from those of general administration and from those of local administration, and to constitute minor local assemblies which by fulfilling the functions of Government in local matters would exclude these from the general assemblies, and remove from their members every opportunity, means, and desire of abusing an authority which should be confined to general interests, and kept free from the petty local passions which agitate people. . . .

No fixed principle is established in respect to taxation; it would seem that each province could tax itself according to its fancy, could establish personal taxes, taxes on consumption, and on importation—that is to say, would maintain an interest of its own, contrary to the interest of the other provinces.

The right to control commerce is everywhere taken for granted; exclusive bodies, or the governors, are even authorised to prohibit the exportation of certain commodities in certain circumstances. So far are people yet from realising that the law of complete freedom of all commerce is a corollary of the right of property—so deep are they still immersed in the fog of European illusions.

In the general union of the provinces with each other I do not see a coalition, a fusion of all parties, in order to



make a body one and homogeneous. It is only an aggregation of parties, always too separated, and which will always maintain a tendency to separate, by the diversity of their laws, of their manners, of their opinions, by the inequality of their actual forces, and still more by the inequality of their eventual progress. It is only a copy of the Dutch Republic, which had not to guard, like the American Republic, the possible extension of some of their provinces. The whole edifice at present rests on the false basis of a very ancient and very vulgar policy, on the prejudice that nations and provinces have an *interest*, as nations and provinces, other than the interest of the individuals composing them, which is to be free and to defend their property against invaders; that they have an interest, not in buying merchandise from the foreigner, but in compelling the foreigner to consume their productions and the works of their manufactures; an interest in having a vaster territory, in acquiring such and such a province, such an island, such a village; an interest in gaining an ascendancy over other peoples. . . . Some of these prejudices are fostered in Europe, because the ancient rivalry of nations and the ambition of princes obliged all States to hold themselves armed to defend themselves against their armed neighbours, and to regard the military force as the principal object of Government. But America has the happiness to have no enemy to fear (unless she creates a division within herself); thus she can and should appreciate at their real value those presumed interests, those subjects of discord which would threaten her liberty. By the sacred principle of the freedom of commerce, regarded as a consequence of the right of property, all the presumed interests of national commerce disappear, also the interest to possess more or less territory will vanish, by the principle that the territory belongs not to the nations but to the individual proprietors of the land [and other inhabitants]; that the question whether such a canton, such a village ought to belong to such a province, to such a State, ought not to be decided by the presumed interest of that province



or that State, but by the interest of the inhabitants of that canton or village themselves.

I imagine that the Americans are yet far from feeling the force of these truths to the degree necessary to insure the happiness of their posterity. I do not blame their leaders. They had to provide for the necessity of the moment by a Union, such as it is, against a present and formidable enemy; there was no time to think of correcting the vices of constitutions and deciding upon the composition of the different States. But they ought to beware of making these defects permanent. They ought to set about uniting opinions and interests, and placing them under uniform principles in all the provinces. They have in this respect great obstacles to overcome. . . .

In the Southern colonies there is a too great inequality of conditions, and above all, the great number of black servants, whose slavery is incompatible with a good political constitution, and who, even when their liberty is granted, will cause embarrassment by forming almost a second nation in the same State.

In all the States there prevail prejudices, an attachment to established forms, the use and wont of certain taxes, the fear of taxes of a better kind that should be substituted for them, the vanity of those colonies which think themselves to be the most powerful, and most unhappy symptoms beginning of national pride. I believe that the Americans are bound to become great, not by war but by culture. . . . If they leave neglected the immense fields that stretch to the sea on the west, there might be formed there a mingling of their outlaws, of their scamps escaped from the severity of the law, with the savages there, from which would rise hordes of brigands to ravage America as the barbarians of the North ravaged the Roman Empire; hence another danger, the necessity of holding themselves armed on the frontier and of being there in a state of continual war. The colonies on the frontier will in consequence become more inured to war than the others, and this inequality in military strength may

become a terrible spur to ambition. The remedy for this possible inequality would be to maintain a standing military force, to which all the colonies will contribute in proportion to their population. The Americans, who harbour still all the fears that prevailed in England, dread more than anything a permanent army. They are wrong. Nothing is easier than to connect the constitution of a standing army with the militia, in such a manner as to improve the militia and to make liberty even more assured. . . . There are thus many difficulties for the future, and perhaps the secret self-interest of powerful individuals will be joined to the prejudices of the multitude to frustrate the efforts of the truly wise and good citizens.

All right-thinking men must pray that this people may arrive at all the prosperity of which they are capable. They are the hope of the human race. They should be the model. They must prove to the world, as a fact, that men can be both free and peaceful and can dispense with the trammels of all sorts which tyrants and charlatans of every costume have presumed to impose under the pretext of public safety. They must give the example of political liberty, of religious liberty, of commercial and industrial liberty. The asylum which America affords to the oppressed of all nations will console the world. The facility of profiting by it, in making escape from the consequences of bad governments, will compel the European powers to be just, and to see things as they are. The rest of the world will, by degrees, have its eyes opened to the dispersion of the illusions amidst which politicians have been cradled. But, for that end, America herself must guarantee that she will never become (as so many of your ministerial writers have preached) an image of our Europe, a mass of divided powers disputing about territories or the profits of commerce, and continually cementing the slavery of peoples by their own blood.

All enlightened men, all the friends of humanity, should at this moment contribute their lights and join their reflections to those of wise Americans, in order to concur in

the great work of their legislation. This would be well worthy of you, Sir; it has been my desire to excite your zeal; and if in this letter I have given myself up, perhaps too much, to the expression of my own ideas, this desire has been my only motive, and will excuse me, I hope, for the weariness I may have inflicted on you.

I would that the blood which has been shed and which will yet be shed in this quarrel, should not prove useless for the happiness of mankind.

Our two nations have done each other much evil, without either of them probably having gained any real profit. The increase of national debts and expenditure, and the loss of many lives, are perhaps the only result. England, it seems to me, has incurred that even more than France. If, instead of pursuing this war, you had only acted with a good grace at the beginning, if you had allowed policy to dictate then what it was inevitably compelled to do later, if national opinion had permitted your Government to have been beforehand with events, and to have consented at first to the independence of America, without making war on anyone, I firmly believe that your nation would have lost nothing by such a policy. She will lose now all that she has spent, and she will spend more; she will suffer for some time a great falling off in her commerce, and suffer many internal troubles, if she is forced to bankruptcy; and whatever happens, she must suffer a great loss in her influence abroad. But this last point is of very little importance for the real good of a people. . . . Your present misfortunes are the effect of a necessary amputation, which will make for your future happiness; it was perhaps the only means of saving you from the gangrene of luxury and corruption.

If in your political agitations you could reform your Constitution by making elections annual, by granting the right of representation in a more equal manner and one more proportionate to the interests of the represented, you would gain as much perhaps as America herself by this Revolution; for your liberty would remain to you, and your

other losses would be soon repaired with that and by that.

You can judge, Sir, by the frankness with which I have expressed myself on these delicate points, of the esteem with which you have inspired me, of the satisfaction I have in feeling that there is some resemblance between our ways of thought. I need not remind you that this confidence is intended only for yourself. I must request of you not to reply to me in detail, *by the post*, for your letter would certainly be opened at the office, and they would find me much too great a friend of liberty for a minister—even for a disgraced minister—to be !

I have the honour, &c.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *Œuvres de Turgot*, ii. 805-11.