Empires
Ancient and Modern

What two eloquent Frenchmen, Voltaire and Montesquieu, had to say in the 18th century about the forces that sustain or shatter great powers remains surprisingly relevant.

by Paul A. Rahe

Three centuries ago, an event took place that is today little remembered and even more rarely remarked upon, though it signaled the beginning of a political and ideological transformation that was arguably no less significant than the one marked in our own time by the fall of the Berlin Wall and the dismemberment of the Soviet Union. In the late spring and summer of 1704, two armies made their way from western to central Europe. The first, led by the Comte de Tallard, marshal of France, sought to upset the balance of power in Europe by establishing Louis XIV's hegemony over the Holy Roman Empire, installing a French nominee on the imperial throne, and securing the acquiescence of the Austrians, the English, the Dutch, and every other European power in a Bourbon succession to the Spanish throne. The second army, led by John Churchill, then Earl, later Duke, of Marlborough, with the assistance of Prince Eugene of Savoy, sought to preserve the existing balance of power, defend Hapsburg control of the Holy Roman Empire, and deprive Louis of his Spanish prize.

At stake, as Louis' opponents asserted and his most fervent admirers presumed, was the establishment of a universal monarchy in Europe and French dominion in the New World. At stake as well for Englishmen, Scots, Irish Protestants, and Britain's colonists in the Americas, were the supremacy of Parliament, the liberties secured by the Glorious Revolution in 1688 and 1689, the Protestant succession to the English crown, and Protestant hegemony in the British Isles and much of the New World.

The reign of Louis XIV (1643–1715) defined European splendor and scientific and cultural achievement, but the Sun King's ambition to make the Continent a French empire was never fulfilled.

There was every reason to suppose that Louis XIV would achieve the goal he seems to have sought his entire adult life. After all, on the field of the sword, France was preeminent. The French had occasionally been checked, but on no occasion in the preceding 150 years had a French army suffered a genuinely decisive defeat. Imagine the shock, then, when all of Europe learned that on August 13, 1704, the army commanded by Marlborough and Prince Eugene had captured Tallard and annihilated the French force at the Bavarian village of Blenheim.

Of course, had the Battle of Blenheim been a fluke, as everyone at first assumed, Louis' defeat on this particular occasion would not have much mattered. In the event, however, this great struggle was but the first of a series of French defeats meted out by Marlborough's armies. If we are today astonishingly ill informed about the once-famous battles fought at Ramillies, Oudenarde, Lille, and Malplaquet in the brief span from 1706 to 1709, it is because we have become accustomed to averting our gaze from the fundamental realities of political life. In the United States, despite the leading role in the world our country long ago assumed, not one history department in 20 even offers a course on the conduct and consequences of war.

Yet Winston Churchill was surely right, in his biography of Marlborough, in observing that "battles are the principal milestones in secular history," in rejecting "modern opinion," which "resents this uninspiring truth," and in criticizing historians who so "often treat the decisions in the field as incidents

More than 100,000 troops took part in a momentous battle on August 13, 1704, near the Bavarian village of Blenheim. The victorious English and Austrian armies kept Vienna from falling into French hands and checked Louis XIV's territorial ambitions on the Continent.

in the dramas of politics and diplomacy." "Great battles," he insisted, whether "won or lost, change the entire course of events, create new standards of values, new moods, new atmospheres, in armies and in nations, to which all must conform."

It would be an exaggeration to say that, in comparison with the Battle of Blenheim, the French Enlightenment and the French Revolution were little more than aftershocks. But there can be no doubt that Marlborough's stirring victories over Louis XIV's France exposed the weakness of the ancien régime, occasioned the first efforts on the part of the philosophes to rethink in radical terms the political trajectory of France, and called into question the assumptions that had for centuries underpinned foreign policy as practiced by all the great powers on the continent of Europe.

Events such as the fall of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of the Soviet Union have a way of altering the terms of public debate. Before 1989, Marxist analysis thrived in and outside the academy. After 1991, it seemed, even to many of those who had once been its ardent practitioners, hopelessly anachronistic, at best a relic of an earlier, benighted age. Something similar happened in France after 1713, when the Treaty of Utrecht brought an end to the War of the Spanish Succession. By diplomatic skill and a canny exploitation of the partisan strife that erupted between Whigs and Tories in Marlborough's England, Louis XIV had managed to preserve his kingdom intact, and even to secure the Spanish throne for his grandson. But the Sun King's great project of European domination proved unattainable. By 1715, it was perfectly clear to anyone with a discerning eye that the French monarchy was bankrupt in more ways than one.

At this point, young Frenchmen began to look elsewhere for workable models. Before the first decade of the 18th century, the French had demonstrated little serious interest in England. The Sun King is said to have once asked an English ambassador whether, in his country, there had ever been any writers of note. Of Shakespeare and Milton, Louis had apparently never heard, and he was by no means peculiar in this regard. To 17th-century Frenchmen, England was nothing more than an object of idle curiosity, if even that. Hardly anyone on the continent of Europe considered England, the English, their language, their literature, their philosophy, their institutions, their mode of conduct, their accomplishments in science, and their way of seeing the world to be proper objects for rumination.

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After Marlborough's great victories, however, attitudes changed, and young Frenchmen of penetrating intelligence thought it necessary to read about, and perhaps even visit, the country that had put together, funded, and led the coalition that had inflicted so signal a defeat on the most magnificent of their kings. The first figure of real note to subject England and the English to extended study was an ambitious young poet of bourgeois origin named François Marie Arouet, whom we know best by his pen name, Voltaire.

Voltaire spent two and a half years in England, arriving in May 1726 and departing abruptly, under suspicious, perhaps legally awkward, circumstances, in October or November 1728. His sojourn was occasioned by a scrape he had gotten into in Paris, where he insulted a member of the nobility who exacted revenge by luring the poet from a dinner party and having his minions administer a severe cudgeling to the bourgeois upstart. When word got around that Voltaire intended to challenge the noble master of his less-exalted assailants to a duel, a *lettre de cachet* (arrest warrant) was elicited from the authorities and the poet was thrown into the Bastille. He was released on condition that he leave the country, which he did forthwith.

Voltaire had been thinking of visiting England in any case. While there, he dined out, circulating among poets such as Alexander Pope, John Gay, and Jonathan Swift and hobnobbing with both Tories and Whigs. In time, he was

presented to King George I, and before he returned to France he dined with George II, then quite recently crowned.

Voltaire did not limit himself to the world of poets, politicians, and princes. He attended the funeral of Sir Isaac Newton and sought out not long thereafter the great man's niece. He made a point of calling on and becoming acquainted with the dowager Duchess of Marlborough, widow to the warrior and statesman who, 20 years before, had very nearly brought Louis XIV's France to its knees. Much of the rest of his time Voltaire devoted to mastering the English language. By the time he left Britain, he had published two essays in English, he had begun writing a play in the language, and he had penned in vibrant and compelling English prose more than half the chapters that would make up his celebrated *Letters concerning the English Nation*.

To 17th-century Frenchmen, England was nothing more than an object of idle curiosity.

This last work deserves attention. In London, it appeared in August 1733 to great acclaim, and it was reprinted in English again and again in the course of the 18th century. In April 1734, when a French version was published clandestinely in Rouen under an Amsterdam imprint with the title *Lettres philosophiques* (*Philosophical Letters*), it caused a great stir. To his English audience, Voltaire had offered an elegant satire appreciative of their virtues but by no means devoid of humor and bite. To his compatriots, he presented, by way of invidious comparison, a savage critique of the polity under which they lived. As the Marquis de Condorcet would later observe, the *Philosophical Letters* marked in France "the epoch of a revolution." It caused a "taste for English philosophy and literature to be born here." It induced "us to interest ourselves in the mores, the policy, the commercial outlook of this people."

This was all precisely as Voltaire intended. He devoted the first seven of the book's 25 letters to religion, intimating throughout that the great virtue of the English was that their devotion to Mammon rendered them decidedly lukewarm as men of faith. "Go into the Royal-Exchange in London," says Voltaire. It is a "place more venerable than many courts of justice." There, he asserts,

> you will see the representatives of all the nations assembled for the benefit of mankind. There the Jew, the Mahometan, and the Christian transact together as tho' they all profess'd the same religion, and give the name of Infidel to none but bankrupts. There the Presbyterian confides in the Anabaptist, and the Anglican depends on the Quaker's word. At the breaking up of this pacific and free assembly, some withdraw to the synagogue, and others to take a glass. This man goes and is baptiz'd in a great tub, in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost. That man has his son's foreskin cut off, whilst a set of *Hebrew* words (quite unintelligible to him) are mumbled over his child. Others retire to their churches, and then wait for the inspiration of heaven with their hats on, and all are satisfied.

Voltaire's compatriots can hardly have missed the significance for Catholic France of the lesson he drew in the end: "If one religion only were allowed in England, there would be reason to fear despotism; if there were but two, the people wou'd cut one another's throats; but as there are 30, they all live happy and in peace."

In much the same spirit, Voltaire then examined England's government, tacitly juxtaposing it with the absolute monarchy ruling his native France. Though the English liked to compare themselves to the Romans, he expressed doubts as to whether this was apt. He judged 18th-century Englishmen far superior to the pagans of ancient Rome:

> The fruit of the civil wars at Rome was slavery, and that of the troubles of England, liberty. The English are the only people upon earth who have been able to prescribe limits to the power of Kings by resisting them; and who, by a series of struggles, have at last establish'd that wise Government, where the Prince is all powerful to do good, and at the same time his hands are tied against doing wrong; where the Nobles are great without insolence and Vassals; and where the People share in the government without confusion.

Voltaire was even willing to celebrate the bourgeois character of English society. "As Trade enrich'd the Citizens in England," he contended, "so it contributed to their Freedom, and this Freedom on the other Side extended their Commerce, whence arose the Grandeur of the State." Commerce enabled a small island with little in the way of resources to marshal great fleets and finance great wars. The role the island's commercial classes played in funding the victories of Marlborough and Prince Eugene "raises a just Pride in an English Merchant, and makes him presume (not without some Reason) to compare himself to a Roman Citizen." To those among his compatriots inclined to treasure aristocratic birth, Voltaire throws down an unanswerable challenge: "I cannot say which is most useful to a Nation: a Lord, wellpowder'd, who knows exactly at what a Clock the King rises and goes to bed; and who gives himself Airs of Grandeur and State, at the same time that he is acting the Slave in the Antechamber of a Minister; or a Merchant, who enriches his Country, dispatches Orders from his Compting-House to Surat and Grand Cairo, and contributes to the Felicity of the World."

Needless to say, not everyone in France was as pleased with such bons mots as the author of the *Philosophical Letters*. Upon first reading the book, Abbé Jean-Bernard Le Blanc, who was otherwise on excellent terms with Voltaire, protested in a letter to a common acquaintance that he was "shocked by a tone of contempt which holds sway throughout. This contempt pertains equally to our nation, to our government, to our ministers, to everything that is highly respectable—in a word to religion." In his little book, Le Blanc added, Voltaire displayed "an indecency truly horrible."

François Marie Arouet, better known as Voltaire

The authorities were similarly disposed. Paris had recently been in an uproar, in part as a consequence of the ongoing struggle within French Catholicism between the Jesuits and the predestination-advocating Jansenists, and it was not yet certain that the crisis had passed. Neither party was amused by the antics of a libertine who evidenced a desire to dance in the ashes of both, and the civil magistrate was, for understandable reasons, hypersensitive to any criticism of the established order. Within a month of the book's appearance, a *lettre de cachet* was issued ordering the author's arrest. Voltaire's house and that of a friend in Rouen were searched; the printer was arrested; and the remaining copies of the book were confiscated. Soon thereafter, the *parlement* of Paris, the most prestigious judicial body in France, denounced the *Philosophical Letters* as "scandalous, contrary to religion, good morals, and the respect due to authority," and it instructed the public hangman to lacerate and burn the book with all due ceremony in the courtyard of the Palais de justice—which he did on June 10, 1734.

Voltaire had anticipated the storm. By the time it broke, he was far from Paris, in Champagne, near the border of Lorraine, safely and comfortably ensconced at the chateau of his mistress, the Marquise du Châtelet. There, in a species of exile, he was to spend the better part of the next 15 years.

As Voltaire's drama unfolded, another French visitor to England looked on with deep concern. He, too, upon his return from London, had written an ambitious book modest in its dimensions. He had arranged for its publication in Holland, and, now that Voltaire's *Philosophical Letters* had been turned over to the public hangman, he wondered whether it was wise to usher into print some of the more controversial opinions he had very much wanted to convey.

Voltaire was a bomb thrower. Charles Louis de Secondat, Baron de La Brède et de Montesquieu, was nothing of the kind. Montesquieu was trained in the law, a profession inclined to justify decisions by appealing to precedent, and he was respectful of the dictates of long experience. When called upon for advice in crises, such as the one that threatened French finances at the death of Louis XIV, he was prudent and tended

to opt for modest reform. In no way was he attracted to extremes. But he was no more a traditionalist inclined to subject reason to the dead hand of the past than was his rival Voltaire.

Montesquieu had been born in 1689, Voltaire in 1694. Both had witnessed the War of the Spanish Succession. Both had recognized the significance of Marlborough's victories. And both thought it essential to come to an understanding of the political regime that had so humiliated the nation of their birth. "Germany was made to travel in, Italy to sojourn in, . . . and France to live in," but England was made "to think in." The sentiment is attributed to Montesquieu, but the words could just as easily have been uttered by Voltaire.

Montesquieu was an aristocrat by birth. As a writer, he had no special need for the passing applause of his contemporaries. He could afford to be patient, and he generally preferred to be indirect, which is why, in the spring of 1734, as he contemplated the fate meted out to the *Philosophical Letters* and visited upon its author, his hapless friend in Rouen, and the book's printer, he chose to censor a volume he had submitted the previous summer to his publisher in Amsterdam, even though the type had already been set.

On his return to France, in 1731, after a stay of a little more than a year in England, Montesquieu had retreated to his chateau in Bordeaux and had devoted two years to writing. In this period of self-imposed solitary confinement, he composed his *Considerations on the Causes of the Greatness of the Romans and Their Decline*. There is no work of comparable length on Roman history, written before its author's time or since, that is as penetrating.

VOLTAIRE'S *PHILOSOPHICAL LETTERS*, SAID ONE OBSERVER, DISPLAYED "AN INDECENCY TRULY HORRIBLE."

It is not obvious, however, why Montesquieu thought it worth his while to write this particular book at this time. It barely mentions England, and it has neither a preface nor an introduction to inform us concerning his intentions. Moreover, while it foreshadows in some respects the themes of his most famous work, *The Spirit of Laws*, it evidences little to suggest a pertinence to public policy of the sort that was so central to the concerns that inspired the latter work. It would be tempting to conclude that in the early 1730s Montesquieu was an antiquarian and a philosophical historian, intent on establishing his reputation within the republic of letters by writing a scholarly work on a noble theme.

More can be said, however, for in the quarter of a millennium that has passed since Montesquieu's death in 1755, scholars have gradually become aware that the *Considerations* was but one of three essays that Montesquieu wrote at this time for inclusion within the pages of a single volume. The third of these, which dealt with England, Montesquieu began drafting and then, upon reflection, set aside. In 1748, he inserted in *The Spirit of Laws* a revised version of what he had drafted, giving it

the title "The Constitution of England," thereby earning for himself great fame, especially within the English-speaking world.

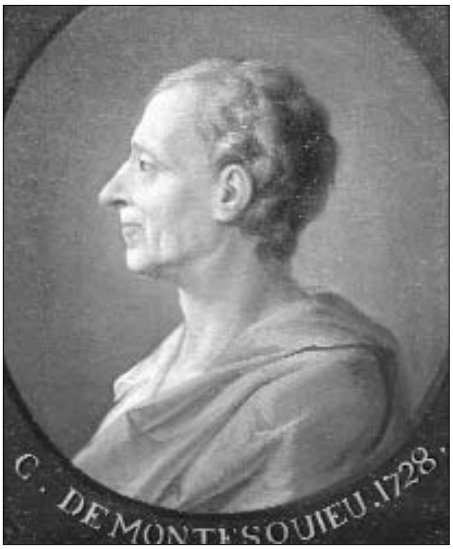
The second essay, titled *Reflections on Universal Monarchy in Europe*, Montesquieu drafted, polished, and dispatched to his Amsterdam printer in 1733 along with his treatise on the Romans. It was not until after he had received a printed copy of the two that he chose to suppress his little work on universal monarchy, for fear that it would cause him the sort of difficulties that had befallen Voltaire. Fragments of it he subsequently inserted in various places within *The Spirit of Laws*, where they passed virtually unnoticed. The original essay eventually found its way into print in 1891.

> Had the Sun King won at Blenheim, Montesquieu wrote, "nothing would have been more fatal to Europe."

These philological details have been known for some time, but to date no one has bothered to join together once again what Montesquieu put asunder. Yet it is obvious that the *Considerations*, the *Reflections*, and the "Constitution of England" form a single work and cannot properly be understood in mutual isolation. When one reassembles the original book, one realizes immediately that this work was intended as a meditation on the larger significance of Marlborough's victory on the battlefield at Blenheim. From perusing Montesquieu's ruminations one gains an unparalleled perspective on the world order emerging in his day and still regnant in our own.

"It is a question worth raising," Montesquieu writes in the first sentence of his *Reflections*, "whether, given the condition in which Europe actually subsists, it is possible for a people to maintain over other peoples an unceasing superiority, as the Romans did." For this question, Montesquieu has a ready and unprecedented answer: "a thing like this has become morally impossible."

He gives three reasons. First, "innovations in the art of war," such as the introduction of artillery and firearms, "have equalized the strength of all men and consequently that of all nations." Second, "the *ius gentium* [law of nations] has changed, and under today's laws war is conducted in such a manner that by bankruptcy it ruins above all others those who possess the greatest advantages." "In earlier times," Montesquieu explains, "one would destroy the towns that one had captured, one would sell the lands and, far more important, the inhabitants as well. . . . The sacking of a town would pay the wages of an army, and a successful campaign would enrich a conqueror. At present, we regard such barbarities with a horror no more than just, and we ruin ourselves by bankruptcy in capturing places which capitulate, which we preserve intact, and which most of the time we return."



Charles Louis de Secondat, Baron de La Brède et de Montesquieu

Third, Montesquieu argues, because of the changes dictated by technological and moral progress, in modern Europe money has become the sinews of war and the only secure foundation of national strength. Power, once more-or-less fixed, is now subject to "continual variation" in line with the trajectory of the economy of the realm. "To the extent that a state takes a greater or lesser part in commerce and the carrying trade," Montesquieu contends, "its power necessarily grows or diminishes." Under these new conditions, the vast expenditures demanded by war and the disruption it occasions for trade produce economic ruin at home, "while states which remain neutral augment their strength," and even the conquered recover from defeat.

It is not difficult to see why Montesquieu judged it imprudent to publish the *Reflections*. In the 17th chapter, with his tongue firmly in cheek, he piously denies the charge that Louis XIV had aimed at universal monarchy—and then he discusses events in a manner suggesting that this had been Louis' aim after all. "Had he succeeded," Montesquieu writes, "nothing would have been more fatal to Europe, to his subjects of old, to himself, to his family. Heaven, which knows what is really advantageous, served him better in his defeats than it would have in victories, and instead of making him the sole king of Europe, it favored him more by making him the most powerful of them all." Had Louis won the Battle of Blenheim, "the famous battle in which he met his first defeat," his "enterprise would have been quite far from achievement": The establishment of a universal monarchy would have required a further "increase in forces and a great expansion in frontiers."

BY THE 18TH CENTURY, VICTORY IN WAR OFTEN LED ONLY TO BANKRUPTCY.

What the Sun King had failed to recognize was that "Europe is nothing more than one nation composed of many," and that the rise of commerce had made his rivals for dominion his partners in trade. "France and England have need of the opulence of Poland and Muscovy," Montesquieu argues, "just as one of their provinces has need of the others, and the state that believes it will increase its power as a consequence of financial ruin visited on a neighboring state ordinarily weakens itself along with its neighbor."

Even in peacetime, Montesquieu insists, the policy pursued by the various powers in Europe is self-destructive. "If conquest on a grand scale is so

difficult, so fruitless, so dangerous," he adds, "what can one say of the malady of our own age which dictates that one maintain everywhere a number of troops disproportionate" to one's actual needs? We are not like the Romans, he notes, "who managed to disarm others in the measure to which they armed themselves." In consequence of the arms race taking place in Europe, Montesquieu concludes, "we are poor with all the wealth and commerce of the entire universe, and soon, on account of having soldiers, we shall have nothing but soldiers, and we will become like the Tartars."

When examined in light of its original companion piece, *Reflections on Universal Monarchy in Europe*, Montesquieu's *Considerations on the Causes of the Greatness of the Romans and Their Decline* reads like an extended introduction. It was, after all, the image of Roman grandeur that fired the ambition of Europe's greatest monarchs. Had it not been for Caesar's ruthless exploitation of the revolutionary potential inherent in his office as an imperator within the *imperium Romanum*, there never would have been a monarch who styled himself an emperor, a Kaiser, or a czar. In the European imagination, the idea of universal monarchy was inseparable from a longing for imperial greatness on the model of ancient Rome. To find and apply an antidote to "the malady" besetting his own age, Montesquieu had to come to grips with the attraction exerted on his contemporaries by the example of Rome.

In Montesquieu's judgment, there were two reasons for the Romans' success. To begin with, they looked on "war" as "the only art" and devoted "mind entire and all their thoughts to its perfection." In the process, they imposed on themselves burdens and a species of discipline hardly imaginable in modern times. "Never," writes Montesquieu, "has a nation made preparations for war with so much prudence and conducted it with so much audacity."

THE IMAGE OF ROMAN GRANDEUR FIRED THE AMBITION OF EUROPE'S GREATEST MONARCHS.

Of equal importance, in Montesquieu's opinion, was the fact that Roman policy was no less impressive. The Romans employed their allies to defeat the foe, then laid their allies low as well. In the midst of war, they put up with injuries of every sort, waiting for a time suited to retribution. When a people crossed them, they punished the nation, not just its leaders, and on their enemies they inflicted "evils inconceivable." As a consequence, "war was rarely launched against" the Romans, and "they always waged war" at a time and in a manner of their own choosing on those whom they regarded as most "convenient." The statecraft practiced by the Roman senate matched in cunning and ruthlessness the skill of the generals and soldiers it sent into the field.

Montesquieu's Rome may have been successful, but it was not a benefactor conferring peace and prosperity: It was a predator. It "enchained the universe," and in the process established a "universal sovereignty." But from this sovereignty came no good. Rome's far-flung subjects suffered more from its rule, Montesquieu tells us, than they had from the horrors of their original conquest. And Rome's citizens suffered as well. That they lost their liberty was by no means an accident—it was a natural consequence of their project of conquest: "The greatness of the empire destroyed the republic." Rome's grandeur produced Roman decadence. In subjecting and enchaining "the universe," in achieving "universal sovereignty," the Romans subjected and enchained themselves.

MONTESQUIEU'S ROME WAS NOT A BENEFACTOR CONFERRING PEACE AND PROSPERITY: IT WAS A PREDATOR.

"As long as Rome's dominion was restricted to Italy," Montesquieu explains, "the republic could easily be sustained." But once Rome's legions crossed the Alps and passed over the sea, and the republic was obliged to post its warriors abroad for extended periods, the ranks of the army grew through the enrollment of noncitizens, soldiers were no longer soldiers of the republic but loyal instead to the generals who paid them, and "Rome could no longer tell whether the man who headed a provincial army was the city's general or its enemy." At this point, on the horizon despotism loomed.

Montesquieu asks us to contemplate and even admire Roman grandeur: "How many wars do we see undertaken in the course of Roman history," he asks, "how much blood being shed, how many peoples destroyed, how many great actions, how many triumphs, how much policy, how much sagacity, prudence, constancy, and courage!" But, then, after giving classical Rome its due, he asks us to pause and re-examine the trajectory of the imperial republic:

> But how did this project for invading all end—a project so well formed, so well sustained, so well completed—except by appeasing the appetite for contentment of five or six monsters. . . . [The] senate had caused the disappearance of so many kings only to fall itself into the most abject enslavement to some of its most unworthy citizens, and to exterminate itself by its own judgments! One builds up one's power only to see it the better overthrown! Men work to augment their power only to see it, fallen into more fortunate hands, deployed against themselves!

Gradually, unobtrusively, as Montesquieu weans us from the enticement of Rome, our admiration gives way to horror and disgust. And gradually and unobtrusively, he thereby lays the groundwork for the argument against continental empire that he intended to advance in *Reflections on Universal Monarchy in Europe*.

We should not want to imitate the Romans, and in the *Considerations* Montesquieu shows us why. And if for some perverse reason we *wanted* to imitate the Romans, he then demonstrates in the *Reflections* that we could not succeed. After reading the first two parts of Montesquieu's original book, we are left to wonder what alternative to the policy hitherto followed by the states of Europe there might, in fact, be. At this juncture, Montesquieu originally intended to direct our attention to the polity that, as a consequence of the Glorious Revolution of 1688 and 1689, had emerged on the other side of the English Channel.

In his *Considerations*, Montesquieu set the stage for his third essay by drawing the attention of readers to what was apparently the only modern analogue to classical Rome:

> The government of England is one of the wisest in Europe, because there is a body there that examines this government continually and that continually examines itself; and such are this body's errors that they not only do not last long but are useful in arousing in the nation a spirit of vigilance.

> In a word, a free government, which is to say, a government always agitated, knows no way to sustain itself if it is not capable of self-correction by its own laws.

In the part of this third essay that he managed to draft, Montesquieu then set out to show what it was that occasioned this process of self-correction by discussing in detail the English constitution's institutionalization of a separation of powers, and by exploring the consequences of the rivalries and tensions that this separation introduces within what he elsewhere called "a republic concealed under the form of a monarchy."

When, however, he first began sketching out what came to be called "The Constitution of England," it cannot have been the French philosophe's intention to stop where, apparently, he did. Empire was, after all, the focus of the *Considerations* and the *Reflections*. To finish a work of which these two essays were to form so signal a part, Montesquieu would have had to discuss at some point the imperial policy adopted by the English. He would have had to demonstrate that, by the very nature of its polity, England was committed to a foreign policy that was viable in modern circumstances in a way that the Roman policy followed by the continental powers was not. As it happens, this is one of the issues he addressed in a chapter of *The Spirit of Laws*.

In speaking of the spirit that guides the English polity's conduct abroad, Montesquieu demonstrates that England is free from the malady that so threatens the powers on the Continent with bankruptcy and ruin. He helps us to understand why it is that, in modern times, a well-ordered Carthage, such as England, could defeat Louis XIV's ill-ordered French Rome.

Britain's vigorous economy assembled "the representatives of all the nations . . . for the benefit of mankind," Voltaire marveled. The theme was celebrated in this 1743 British painting,* Allegory of Trade, *which shows Mercury, the god of merchants and travelers, presiding over peacable traders from far-flung lands.

The chief passion of the English is their fondness for liberty, which, Montesquieu says, they "love prodigiously because this liberty is genuine." In defending their freedom, he intimates, they are inclined to be no less resolute than were the citizens of classical Rome. For liberty, this nation is prepared to "sacrifice its goods, its ease, its interests." In a crisis, it will "impose on itself imposts quite harsh, such as the most absolute prince would not dare make his subjects endure." Moreover, possessing as they do "a firm understanding of the necessity of submitting" to these taxes, the English are prepared to "pay them in the well-founded expectation of not having to pay more." The burden they actually shoulder is far heavier than the burden they feel.

ENGLAND, MONTESQUIEU WROTE, HAS ALWAYS MADE ITS POLITICAL INTERESTS GIVE WAY TO THE INTERESTS OF ITS COMMERCE.

In this chapter, Montesquieu refrains from observing, as he repeatedly does elsewhere in *The Spirit of Laws*, that the monarchies on the European continent find it well-nigh impossible to inspire the confidence that would allow them to borrow the great sums of money needed to wage war in modern times. It suffices for him pointedly to remark that, given its laws, England has little difficulty sustaining the credit required to cover the costs of war: "For the purpose of preserving its liberty," it will "borrow from its subjects; and its subjects, seeing that its credit would be lost if it was conquered, . . . have yet another motive for exerting themselves in defense of its liberty."

Though inclined, like Rome, to defend itself with a resoluteness and a vigor that beggar the imagination, England is by no means a nation bent on conquest. The reason why it is so unlike Rome in this particular is simple. Blessed with an island location and a constitution favorable to the freedom of the individual, England is a seat of "peace and liberty." Moreover, once it was liberated from the "destructive prejudices" attendant on religious fervor, England became thoroughly commercial and began to exploit to the limit the capacity of its workers to fashion from its natural resources objects of great price.

Commerce is the distinguishing feature of English life, and Montesquieu's Englishmen conduct it as other nations conduct war. This people has "a prodigious number of petty, particular interests." There are numerous ways in which it can do and receive harm. "It is apt to become sovereignly jealous and to be more distressed by the prosperity of others than to rejoice at its own." Its laws, "in other respects gentle and easy," are "so rigid with regard to commerce and the carrying trade . . . that it would seem to do business with none but enemies."

In England, commerce is dominant in every sphere. "Other nations,"

Montesquieu remarks, "have made their commercial interests give way to their political interests; this one has always made its political interests give way to the interests of its commerce." When England sends out colonies far and wide, to places such as North America, it does so "more to extend the reach of its commerce than its sphere of domination." In keeping with its aim, it is generous with such distant colonies, conferring on them "its own form of government, which brings with it prosperity, so that one can see great peoples take shape in the forests which they were sent to inhabit."

Safeguarding its liberty and its commerce does not require an island nation such as Montesquieu's England to spend vast sums on "strongholds, fortresses, and armies on land." But this nation does "have need of an army at sea to guarantee it against invasion, and its navy [is] superior to those of all the other powers, which, needing to employ their finances for war on land [do] not have enough for war at sea." England's supremacy at sea enables it to exercise "a great influence on the affairs of its neighbors." Moreover, because England does "not employ its power for conquest," neighboring states are "more inclined to seek its friendship," and they fear "its hatred more than the inconstancy of its government and its internal agitation would appear to justify." In consequence, although it is "the fate of its executive power almost always to be uneasy at home," this power is nearly always respected abroad.

> The simple fact that Great Britain withstood Napoleon proves the prescience of Voltaire and Montesquieu.

Montesquieu was prepared to concede that this England would someday fail. "As all human things have an end," he observed, "the state of which we speak will lose its liberty, it will perish. Rome, Lacedaemon, and Carthage have, indeed, perished." But Montesquieu did not think that England would perish in the foreseeable future. When an Anglo-Irish admirer wrote to express dismay at the licentiousness of his own compatriots and to ask whether Montesquieu thought that England was in any immediate danger of succumbing to corruption and of losing its liberty in the process, the philosophe responded that "in Europe the last sigh of liberty will be heaved by an Englishman," and he drew the attention of his correspondent to the intimate connection between English liberty and the independent citizenry produced and sustained by English commerce. Nowhere did Montesquieu ever suggest that England suffered from a defect comparable to that which felled Rome. Nowhere did he contend that the commercial project on which England had embarked carried within it the seeds of the nation's destruction. Nowhere did he trace a link between English grandeur and English decadence.

Voltaire and Montesquieu had a considerable impact on the thinking of their contemporaries, but in the end they failed fully to persuade their compatriots in France of the superiority of English policy. Perhaps because Voltaire's *Philosophical Letters* was so quickly and thoroughly suppressed, perhaps because the critique Montesquieu directed at imperialism on the Roman model was buried, and thereby rendered inconspicuous, within his *Spirit of Laws*, perhaps because in the 1750s and 1760s Jean-Jacques Rousseau mounted a scathing and rhetorically compelling assault on commercial society, ancient Rome retained its allure. In subsequent generations, the most influential Frenchmen, and those Germans and Russians who looked for inspiration to Paris, rather than to London, failed to take heed. Napoleon tried to establish a universal monarchy in Europe, and, when opportunity knocked, Hitler and Stalin followed suit. Even today, when Europeans appear to have abandoned war as an instrument of foreign policy and frequently speak, and sometimes act, as if Montesquieu was right in suggesting that "Europe is nothing more than one nation composed of many," in some circles the dream of imperial grandeur persists. One need only peruse the book on Napoleon published in February 2001 by Dominique de Villepin, foreign minister of France, and ponder his assertion that, at Waterloo, Europe lost the most splendid opportunity ever to come its way.

The simple fact that Great Britain withstood Napoleon's repeated attempts to extend his dominion over all of Europe proves the prescience of Voltaire and Montesquieu. Despite its diminutive size and limited resources and population, Britain was able to put together, fund, and lead the various coalitions that ultimately inflicted on this would-be Caesar a defeat even more decisive than the one suffered by Louis XIV. Moreover, in 1940, there was once again reason to recall Montesquieu's bold claim that "in Europe the last sigh of liberty will be heaved by an Englishman," for it was Montesquieu's England that stood up to Hitler, and for a time it did so almost entirely alone.

If, in the end, Great Britain did not put together, fund, and lead the coalition that eventually defeated the Nazi colossus, if it did not put together, fund, and lead the alliance that later contained, wore down, and ultimately dismembered the Soviet empire, it was because the British lost their commercial supremacy and came to be overshadowed by another, kindred people, which took shape, as Montesquieu had predicted, "in the forests" of the New World. This great people was endowed by Britain with a "form of government, which brings with it prosperity," and to this people one could aptly apply nearly every word that Voltaire and Montesquieu wrote concerning the England they visited roughly a quarter-century after Marlborough repeatedly demonstrated in battle—at Blenheim, Ramillies, Oudenarde, Lille, and Malplaquet—the superiority of modern to ancient statecraft. ❑