

Colbert's bequest to the founding fathers

by Anton Chaitkin

Yorktown, the last great battle of the American Revolution, was won by the allied forces of America and France. Lacking an industrial supply base, politically disorganized, the new American republic had nevertheless survived through years of patient and resolute struggle. To develop national power in their shaky new country, American leaders would be instructed by what the first treasury secretary called the "indefatigable endeavors" of the seventeenth-century French statesman Jean-Baptiste Colbert.

At the war's end, the Americans had not yet formed the necessary central government. Col. Alexander Hamilton had been General Washington's chief aide, coordinating military intelligence for the alliance. On April 8, 1782, Hamilton wrote an article for the *New-York Packet*, No. 5 in his series called "The Continentalist," explaining the need for a strong Union government. In this article, Hamilton set forth the economic tradition which the American leaders would use to develop their country, under the necessary energetic government:

"Trade may be said to have taken its rise in England under the auspices of Elizabeth; and its rapid progress there is in a great measure to be ascribed to the fostering care of government in that and succeeding reigns.

"From a different spirit in the government, with superior advantages, France was much later in commercial improvements, nor would her trade have been at this time in so prosperous a condition had it not been for the abilities and indefatigable endeavors of the great *Colbert*. He laid the foundation of the French commerce, and taught the way to his successors to enlarge and improve it. The establishment of the woolen manufacture, in a kingdom, where nature seemed to have denied the means, is one among many proofs, how much may be effected in favor of commerce by the attention and patronage of a wise administration. The number of useful edicts passed by Louis XIV, and since his time, in spite of frequent interruptions from the jealous enmity of Great Britain, has advanced that of France to a degree which has excited the envy and astonishment of its neighbors."

Colbert's coup d'état

It was in 1661 that Jean-Baptiste Colbert began the organization of lawful government in France. Colbert (b. 1619)

had been the coordinator of secret intelligence for Cardinal Mazarin, the French royal family's prime minister. Colbert was a student of the strategies of Cardinal Richelieu, the previous prime minister, who had built a national army of 100,000 men, while battling the feudal nobility who recognized no real French *nation* and no law above their own power. Richelieu's "Grand Design" had envisaged a world of great nations, empowered by rising culture and education.

When the prime minister, Cardinal Mazarin, died in 1661, King Louis XIV was only 23 years old, and Colbert had already served as a confidential counselor for him and his family since Louis's early childhood. Colbert took advantage of the moment to create an entirely new regime.

Immediately, he opened an investigation of the Superintendent of Finance, Nicolas Fouquet, who had long served as an intermediary for the blackmail of the international and regional bankers against the king. They might loan money to the king, according to their unpredictable conditions, but he was treated as an individual and was subjected to fraud; there was no French sovereignty.

Colbert proved the corruption and treason of Fouquet and of many bankers with whom he had worked. Fouquet's faction had actually planned a violent takeover by the aristocrats. Fouquet was imprisoned, and a *debt moratorium* was declared, freeing the young king from three or four years of debt strangulation.

Program for a great nation

Colbert waged all-out political war against the corrupt French nobility. He created a single nationwide code of law, and set up courts where nobles who robbed, oppressed, and murdered the peasants were put on trial. He conducted inquiries into the legitimacy of titles to nobility. Thousands were deemed fraudulent, and the losers joined the ranks of taxpayers. Many had to go to work, rather than simply collecting a myriad of taxes from the people of their region. Now only the government had the authority to collect taxes, and its finances were conducted in an orderly and lawful fashion.

Far from wishing to build up a vast state bureaucracy, Colbert pointed to the masses of idlers and parasites whose gradual absorption into the work force would solve France's economic problems. In a memorandum to the king dated Oct. 22, 1664, Colbert explained that the glory of the king would be established by "taking action in proportion to great objectives. . . . It is necessary to reduce the professions of your subjects as much as possible to those which can be useful to these grand designs."

"These are agriculture, merchandise [production and distribution of goods], and soldiers and sailors.

". . . [Your Majesty should] be working at the same time to diminish, gradually and insensibly, the [number of] monks and nuns. . . . The two professions which consume

a hundred thousand of your subjects uselessly and without contributing to your glory, are financiers and lawyers.

“ . . . The administration of justice . . . imposes a heavy and tyrannical yoke, using the authority of your name, on all the rest of your people.”

His “Memorandum on the Reformation of Justice,” of May 15, 1665, renewed this appeal.

France had no significant manufacturing capability. Dutch merchants, financed by the old Venetian nobility, carried most of the world’s commerce in their ships. The Dutch trade cartel bought masses of commodities, stored them in their warehouses, and then dumped them at will into French and other markets. French home industry was constantly undercut.

Colbert imposed tariffs imposed on imported goods, but lifted the tolls and taxes which the local aristocracy had imposed on road and river shipments within France, which had made Frenchmen foreigners to one another. A great canal was cut, linking the Atlantic Ocean and the Mediterranean Sea, as first proposed by Leonardo da Vinci in 1516. In supervising the construction and improvement of roads and waterways, Colbert asked his builders to make their works so good that they would “last eternally.”

Under chief engineer Sebastien Vauban, fortresses were constructed by the latest standards, defining and protecting France’s frontier. The forts called forth, for their supply, the construction of new highways and canals.

The government started factories, and pushed private entrepreneurs to take them over or to build their own. Royal grants were provided for private enterprise; credit from money-lenders, which otherwise circled endlessly through government paper speculations, was encouraged to go to the new productive enterprises. Teachers and craftsmen, Protestant and Catholic, were brought in from all of Europe to tutor France’s development, and to help manage its new factories.

Colbert was most jealous of his country’s reputation for the export market. Standards were set and enforced. On first offense, a manufacturer caught in fraud or the production of shoddy goods would be held up to ridicule; a specimen of his cloth might be “hung in effigy” in the public square. Repeated offenses were dealt with more severely.

A future for man’s mind

Colbert’s promotion of home industry, and his boasting of exports over imports of manufactures, has been mislabeled “mercantilism” by historical writers, the most notoriously fraudulent of whom was Adam Smith. Unlike Smith’s concocted “mercantilists,” Colbert sought not simply to pile up gold and silver in France, but to develop a national culture of technology and trade, which would lift France out of the mire of localist ignorance.

Colbert’s administration sponsored the construction of a merchant fleet, to carry French goods abroad, and to service

French colonies in Canada and elsewhere. To protect this commerce, the number of royal warships was expanded, from less than 20, to 250. His policy for Canada, though ultimately stymied, was similar to that of the English colonists in America, and in striking contrast to “imperialism.” He sought to populate Canada with settlers, to concentrate at first in the East in new cities and modern farms, and to intermarry with the American Indians. He recruited and sent women to marry the French soldiers already in Canada, hoping to spur rapid population growth. Above all, he opposed the merchant oligarchy in the fur trade, which deliberately kept settlers away or spread them thinly in the wilds, where they intoxicated and looted the Indians.

Science policy

In 1666 Colbert organized the French Academy of Sciences. He brought in the Dutch astronomer Christiaan Huygens as the Academy’s president. The scientists working and studying under Colbert’s sponsorship formed the core of leadership in the development of mathematics, physics and chemistry for the next three centuries.

Colbert’s protégé Denis Papin was assigned to study under Huygens, as was the young German, G.W. Leibniz. Papin and Leibniz collaborated to develop the first working steam boat; unfortunately, Papin and his model boat ended up in the hands of the British establishment, which managed to suppress steam power for another century. Huygens, the founder of the wave theory of light, taught mathematics to Leibniz, and in 1675 Leibniz completed the groundwork for his invention of calculus, the foundation of all modern mathematics.

In 1675 Leibniz demonstrated his new calculating machine to the French Academy; it could multiply, divide, and take square and cube roots. He received three orders for the machine, one for the king, one for the Royal Observatory, and one for Minister of Finance Colbert.

Leibniz’s pioneer work in the science of thermodynamics—the study of the potential of violent force to be tamed and put to use by man—was up and advanced a century later by Lazare and Sadi Carnot in the Ecole Polytechnique, which later taught engineering to the American military.

Colbert died in 1683. His program of economic, scientific and cultural development was quickly aborted. But in two decades he had turned France into a great power, and had demonstrated to the world how a nation creates its own destiny.

In 1661, an English youth named William Penn was thrown out of Oxford University, having been caught participating in an underground republican study group. Penn’s father, an admiral, sent him to France to study. There young William spent two years watching, and perhaps taking part in, Colbert’s life-and-death struggle with the aristocracy. In 1683, the year of Colbert’s death, Penn founded the City of Philadelphia.