

## CHARLES JAMES FOX



CHARLES JAMES FOX, brilliant Parliamentary orator and one of the greatest of English statesmen, a bitter opponent of Pitt and of the war with France, was born at London, Jan. 24, 1749, and died at Chiswick, a suburb of the metropolis, Sept. 13, 1806. He was the son of Henry Fox (afterward Lord Holland), and his mother, Lady Georgina, was the daughter of a grandson of Charles II. After studying at Eton and at Oxford, and travelling on the Continent for awhile, he entered Parliament in his nineteenth year, and from 1770 to 1774 held office in Lord North's ministry. Though a gamester, man of pleasure, and indolent to a degree, his impassioned oratory won him the admiration of friend and foe alike in the Commons, while his ardent enthusiasm, large humanity, and the elevation of his sentiments in his speeches and debates in the House, gained him in and out of it a loyal and fervent following. He was, however, too independent to please either Lord North or the King (George III), and so was dismissed from office in 1776, after which he joined the Whig party, and was henceforth identified with it, coming at the same time under the influence of Burke until 1791, when the friendship that had long existed between them was severed. In 1782-83, Fox was Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, in the Rockingham and Portland or coalition ministries, the latter of which was wrecked by the animosity of the King to Fox's East India Bill, and for the next twenty years, save for a brief period when he took the Foreign Secretaryship in the Granville ministry, in 1806, he remained practically out of office. During much of this period he led the opposition to the younger Pitt's ministry, and as leader displayed great political sagacity and marvellous powers of debate. Though when out of office he vigorously pled for peace with France, he was able to accomplish little toward that end while in the Granville administration; but, before he died, Fox, to his great credit, aided Wilberforce in his humane efforts to abolish the slave trade. He was in sympathy with the French Revolution, as he had been in sympathy with the cause of American independence, and he was one of the prosecutors of Warren Hastings for his misrule in India.

### ON THE REJECTION OF BONAPARTE'S OVERTURES

[Napoleon Bonaparte, having usurped the government of France, became First Consul in December, 1799; and, as an air of moderation seemed appropriate under these circumstances, he made overtures of peace to the king of England in a letter written with his own hand. Mr. Pitt, who had no belief in the permanence of his power, rejected his offers in terms which were certainly rude if not insulting.

The correspondence in question was laid before Parliament, and, on the 8d of February, 1800, a motion was made by Mr. Dundas approving of the course taken and pledging the country for a vigorous prosecution of the war. After Mr. Whitbread, Mr. Canning, and Mr. Erskine had spoken, Mr. Pitt rose and held the House in fixed attention for nearly five hours by one of the most masterly orations he ever pronounced in Parliament.

(198)

Mr. Fox then delivered the following speech in reply; and never were these two great orators brought into more direct competition, or the distinctive features of their eloquence exhibited in finer contrast.

The speech is admirably reported, and was considered by most who heard it as the ablest Mr. Fox ever made.]

MR. SPEAKER,—At so late an hour of the night I am sure you will do me the justice to believe that I do not mean to go at length into the discussion of this great question. Exhausted as the attention of the House must be, and unaccustomed as I have been of late to attend in my place, nothing but a deep sense of my duty could have induced me to trouble you at all, and particularly to request your indulgence at such an hour.

Sir, my honorable and learned friend [Mr. Erskine] has truly said that the present is a new era in the war, and the right honorable gentleman opposite to me [Mr. Pitt] feels the justice of the remark; for, by travelling back to the commencement of the war and referring again to all the topics and arguments which he has so often and so successfully urged upon the House, and by which he has drawn them on to the support of his measures, he is forced to acknowledge that at the end of a seven years' conflict we are come but to a new era in the war, at which he thinks it necessary only to press all his former arguments to induce us to persevere.

All the topics which have so often misled us—all the reasoning which has so invariably failed—all the lofty predictions which have so constantly been falsified by events—all the hopes which have amused the sanguine, and all the assurances of the distress and weakness of the enemy which have satisfied the unthinking, are again enumerated and advanced as arguments for our continuing the war. What! at the end of seven years of the most burdensome and the most calamitous struggle in which this country ever was

engaged, are we again to be amused with notions of finance and calculations of the exhausted resources of the enemy as a ground of confidence and of hope?

Gracious God! were we not told five years ago that France was not only on the brink and in the jaws of ruin, but that she was actually sunk into the gulf of bankruptcy? Were we not told, as an unanswerable argument against treating, "that she could not hold out another campaign — that nothing but peace could save her — that she wanted only time to recruit her exhausted finances — that to grant her repose was to grant her the means of again molesting this country, and that we had nothing to do but persevere for a short time, in order to save ourselves forever from the consequences of her ambition and her jacobinism?"

What! after having gone on from year to year upon assurances like these, and after having seen the repeated refutations of every prediction, are we again to be gravely and seriously assured that we have the same prospect of success on the same identical grounds?

And, without any other argument or security, are we invited, at this new era of the war, to conduct it upon principles which, if adopted and acted upon, may make it eternal? If the right honorable gentleman shall succeed in prevailing on Parliament and the country to adopt the principles which he has advanced this night, I see no possible termination to the contest. No man can see an end to it; and upon the assurances and predictions which have so uniformly failed we are called upon not merely to refuse all negotiation, but to countenance principles and views as distant from wisdom and justice as they are in their nature wild and impracticable.

I must lament, sir, in common with every genuine friend of peace, the harsh and unconciliating language which minis-

ters have held to the French, and which they have even made use of in their answer to a respectful offer of a negotiation. Such language has ever been considered as extremely unwise, and has ever been reprobated by diplomatic men.

I remember with pleasure the terms in which Lord Malmesbury, at Paris, in the year 1796, replied to expressions of this sort used by M. de la Croix. He justly said "that offensive and injurious insinuations were only calculated to throw new obstacles in the way of accommodation, and that it was not by revolting reproaches nor by reciprocal invective that a sincere wish to accomplish the great work of pacification could be evinced."

Nothing could be more proper nor more wise than this language; and such ought ever to be the tone and conduct of men entrusted with the very important task of treating with a hostile nation. Being a sincere friend to peace, I must say with Lord Malmesbury that it is not by reproaches and by invective that we can hope for a reconciliation; and I am convinced in my own mind that I speak the sense of this House, and, if not of this House, certainly of a majority of the people of this country, when I lament that any unprovoked and unnecessary recriminations should be flung out by which obstacles are put in the way of pacification. I believe it is the prevailing sentiment of the people that we ought to abstain from harsh and insulting language; and in common with them I must lament that both in the papers of Lord Grenville and this night such license has been given to invective and reproach.

For the same reason I must lament that the right honorable gentleman [Mr. Pitt] has thought proper to go at such length and with such severity of minute investigation into all the early circumstances of the war, which (whatever they

were) are nothing to the present purpose and ought not to influence the present feelings of the House. I certainly shall not follow him through the whole of this tedious detail, though I do not agree with him in many of his assertions.

I do not know what impression his narrative may make on other gentlemen; but I will tell him fairly and candidly he has not convinced me. I continue to think, and until I see better grounds for changing my opinion than any that the right honorable gentleman has this night produced, I shall continue to think, and to say plainly and explicitly "that this country was the aggressor in the war."

But with regard to Austria and Prussia—is there a man who for one moment can dispute that they were the aggressors? It will be vain for the right honorable gentleman to enter into long and plausible reasoning against the evidence of documents so clear, so decisive—so frequently, so thoroughly investigated.

The unfortunate monarch, Louis XVI, himself, as well as those who were in his confidence, has borne decisive testimony to the fact that between him and the Emperor [Leopold of Austria] there was an intimate correspondence and a perfect understanding. Do I mean by this that a positive treaty was entered into for the dismemberment of France? Certainly not. But no man can read the declarations which were made at Mantua as well as at Pilnitz, as they are given by M. Bertrand de Molville without acknowledging that this was not merely an intention, but a declaration of an intention, on the part of the great powers of Germany, to interfere in the internal affairs of France for the purpose of regulating the government against the opinion of the people.

This, though not a plan for the partition of France, was, in

the eye of reason and common sense, an aggression against France. The right honorable gentleman denies that there was such a thing as a treaty of Pilnitz. Granted. But was there not a declaration which amounted to an act of hostile aggression? The two powers, the Emperor of Germany and the King of Prussia, made a public declaration that they were determined to employ their forces in conjunction with those of the other sovereigns of Europe "to put the King of France in a situation to establish in perfect liberty the foundations of a monarchical government equally agreeable to the rights of sovereigns and the welfare of the French."

Whenever the other princes should agree to co-operate with them, "then and in that case their Majesties were determined to act promptly, and by mutual consent, with the forces necessary to obtain the end proposed by all of them. In the meantime they declared that they would give orders for their troops to be ready for actual service."

Now, I would ask gentlemen to lay their hands upon their hearts and say with candor what the true and fair construction of this declaration was—whether it was not a menace and an insult to France, since in direct terms it declared that whenever the other powers should concur they would attack France, then at peace with them, and then employed only in domestic and internal regulations?

Let us suppose the case to be that of Great Britain. Will any gentleman say that if two of the great powers should make a public declaration that they were determined to make an attack on this kingdom as soon as circumstances should favor their intention, that they only waited for this occasion, and that in the meantime they would keep their forces ready for the purpose, it would not be considered by the Parliament and people of this country as a hostile aggression? And is

there any Englishman in existence who is such a friend to peace as to say that the nation could retain its honor and dignity if it should sit down under such a menace?

I know too well what is due to the national character of England to believe that there would be two opinions on the case if thus put home to our own feelings and understandings. We must, then, respect in others the indignation which such an act would excite in ourselves; and when we see it established, on the most indisputable testimony, that both at Pilnitz and at Mantua declarations were made to this effect, it is idle to say that, as far as the Emperor and the King of Prussia were concerned, they were not the aggressors in the war.

"Oh! but the decree of the 19th of November, 1792." That, at least, the right honorable gentleman says, you must allow to be an act of aggression not only against England but against all the sovereigns of Europe.

I am not one of those, sir, who attach much interest to the general and indiscriminate provocations thrown out at random, like this resolution of the 19th of November, 1792. I do not think it necessary to the dignity of any people to notice and to apply to themselves menaces without particular allusion, which are always unwise in the power which uses them, and which it is still more unwise to treat with seriousness.

But if any such idle and general provocation to nations is given, either in insolence or in folly, by any government, it is a clear first principle that an explanation is the thing which a magnanimous nation, feeling itself aggrieved, ought to demand; and if an explanation be given which is not satisfactory it ought clearly and distinctly to say so. There should be no ambiguity, no reserve, on the occasion.

Now we all know, from documents on our table, that M. Chauvelin [the French minister] did give an explanation

of this silly decree. He declared in the name of his government that it was never meant that the French government should favor insurrections; that the decree was applicable only to those people who, after having acquired their liberty by conquest, should demand the assistance of the republic; but that France would respect, not only the independence of England, but also that of her allies with whom she was not at war.

This was the explanation of the offensive decree. "But this explanation was not satisfactory." Did you say so to M. Chauvelin? Did you tell him that you were not content with this explanation? and when you dismissed him, afterward, on the death of the King [of France], did you say that this explanation was unsatisfactory?

No. You did no such thing; and I contend that unless you demanded further explanations, and they were refused, you have no right to urge the decree of the 19th of November as an act of aggression.

In all your conferences and correspondence with M. Chauvelin did you hold out to him what terms would satisfy you? Did you give the French the power or the means of settling the misunderstanding which that decree, or any other of the points at issue, had created?

I maintain that when a nation refuses to state to another the thing which would satisfy her she shows that she is not actuated by a desire to preserve peace between them; and I aver that this was the case here. The Scheldt, for instance. You now say that the navigation of the Scheldt was one of your causes of complaint. Did you explain yourself on that subject? Did you make it one of the grounds for the dismissal of M. Chauvelin? Sir, I repeat it, that a nation to justify itself in appealing to the last solemn resort ought to prove

that it has taken every possible means, consistent with dignity, to demand the reparation and redress which would be satisfactory; and if she refuses to explain what would be satisfactory she does not do her duty or exonerate herself from the charge of being the aggressor.

The right honorable gentleman has this night, for the first time, produced a most important paper: the instructions which were given to his Majesty's minister at the court of St. Petersburg, about the end of the year 1792, to induce her imperial Majesty to join her efforts with those of his Britannic Majesty to prevent, by their joint mediation, the evils of a general war. Of this paper and of the existence of any such document I, for one, was wholly ignorant.

But I have no hesitation in saying that I entirely approve of the instructions which appear to have been given; and I am sorry to see the right honorable gentleman disposed rather to take blame to himself than credit for having written them. He thinks that he shall be subject to the imputation of having been rather too slow to apprehend the dangers with which the French Revolution was fraught than that he was forward and hasty — "Quod solum excusat, hoc solum miror in illo."<sup>1</sup>

I do not agree with him. I by no means think that he was blamable for too much confidence in the good intentions of the French. I think the tenor and composition of this paper was excellent, the instructions conveyed in it wise, and that it wanted but one essential thing to have entitled it to general approbation, namely, to have been acted upon!

The clear nature and intent of that paper I take to be that our ministers were to solicit the court of Petersburg to join with them in a declaration to the French government stating explicitly what course of conduct with respect to their foreign

<sup>1</sup> "The only thing he excuses is the only thing in him which I admire."

relations they thought necessary to the general peace and security of Europe, and what, if complied with, would have induced them to mediate for that purpose. This was a proper, wise, and legitimate course of proceeding.

Now, I ask you, sir, whether, if this paper had been communicated to Paris at the end of the year 1792 instead of Petersburg, it would not have been productive of most seasonable benefits to mankind; and, by informing the French in time of the means by which they might have secured the mediation of Great Britain, have not only avoided the rupture with this country, but have also restored general peace to the continent? The paper, sir, was excellent in its intentions; but its merit was all in the composition. It was a fine theory, which ministers did not think proper to carry into practice. It was very much like what the right honorable gentleman at the head of the Board of Control [Mr. Dundas] said some years ago of the commercial system upon which we have maintained our government in the East Indies.

"Nothing could be more moral, more beautiful, and benevolent than the instructions which were sent out to our governors; but unfortunately those instructions had been confined to the registers of the corporation; they were to be found only in the minute-books of Leadenhall Street. Their beneficial effects had never been felt by the people, for whose protection and happiness the theories were framed."

In the same manner this very commendable paper, so well digested and so likely to preserve us from the calamities of war, was never communicated to the French; never acted upon; never known to the world until this day; nay, on the contrary, at the very time that ministers had drawn up this paper, they were insulting M. Chauvelin in every way until about the 23d or 24th of January, 1793, when they finally

dismissed him without stating any one ground upon which they were willing to preserve terms with the French.

But "France," it seems, "then declared war against us; and she was the aggressor because the declaration came from her." Let us look at the circumstances of this transaction on both sides. Undoubtedly the declaration was made by them; but is a declaration the only thing which constitutes the commencement of a war? Do gentlemen recollect that, in consequence of a dispute about the commencement of war, respecting the capture of a number of ships, an article was inserted in our treaty with France by which it was positively stipulated that in future, to prevent all disputes, the act of the dismissal of a minister from either of the two courts should be held and considered as tantamount to a declaration of war?

I mention this, sir, because when we are idly employed in this retrospect of the origin of a war which has lasted so many years, instead of turning our eyes only to the contemplation of the means of putting an end to it, we seem disposed to overlook everything on our own parts, and to search only for grounds of imputation on the enemy. I almost think it an insult on the House to detain them with this sort of examination.

Why, sir, if France was the aggressor, as the right honorable gentleman says she was throughout, did not Prussia call upon us for the stipulated number of troops, according to the article of the definitive treaty of alliance subsisting between us, by which, in case that either of the contracting parties was attacked, they had a right to demand the stipulated aid? and the same thing again may be asked when we were attacked.

The right honorable gentleman might here accuse himself, indeed, of reserve; but it unfortunately happened that at the time the point was too clear on which side the aggression lay. Prussia was too sensible that the war could not entitle her to

make the demand, and that it was not a case within the scope of the defensive treaty. This is evidence worth a volume of subsequent reasoning; for if, at the time when all the facts were present to their minds, they could not take advantage of existing treaties, and that too when the courts were on the most friendly terms with one another, it will be manifest to every thinking man that they were sensible that they were not authorized to make the demand.

I really, sir, cannot think it necessary to follow the right honorable gentleman into all the minute details which he has thought proper to give us respecting the first aggression; but that Austria and Prussia were the aggressors, not a man in any country who has ever given himself the trouble to think at all on the subject can doubt. Nothing could be more hostile than their whole proceedings. Did they not declare to France that it was her internal concerns, not her external proceedings, which provoked them to confederate against her?

Look back to the proclamations with which they set out. Read the declarations which they made themselves to justify their appeal to arms. They did not pretend to fear her ambition — her conquests — her troubling her neighbors; but they accused her of new-modelling her own government. They said nothing of her aggressions abroad. They spoke only of her clubs and societies at Paris.

Sir, in all this I am not justifying the French; I am not trying to absolve them from blame either in their internal or external policy. I think, on the contrary, that their successive rulers have been as bad and as execrable, in various instances, as any of the most despotic and unprincipled governments that the world ever saw. I think it impossible, sir, that it should have been otherwise. It was not to be expected that the French, when once engaged in foreign wars, should