The Uses of Power: Lafayette and Brissot in 1792

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War! War! That is the wish of all French patriots, that is the wish of all friends of liberty spread out across the surface of Europe, who wait only for this happy diversion to attack and overthrow their tyrants.

...this war of expiation, which will renew the face of the world and plant the standard of liberty over the palaces of kings, the harems of Sultans, the chateaux of petty feudal tyrants, the temples of popes and muftis...  

In this way J. P. Brissot reported in his newspaper, *Le Patriote Français*, a speech by Anacharsis Cloots in December 1791 urging the Legislative Assembly to adopt war. Brissot's contributions as a writer, an Enlightenment thinker, and a supporter of equality for slaves have dominated recent works written about him, crowding out of consideration one of his major contributions to the history of France: his advocacy for war. Once proclaimed in the spring of 1792, war dominated Europe for almost twenty-five years. The development of the Terror is inconceivable without the background of war and the paranoia that came with it. Yet the motives of the man who from almost the first day of the Legislative Assembly pushed for war are not clearly understood. Since the First World War, only one book-length work in French or English has been published on Brissot, except for works focusing on him as an Enlightenment

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2 Brissot has been neglected as well because his most prominent role came in the short-lived Legislative Assembly, the least studied part of the French Revolution. Only one book in English is devoted to this period of the Revolution: C. J. Mitchell, *The French Legislative Assembly of 1791* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1988).
thinks or as an anti-slavery activist. How did the man who loved the peaceful Quakers in America, who declared that "republics ought to shun war," and who founded a society to emancipate slaves come to conduct a campaign to set France at war with all the monarchies of Europe?

Brissot’s campaign to lead France into war started as soon as he entered the Legislative Assembly in the fall of 1791 and continued relentlessly through the winter. In his excellent book on *The Origins of the French Revolutionary Wars*, T. C. W. Blanning attributes Brissot’s crusade to the "conviction that the Revolution was only half-completed and should be driven on to its logical conclusion. That meant the subversion of the constitution which had just been introduced." Although Blanning asserts that the followers of Brissot and the followers of Lafayette entered into a "tactical alliance" to promote war, it is important to underline how different the two groups really were. Far from wishing to subvert the constitution, Lafayette believed that war would help to maintain and strengthen it.

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5 Blanning, *Origins*, 101, asserts that the capitulation of the electors of Trier and Mainz to French demands to disband the émigré troops and the rapturous response to the king’s announcement to the Assembly on 14 December demonstrated that the "Brissotin-Fayettiste initiative had clearly backfired." But the king’s triumph took place after Narbonne had come to office and seems consistent with the desires of the Fayettistes to use the danger of war to increase the authority of the king’s government and make the constitution work.

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Brisson advocated war, even though the army was weakened by emigration, desertion, and revolts. He was not worried about waging war with an army that was poorly trained and undersupplied because he did not value expertise. In government, for example, Brissot suggested in 1790 that the Assembly choose the ministry. He was not concerned that Assembly members would make poor choices because, except for the post of finance minister, he argued, the functions of the ministers did not require special qualifications. Likewise, he did not believe that the army required special expertise. Myths about the army of the American Revolution clearly affected Brissot's thinking.

In 1786 in a response to Chastellux's book on America, Brissot criticized Chastellux's views on the military, and his statements there go a long way toward explaining the almost carefree attitude with which he helped to take France to war in 1792, only six years later. First he believed that a professional military was dangerously aristocratic and would lead to constant and unnecessary conflicts with other powers: "Those who possess this art [military expertise], will employ it to acquire fame or wealth, they consequently desire, and foment hostilities: but republics ought to shun war, and especially the spirit of it." Professional soldiers drawn from the nobility, Brissot argued, actually decreased the ability of the country to protect itself:

The military art diminishes true courage. It is to nations what fencing is to individuals. It supplies the place of true courage, but does not inspire it. But it is with courage only that republics must defend themselves from foreign attacks.

When men shall be thoroughly inspired with the love of liberty, and accustomed to exercise it in its full extent, they will possess a

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spirit no military art can subdue. The man who exclaims *I will die or be free*, has no master; the nation that repeats it, is no longer enslaved. . . . Such courage does not need the support of art or fortifications. It can support itself.9

Here Brissot expressed his belief in the decisive power of morale. Courage and patriotism, he believed, were essential, and without them, the cause was lost. Therefore, the revolutionaries looked incessantly for signs of slackened will or lack of devotion because they believed that wars were won by those qualities, not primarily by weapons or discipline.

Brisсот's point of view suggests why generals could be accused of treason and guillotined merely for not fighting enough. It also is important for understanding the emphasis on attack in revolutionary warfare. Action, not steadfastness, demonstrated courage or devotion, and advocating a defensive strategy looked like treason to many. In May 1792, Pierre Chépy, who had been named (by Brissot's influence) a commissioner to report on the condition of the army of the North, wrote back to Brissot with a criticism of Lafayette for saying "out loud that offensive war suits neither our position nor our politics." He charged that, by not gathering sufficient men for an offensive war and by building batteries and fortifications, Lafayette was bottling up the French warriors. Lafayette knew that "defensive war will exhaust the patience of our soldiers, it will produce an incalculable discouragement, will consume the public fortune, and will lead us inevitably to the paralysis and the degeneration of our social system." Chépy interpreted Lafayette's attempts to form groups of elite troops as the creation of "pretorian guards," not as important measures of organizing a professional army. Like Brissot, Chépy thought a professional

9 A Critical Examination of the Marquis de Chatellux's [sic] Travels in North America, in a letter addressed to the Marquis; principally intended as a refutation of his opinions concerning the Quakers, the negroes, the People, and Mankind. Translated from the French of J. P. Brissot de Warville (Philadelphia: Joseph James, 1788), 72.
army would become aristocratic and sap the virtue and the
courage of ordinary citizens.  

In his commentary on Chastellux in 1786 Brissot argued that
military skill could be easily acquired and that supplies were
unnecessary: "The real strength of a republic, depends upon the
insuperable attachment of its members to liberty and their rights.
Possessing this, the republican repels every attack, he soon
learns the military art, he harasses and overcomes all his
enemies." Brissot pointed to the examples of American generals,
noting that

The greatest part of them had never handled a musket; they had
been merchants, farmers, physicians, book-sellers. . . . And no
wonder that republicans so speedily acquire military skill. The
preservation of their liberties engages every faculty; a more powerful
incentive than the pay of mercenaries, or even the distinctions of
European armies.

Animated by the love of liberty, republican soldiers are more
patient, and bear fatigue better than hired troops. . . . [T]he American
soldiers, . . . always fought bravely, although ill paid, ill provided for,
ill clothed, and unaccustomed to the business. . . . [T]hey soon
learned to serve the artillery, . . . their barracks were of the best
construction, . . . they were brave, . . . . What produced these
wonders? The love of liberty. While they preserve it, they will have
nothing to fear, and the military art will be useless to them.

In a word, every individual of a republic, should be brave,
should be a soldier, by birth the defender of his country; but none
should be so by profession.  

Brissot denigrated "military art" and romanticized an
incompetent quartermaster and commissary system, asserting
that the love of liberty would more than make up for those
deficiencies. Brissot here echoed a widespread view of American
warfare that I have analyzed elsewhere as the "Myth of
Braddock's defeat," the belief that Americans, despite their lack

10 Chépy to Brissot, 17 May 1792, Archives Nationales [hereafter AN],
446 AP 9, published in Correspondance et Papiers de Brissot, ed. Claude
11 Brissot, A Critical Examination, 72-3.
of training, won against professional European armies because these citizen soldiers were fighting for a cause they believed in and had learned in the wilds of America to employ new military tactics more suited to the landscape and free men. This explanation for American success in the Revolutionary War ignores the role of the professional French army and the willingness of George Washington to employ defensive warfare to stave off defeat and create as professional an army as he could.

Offensive war became to Brissot a sign of patriotism, and defensive war became by definition treason. The attitude of Louis XVI, who had accepted the constitution because he had no choice but who did not believe it would work, strengthened this attitude. Louis intended to demonstrate the failings of the constitution by conforming strictly to its provisions but doing nothing active to advance or preserve the new institutions. When the Brissotins promoted war, they suspected that the king would not lift a finger to protect the country and would thus demonstrate his treachery. When Robespierre objected that war would give power to the very enemies of the Revolution and provide them with opportunities to betray the cause, Brissot responded that the people would know how to deal with those betrayals. In fact, he allegedly declared that he had "only one fear – that we may not be betrayed. We need great acts of treason: therein lies our salvation."
In an analysis of the beginning of the war, François Furet argued that Brissot and his allies had quickly won over the Assembly to war in a few weeks in the fall of 1791. Furet wrote, "If it is true, as I believe, that the key events played out in six weeks, then the paradox of an Assembly with a majority of rather Feuillant deputies that so quickly joined the positions to its extreme left is not easy to explain." But the Girondin triumph did not occur so quickly. Before the Assembly could be brought to support the war, the Girondins had to scuttle promising diplomatic initiatives, replace the king's loyal ministry with a war-mongering one, and bring the king himself to ask for a declaration of war. War depended as well on colossal blunders on the part of the Austrians. Most importantly the Girondins had to sell the war to the Assembly. They did so by invoking patriotism, expressing outrage at the foreign powers' threats to intervene as insults to national honor, and fomenting fear of the "Austrian committee." The essentially patriotic response of the Assembly is hard to see if we think of Feuillants as unpatriotic or as secret enemies of the Revolution, but that, of course, was not the case. Nationalism motivated them all. Fear of foreigners intervening in France or fear that a vote against war would be construed as anti-patriotic meant that fewer than ten men out of some 745 voted against the declaration of war. Brissot reported that it passed unanimously.

Why would the moderates in the Assembly trust the Brissotins who pushed through the war declaration and who dominated the ministry that would run the war? They did not

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16 Mitchell, 80, gives the number as six, though that number is in doubt. The number traditionally given is that seven men voted against the war. The importance of nationalism in the debates is stressed by Blanning, _Origins_, 107-8.

17 _Le Patriote Français_, no. 985, 21 Apr. 1792, 448.
trust them, but there were other people whom they did trust: the army and the generals. If, indeed, France was being threatened by other powers, it was important to support the army. Even if moderates mistrusted the Brissotins, Narbonne and Lafayette, whom moderates did trust, were also pushing for war, although for different reasons. Brissot recalled in his memoirs that there were still many people in the Legislative Assembly who looked to Lafayette for guidance. He remarked on the enthusiastic reception the Assembly gave Lafayette in December 1792 after the latter had been named a general of one of the three armies.  

After the completion of the constitution, Lafayette had retired to his ancestral home in Auvergne. In December 1791, only a few days after becoming minister of war, Narbonne asked Lafayette's friend Latour-Maubourg to persuade Lafayette to take command of an army. Latour-Maubourg's letter stressed how much had changed since Lafayette had earlier turned down becoming a general and had chosen his rural retreat: "Everything announced then a peaceful future, and everything now assures us of war outside and predicts it in the interior." He argued that Lafayette could not put personal considerations above the need to defend the constitution. Latour-Maubourg wrote that "War is inevitable, the Assembly is pushing for it, the people want it and many decent people think this crisis is salutary."  

Narbonne had clearly decided to use the war fever to promote the interests of the royal government. The difference between his and Brissot's advocacy of war revealed itself in several ways. He appointed Lafayette as a general and issued strict regulations for the army on 1 January 1792, which continued to be debated in the Assembly throughout the spring. Narbonne used the threat of war to strengthen and discipline the army. On 21 January, Narbonne's plan for rapidly increasing the number of troops by incorporating National Guardsmen into the army met resistance in the Assembly. Narbonne reported that the

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generals insisted that they needed a strong army to face the "disciplined soldiers" of their adversaries and that volunteers would not be ready. The "patriots" objected that the National Guards, whom they clearly trusted more than the regular army, would be weakened. The debate over this question caused so much commotion that the Assembly hall had to be cleared of people, and Narbonne threatened to resign if his plans for organizing the army were not adopted. Narbonne used the preparations for war as a way to exercise more control over the Assembly as well. He intervened so often in the proceedings of that body that Brissot complained about it. Narbonne hoped to steal the thunder of those calling for war and create an active government that was genuinely in control of events.

Lafayette saw the coming war in the same terms as Narbonne: as an opportunity to bring the army officers into line to support the constitutional system. The king's government could get control over the armed forces and use them both internally and externally to maintain order and prevent further revolution. Only when war was declared could the king constitutionally take command of the army. War would also give greater prominence to those who waged it. Lafayette and Narbonne seemed especially intent on using war to defuse the issue of the émigrés and to prevent foreigners from interfering in the internal affairs of France. In his memoirs, Lafayette drew a distinction between his devotion to the constitution and the

23 The key clauses are in Title IV of the Constitution of 1791, Of the Public Force: "7. All branches of the public force employed for the security of the State against enemies from abroad shall act under the orders of the King. 8. No body or detachment of troops of the line may act in the interior of the kingdom without a legal requisition." John Hall Stewart, A Documentary Survey of the French Revolution (New York: Macmillan, 1951), 258-9.
desires of the Lameth brothers and their group to revise the constitution in the direction of English institutions. He especially criticized them for cooperating with foreign powers to bring about these changes. Lafayette asserted that almost all the "constitutionnels" agreed with him that "salvation lay only in rallying completely and without any reservations around the constitution of '91 despite its defects, that peace should be frankly maintained if that were still possible, but that, otherwise, they should let the foreign courts take all the hatefulness of initiating [war]."  

Lafayette and his group hoped to scare off the other powers from interfering in French affairs and to rally the French to the king. He was especially enthusiastic about the decree of 14 January 1792, adopted by the Assembly unanimously and to great applause. Issued in response to news that the powers intended to convoke a "congress" to deal with France, this decree was a ringing declaration of national sovereignty. Any Frenchmen who took part in a congress to modify the French constitution or mediate "between the French nation and the rebels conspiring against it" were declared traitors and guilty of the crime of "lèze-nation." The decree concluded by asking the king to announce to the powers, in the name of the French nation, that Frenchmen would maintain the constitution in its entirety or die with it.  

Lafayette found the declaration to be in "absolute conformity with my sentiments and what I have wanted for a long time." He had it read to his troops, announcing to them "that in the French army and especially in the one that I command, there can be only faithful servants of the constitution or traitors; this assertion made more than one officer grimace." Lafayette intended to use

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this explicitly nationalist agenda to remove officers who were not loyal to the constitution.

Exploiting the nationalism of Lafayette and the members of the Assembly, Brissot argued for war by asserting that the nation had been insulted by the foreign powers. Unable to point to specific instances of overt military attack, Brissot began to employ a language reminiscent of aristocratic dueling. On 17 January he told the Assembly that the mask had finally fallen revealing the Habsburg emperor as their true enemy. The emperor should be "forced to renounce the league that he has formed against you, or you should defeat him, there is no middle way; because for a free people, ignominy is not a middle way." An open war, Brissot thought, was better than this silent war: "You should therefore provoke a satisfaction that will put an end to these expensive anxieties." Brissot demanded "satisfaction," a complete renunciation of the league against France, or France should begin an offensive war against the emperor. France needed to make people everywhere respect "the constitution and the French name. . . . Thus war is necessary; France should undertake it for her honor: she would be in effect dishonored forever, if several thousand rebels could induce her to surrender her laws." Brissot's language illustrates vividly Jay M. Smith's argument about the changing meanings of words such as "noble" and "honor." Smith writes that by eliminating the nobility, the nation had appropriated the "moral qualities once identified with the nobility. . . . The suppression of hereditary nobility announced the emergence of a patriotic culture in which French 'nobility' of character would be taken for granted, even though its relationship to 'the nobility' would not be discussed." Just as nobles and revolutionaries meant different things when they

27 Furet, "Les Girondins," 199 makes this point: Brissot presented the international situation "less as truly dangerous . . . than as insupportable to national honor."
invoked "nobility," Brissot and Lafayette meant different things when they advocated "war."

Brissot also sold the war by repeatedly printing in his newspaper, *Le Patriote Français*, that the Austrians were massing troops at the borders of France, that troop movements were reported in Vienna, and that the Austrians were gathering supplies.\(^{30}\) On 11 March his paper reported that 25,000 Prussians were marching on France: "Will we wait then for all the tyrants of Europe to be ready to attack us, before thinking of attacking them ourselves? Frenchmen! forward. . . ."\(^ {31}\) Brissot's newspaper asserted confidently that the Belgians would greet the French troops with open arms and that people everywhere under the yoke of monarchical despotism were eager to welcome the French army and adopt the new French institutions.\(^ {32}\) "The soldiers themselves long to abandon their despots and to join with you under the banners of liberty."\(^ {33}\) This would be a war of liberation. In a surprising foreshadowing of nineteenth-century nationalism, Anacharsis Cloots predicted that ethnic groups under Habsburg domination would willingly join in the war to throw off their chains. The war would be short and victorious.\(^ {34}\)

\(^{30}\) *Le Patriote Français*, no. 914, 10 Feb. 1792, 164, contains news from Strasbourg that 6,000 Austrians were marching to the frontiers of Alsace. No. 925, 22 Feb. 1792, 213, reprints an article from Strasbourg declaring that everybody knew the emperor was bringing a large army up to the frontier, that he openly supported the emigrés, and that his goal was to make the French afraid, while the enemy in the interior would work to divide the country. Only then would the emperor attack. This issue also printed a letter from Berlin on preparations for war undertaken there.

\(^{31}\) *Le Patriote Français*, no. 944, 11 Mar. 1792, 285. See also no. 955, 22 Mar. 1792, 328.

\(^{32}\) *Le Patriote Français*, no. 922, 18 Feb. 1792, 197, letter from Brussels urging the French to invade to take over munitions and get the support of the people who will be "more terrible than people think."

\(^{33}\) Dietrich, the mayor of Strasbourg, to *Le Patriote Français*, no. 872, 30 Dec, 1791, 754.

Those who advocated war had to contend with the constitutional provision that the king had to ask the Assembly to declare war. The assumption of those who wrote the constitution was that kings entered into war for their own aggrandizement and that an Assembly would need to restrain them. They now faced the opposite situation: an Assembly wanted to declare war (a war of self defense, rather than conquest, they would argue), but the king and his ministers seemed reluctant.

Fearing that the king did not really want war, the Girondins came up with ideas for getting around that obstacle. Brissot's friend Bancal des Issarts urged that the princes at Koblenz be accused of conspiracy and force be used against them immediately. Since "it is a matter of punishing a crime committed against the constitution, by Frenchmen, and not a foreign war, the National Assembly will declare that there is no reason for the king to exercise his initiating prerogative (proposition initiative) given to him by the constitution, in ordinary cases of war against foreign powers." Although he argued that they could thus avoid foreign war and civil war, his true feelings were expressed in his conclusion that, if foreign war became inevitable, the French people would fight so ardently that victory would quickly follow. The Girondins finally managed to bring the king to carry out the constitutionally prescribed duty of declaring war on 20 April 1792 only after the Assembly forced him to appoint ministers sympathetic to the Girondin policies. Lafayette, who had lobbied unsuccessfully for retaining Narbonne in office, now entered into a sort of deal with the Girondins. Dumouriez apparently assured him that the radicals would be kept in check and order would prevail. Lafayette wrote to his wife, "I asked that they show more respect to civil & religious liberty, that they work for

35 The constitution stated that a declaration of war was to be made "by a decree of the legislative body, rendered upon the formal and requisite proposal of the King, and sanctioned by him." Stewart, 246.

36 _Le Patriote Francais_, no. 888, 15 Jan. 1792, 58.
public order, in short a lot of things of that type about which you know my principles. I think that they have been adopted." He also believed he had been promised that the beginning of hostilities would be delayed until the French armies were better prepared. However, the two groups had never cooperated closely. In January 1792, Lafayette wrote to a friend, "I cannot fathom the Brissots who want war and the Antoines who want peace; . . . The fury of the Brissotins against me seems to be a bad sign for them." Writing to Brissot regarding military matters in the middle of February, Narbonne concluded his letter saying that he did not know whether he would have the right in the future to call him a friend but that he wanted to have his respect "whether we follow the same line or whether I believe I must oppose you."

Both of the main war parties took enormous risks in setting off the chaos and destruction that comes in war's wake. They made this choice deliberately; it was not forced on them by the diplomatic situation. In the twentieth century, imbued with the pacifist strain of the left wing in France, many historians seemed somewhat embarrassed to find that the heroic people of revolutionary myth had been so bellicose. They focused on Robespierre, who opposed the war because he feared putting too much power in the hands of the aristocrats, and they came to believe that the Mountain joined him in opposing the war, which could then be blamed exclusively on the Girondins. Revolutionaries at the time, however, sided with Brissot, not Robespierre. At the trial of the Girondins in 1793, Brissot was accused of fomenting war against England in 1793 when the

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37 Lafayette to his wife, 18 Apr. 1792, Cornell University Library, Lafayette Collection. See also Lafayette, Mémoires, 3:307.
39 AN, Narbonne to Brissot, 17 Feb. 1792, 446 AP 8, dossier 1.
country was not sufficiently prepared.\textsuperscript{40} Brissot was not charged with advocating war in the spring of 1792, doubtless because too many members of the Mountain had also supported that war for that to be a convenient charge. Georges Lefebvre told the story of the coming of the war as if the Austrian negotiations with the Prussians were really aimed at France.\textsuperscript{41} However, Paul Schroeder argues persuasively that Leopold's diplomatic maneuverings were intended to avoid war with France, not start it.\textsuperscript{42}

War served, then, primarily domestic political purposes. Both Lafayette and Brissot were willing to play with fire, to start a war whose consequences might be especially grave for France. Yet the motives of the two men should not be judged equal. Lafayette wanted ultimately to preserve order and a constitutional system. Brissot advocated a crusade against kings that would be bound to result in more far-reaching consequences. With a black and white view of the world, Brissot saw all kings and their allies as evil. He rejected peace and even diplomatic relations with those men whom he perceived as "enemies."\textsuperscript{43} Brissot's attitudes, then, made him more willing than Lafayette to embark on war and to justify offensive warfare.

A final piece of evidence seems the most damning indictment of Brissot's motives. It is a report found in the archives of the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs prepared in 1795 by a Russian named Mostowski who had lived in Paris from October 1792 to March 1793 when he met Brissot and other prominent political figures. Although it is not clear that the reports came directly from Brissot himself, Mostowski learned

\textsuperscript{40} AN, W292/b, no. 204, Affaire des Girondins, 5e partie, pièce 7.
of a war plan that Brissot had created at the end of 1792. Convinced that the population of France was growing quickly and that a government would have trouble maintaining order under such circumstances, especially considering how ungodernable the revolution had made the citizenry, Brissot believed it would be advantageous to conquer more territory and continue the war until the population had been reduced. Mostowski wrote that Brissot believed that "France needed a war that would last long enough to get rid of 2 million men, and calculating an annual loss of 250 to 300 thousand men, he concluded that this war should last for six or seven years during which, whether successful or not, the government would resolve solemnly not to listen to any" propositions for peace. Brissot concluded with a medical analogy: like a sick man who needs to be bled, they needed to bleed the political body.\textsuperscript{44}

This second-hand anecdote may not be trustworthy. It certainly seems to contradict Brissot's confident pronouncements that French forces would win with ease and assumes instead large losses and the sacrifice of many French people. Although it may not reflect Brissot's views accurately, it does point out the substantial dangers of embarking on war. Those were dangers to which Brissot was more than willing to subject his fellow citizens.

\textsuperscript{44} Marc Bouloiseau, "L'organisation de l'Europe selon Brissot et les Girondins, à la fin de 1792," \textit{Annales Historiques de la Révolution Française} 57 (1985): 290-4.