

More ... and Less

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More

In the past year, Paul Scofield died. Scofield was an English actor most known for his Oscar-winning portrayal of Thomas More in the 1966 movie, “A Man for All Seasons.” Scofield’s passing prompted a colleague to lend me the video of that movie, which I watched not for the first time, but for the first time in many years, and for the first time as a member of More’s profession – lawyer.

It’s a lush movie, with many atmospheric takes of fog rising from the Thames. It’s also a literally muddy movie, with lots of Thames mud, memorably on Robert Shaw’s Henry VIII as he jumps from the royal barge to pay a visit to More’s Chelsea home.

The movie was based on the popular play by Robert Bolt, who also wrote the film’s screenplay. Bolt’s preface explained that he saw More as a “hero of selfhood,” supremely successful in his society, but undone because he was unwilling to take an oath acknowledging Henry’s supremacy over the Church in England. This supremacy would enable Henry’s divorce from Catherine of Aragon, and marriage to Anne Boleyn in quest of a male heir.

Bolt was transparent and unapologetic about making an existential hero out of a Christian saint. He used the taking of an oath as the symbol of the ultimate commitment of the self, and said that

I think the paramount gift our thinkers, artists, and for all I know, our men of science, should labor to get for us is a sense of selfhood without resort to magic. Albert Camus is a writer I admire in this connection.

For Bolt's meaning of "magic" in this statement, substitute anything falling under the rubric of "religion," in the sense of duties imposed by a being greater than the self.

Throughout Bolt's play, More is confronted by utilitarianism in varying faces. Cardinal Wolsey, played by Orson Welles in his greasiest, most obese period (think of his appearance in his 1958 movie "A Touch of Evil," and add a few pounds) argues political utility. Let Henry die without an heir, and succession struggles like the War of the Roses would be repeated. Thus, "regrettable" measures must be taken. He asks More to explain why More as a member of the Privy Council, could resist those measures, "for the sake of [his] own private conscience."

More responds that "when statesmen forsake their own private conscience for the sake of their public duties ... they lead their country by a short route to chaos." More relights a candle just snuffed by Wolsey, and adds "And we shall have my prayers [for an heir] to fall back on." This meeting with Wolsey ends with More's character's nearest thing to an insult in the play. To Wolsey's line "More! You should have been a cleric!" More responds "Like yourself, Your Grace?" The stage direction indicates More is "amused."

Social utility is represented by More's friend the Duke of Norfolk, who argues that the "nobility of England" have broadly taken the oath, while More stands to lose his position "for a theory." Bolt's More then gives the manifesto of a "hero of selfhood":

What matters to me is not whether it's true or not but that I believe it to be true, or rather, not that I *believe* it, but that *I* believe it ...

Norfolk appeals then to friendship, and hears that More can't sacrifice self for affection.

Norfolk, as an aside, is portrayed by Bolt as a conventional soldier-noble, the epitome of lack of self-awareness. Bolt's play doesn't reveal that Norfolk was uncle to both Anne Boleyn and Catherine Howard, and yet managed to outlive Henry VIII.

Bolt gives More's daughter Margaret a subtler approach to More's obstinacy. She argues the oath is simply words.

Margaret: “God more regards the thoughts of the heart than the words of the mouth.” Or so you’ve always told me.

More: Yes.

Margaret: Then say the words of the oath and in your heart think otherwise.

Some of us will recognize here the useful concept of “mental reservation.” More declines, telling his daughter that “When a man takes an oath, Meg, he’s holding his own self in his own hands. Like water.”

The character who would not take an oath that would extinguish his self is undone by the perjured oath of Richard Rich. Rich was a poor scholar of ambition. More’s character had earlier in the play advised Rich to be an honest teacher rather than a politician.

Bolt has More speak to Rich’s taking of an oath. More’s lines are almost verbatim the historical record:

If I were a Man, my Lords, that had no regard to my Oath, I had had no occasion to be here at this time ... as a Criminal; and if this Oath, Mr. *Rich*, which you have taken be true, then I pray I may never see God's Face, which, were it otherwise, is an Imprecation I would not be guilty of to gain the whole World.

The account of More’s trial, which Bolt tracks, is from a collection of accounts of state trials published nearly two hundred years after More’s time. More himself, though, gave a contemporary record of his time in the tower in letters to his daughter Margaret. He stated plainly, but generally, his reason for not swearing to the oath:

[U]nto the oath that there was offered me I could not swear, without the [jeopardy] of my soul to perpetual damnation. And that if they doubted whether I did refuse the oath only for the grudge of my conscience, or for any other fantasy, I was ready therein to satisfy them by mine oath.

More’s three letters to daughter Margaret, if genuine, portray something maybe more, maybe less, than a “hero of selfhood.” To the argument that, since More didn’t condemn those who signed the oath, he must consider the subject of it open to doubt, More answered that long study had put him on the other side, and that he stood not alone,

but with “the general council of Christendom.” The council “of one realm” could not bind him “to change his conscience.”

To the argument that the king could use the same means to compel More to state his objections to the oath, that More had used as Chancellor in examining “heretics, thieves, and other malefactors,” More answered with a lawyerly distinction. In examining heretics (and More had had some burned as Chancellor) More had stood with the Pope’s power, “an undoubted thing,” “not like a thing agreed in this realm and the contrary taken for truth in other realms.” His interrogators noted the distinction carried little difference, since as heretics could be burned for their denial, he could be beheaded for his.

More again adverted to being in the general opinion -- one that transcended local law. The matter turned, not between death by beheading or burning, “but because of the difference in charge of conscience, the difference standeth between beheading and hell.”

As a personal matter, the burned heretics could well have answered the same, that the difference for them stood between burning and hell. More’s defense, as offered in these letters, lay ultimately in conformance to orthodoxy. His choice to die out of conviction to that generality, though heroically strong conviction, was not a “heroism of selfhood.” Bolt’s “man for all seasons” wasn’t a man for the 1960’s.

Less

The year 1992 saw another movie based on a play about a statesman. The playwright, Jean Claude Brisville, was here also the screenwriter. In an odd “six degrees of Robert Bolt” touch, Brisville was a friend of Albert Camus’s, so close that he claimed to have had a sort of extrasensory experience at the moment of Camus’s death.

The movie was “Le Souper”. As it is available only in French, which I don’t understand, I can give only this plot summary from the Web. The film is entirely the story of a dinner between Joseph Fouché and Charles Maurice de Talleyrand, hereinafter “Talleyrand.” The setting is Paris in 1815 after Napoleon’s defeat at Waterloo. Fouché, on the night of the dinner, was head of the provisional government formed after Napoleon fled Paris. Fouché had been Napoleon’s minister of police, and earlier, a Jacobin.

The career of his host had been more remarkable. He had been born in 1754 to a line of nobles not wealthy, and possibly not that distinguished. The Talleyrand family's supposed lineage was to the ancient counts of Perigord, whose motto was "Nothing except God." Their lineage was in fact fudged. A late Bourbon king with no reason to like the family said "They aren't 'of Perigord', they're just 'from Perigord.'"

Charles Maurice was the family's eldest living son, but the normal military career for a first son was prevented by a deformed right foot that left this Talleyrand with a lifelong limp. Modern biographers say the deformity was congenital. The family's official story was that Charles Maurice had been dropped by a wet nurse. To scandalize, Charles Maurice sometimes said that the nurse had left him unattended during a male friend's attentions, allowing a pig to eat off part of his foot.

Whatever the cause, Talleyrand's unfitness for the military led his family to pass the patrimony to a younger brother, and to commit Charles Maurice to a career in the Church. He began religious studies in Paris at sixteen, and was ordained nine years after. He later said his career as diplomat owed much to his priestly education. His memoirs of that period show that he had some empathy for the famous prayer of Saint Augustine: "O Lord, give me chastity – but not yet."

He frequented the salons of Paris and sired a son by one of his hostesses. Throughout his life, his connections with the elite women of Paris were basic to his political success.

With wit, a winning personality, and an uncle who was Archbishop of Rheims, at twenty-six he became Agent-General of the Clergy, a sort of minister of finance for the Church in France. The office collected the "gift" that the clergy paid the crown in lieu of taxes. Four years later, in 1789, he was consecrated Bishop of Autun, in Burgundy. The grant of the bishopric may have been delayed by Louis XVI's views on the young priest's morality.

When Louis convened the Estates General for the first time in centuries, the clergy of Autun chose their bishop for their representative. He was one of three hundred clergy in the body of twelve hundred. With the gifted timing that characterized all his career, he joined his fellow clergy who were going over to the commons, one day before the King was forced to merge all the estates into one. Four months later Talleyrand

moved that the financial crises that had brought on the revolution be addressed by nationalizing the assets of the clergy. Later, as president of the Assembly, he supported full citizenship for Jews. In light of the time and the place, this could not have been done out of expediency.

Talleyrand, from the ground of apostolic succession, was the most legitimate of the bishops who in 1791 consecrated bishops for the new French “Constitutional Church.” He was soon excommunicated.

About this time Talleyrand went on the first of two diplomatic missions to London. In August of 1791, the monarchy fell, and with blood flowing in the streets, Talleyrand managed to get himself sent back to England. He spent the next year at large there, associating with both fellow exiles like Madame de Stael, and politically liberal Englishmen like the Marquis of Lansdowne. It’s likely that it was at Lansdowne’s that Talleyrand befriended the utilitarian philosopher Jeremy Bentham. Of the many sayings attributed to Talleyrand, one is this about Bentham’s writings: “Everyone steals from him, but he’s still rich.”

In December of ’92, the French convention confiscated Talleyrand’s property in France. About a year later, Talleyrand learned he was about to be arrested under an English bill rather like our Homeland Security Act, and he set sail from England for America.

He spent most of his time in America around Philadelphia, the capital. He scandalized the town by keeping a black Caribbean mistress. The scandal didn’t prevent his being elected to the American Philosophical Society. When in New York City, Talleyrand was a houseguest of both Aaron Burr and Alexander Hamilton.

Beyond the cities in America, Talleyrand traveled as far as Maine and Niagara Falls. The latter trip he took in buckskin, and regarded the experience as plunge into the heart of darkness. As he put it, “One sinks lower and lower.” Talleyrand didn’t like much about America -- the climate, the food, or the people, whom he saw as crude money-grubbers. Different contemporary local accounts say that he did, and did not, speak English. This was the man, after all, who said: “Language is given to us to conceal our meaning.”

While Talleyrand was in his American exile, in France, reaction to the Terror led to the overthrow of Robespierre and the establishment of the relatively moderate five-man Directory. Through wire-pulling by friends like Madame de Stael, Talleyrand's name was struck from the list of banned émigrés. The speech in the Convention accompanying this reformation described Talleyrand's time in America as a sojourn for the contemplation of republicanism.

Talleyrand's relationship with the equally remarkable Madame de Stael would be itself worthy of a paper. When Napoleon asked Talleyrand if de Stael was a good friend, he replied that "She was such a good friend that she would throw all her friends into the water for the pleasure of fishing them out." Of Talleyrand, de Stael wrote that if his conversation cost money, she'd be destitute.

Talleyrand later explained that reputation for wit by comparing conversation to a hunt:

I only ever fire when I am within six feet, when I have a sure kill. ... I let a thousand things run by if I only have a trite reply. But I never miss the game that runs between my legs.

It was again with Madame de Stael's help that Talleyrand was named Foreign Minister by the Directory in 1797. He immediately began flattering the promising general Bonaparte. In service to the Directory, Talleyrand encouraged Napoleon's invasion of Egypt, then under the Sultan of Turkey. Talleyrand reneged on going to Constantinople to smooth things over with the Sultan.

Talleyrand was also at the center of the "XYZ affair" that we were drilled on in elementary school American history. US agents, sent to France because of French violations of the neutrality of US ships, were told by Talleyrand's agents, called "X, Y and Z" in the American press, that they could meet with Talleyrand only after payment of what the French term a "sweetener." The Americans went home, the story got out, and the inflamed press coined "Millions for defense, not one cent for tribute," a principle that Talleyrand would doubtless have rejected as a matter of principle.

Napoleon's Egyptian excursion, of course, went badly. A second coalition of European powers was formed against France. The Directory was shaky, and Talleyrand resigned in July of 1799. Four months later, Napoleon threw over the Directory, and set

himself up as First Consul. For behind-the-scenes services in the coup, Talleyrand was again Foreign Minister.

Talleyrand's association with Bonaparte led in 1801 to his own affair of sovereign, pope, and marriage. Talleyrand, a consecrated bishop, lived openly with Madame Grand, a divorced courtesan. She was a beauty who had been born in India. Her reputation is revealed in the story told of her, that when asked where she was from, she replied "Je suis d'Inde," translatable as both "I'm from India," and as "I'm a hen turkey (then slang for a foolish woman)."

Talleyrand was pressured by the First Consul to marry Grand, or put her out. Why Talleyrand chose the first is puzzling. Madame Grand was not the sort a Perigord chose as wife. Many years later he was unable to give his niece an explanation, other than to say that "You do not know how far men can go astray in the great epochs of social decomposition."

Talleyrand's attempts to get a savings clause for his marriage in Napoleon's Concordat with the Papacy delayed, and nearly derailed its negotiation. At issue was a clause declaring that clerics who had by their acts denounced that status would be considered laymen. As laymen, they could marry. One cardinal termed the proviso "Madame Grand's clause." It did not survive the canon lawyers, and Talleyrand married Madame Grand in a civil ceremony in 1802.

Talleyrand may or may not have encouraged Bonaparte to abduct the Duke d'Enghien, a Bourbon prince living in the German state of Baden, on the mistaken belief that this particular Bourbon had been plotting Napoleon's assassination. The Duke was brought to France, tried, and shot. The summary execution of the prince raised outrage and fear in noble houses throughout Europe, and ended any chance that the Consulate could reconcile with the Bourbons. Talleyrand disclaimed any responsibility, and the event is associated with the most famous mot attributed to him – one that may not be his. The seizure and murder of the duke, according to the saying, "was worse than a crime, it was a mistake."

As someone who regularly provides legal counsel to advertisers, let me here note parenthetically that the concept "worse than a crime, a mistake," has very general utility.

Talleyrand collaborated in Bonaparte's establishment of new monarchical institutions, but preferred that Napoleon settle for the traditional the title of "king" rather than "emperor." David's painting of Napoleon's coronation ceremony shows Talleyrand at the far right foreground, in full profile, distinctly smiling. In contrast to Holbein's portrait of More, which captures a personality, the portraits of Talleyrand are generic, as if done from an oral description to a police sketch-artist.

In Napoleon's new aristocracy, Talleyrand acquired a new title, Prince de Benevent, enormous wealth, by means official and otherwise, and a Renaissance chateau below the Loire, at Valencay. With wonderful aptness, Valencay, Talleyrand's resting place, enjoyed neutrality in World War II, because the Duke of Valencay was also the Duke of Sagan, in Prussia. This happy circumstance stemmed from Talleyrand's close -- one could say intimate -- relations with the Duchess of Kurland, a Baltic duchy under Prussian rule. Thanks to its neutrality, Valencay safely housed treasures from the Louvre until World War II's end. This feat of posthumously playing both sides of the fence would no doubt have pleased the Prince.

Talleyrand's vision of Europe, with Austria as useful natural enemy to Russia, and a balance of powers promoting stability and commerce, grew increasingly farther from Napoleon's visions of unrelenting conquest. Since Bonaparte was uncontrollable, Talleyrand began collaboration with Bonaparte's enemies. He gave detailed intelligence to the Austrian ambassador in Paris -- Prince Metternich. Napoleon nonetheless crushed a combined Russian-Austrian force at Austerlitz, and rejected Talleyrand's argument for a generous peace with Austria. Talleyrand softened the peace treaty as much as he could, and Vienna paid 60,000 florins to "a person whose name His Majesty [Emperor Franz] alone knows."

Napoleon's 1807 invasion of Portugal and Spain deepened the rift with his Foreign Minister. Here, as with the Egyptian invasion, contemporaries differ on how much Talleyrand supported or opposed the Iberian campaign. Talleyrand resigned as foreign minister, but remained Napoleon's Grand Chamberlain. He wound up having to host the deposed Spanish Bourbons at Valencay, and his wife had an affair with one of the Spanish princes. Talleyrand later expressed gratitude that the Spanish prince had thus kept his wife from mischief.

In an 1808 conference between Napoleon and Tsar Alexander, Napoleon called on Talleyrand's diplomatic services again. Talleyrand had numerous private meetings with the Tsar. The anti-Austrian alliance Napoleon sought with Russia did not happen.

The following year, with Napoleon embroiled in Spain, Talleyrand was very publicly warm to his old enemy Fouche. Napoleon hurried back from Madrid, and summoned Fouche, Talleyrand, and several other ministers. He proceeded to give Talleyrand one of the great dressings-down in history, including:

You are a coward. A man of no faith. Nothing is sacred to you. You would sell your own father. I have showered you with riches and yet there is nothing you would not do to hurt me. You deserve to be broken like glass. I have the power to do it, but I have too much contempt for you to bother. Why didn't I have you hanged at the gates of the Tuileries? But there is still time for that. You are nothing but shit in a silk stocking. What about your wife? You never told me that San Carlos was your wife's lover.

At this point, according to some, Talleyrand responded, "It didn't occur to me that this information had any bearing on Your Majesty's glory, or my own."

Historians debate whether the line "shit in a silk stocking" was in this tirade. It was contemporary military slang, but none of those present recorded it. Some assume that's out of embarrassment.

Napoleon left the room after accusing Talleyrand of urging both the murder of the Duke d'Enghien, and the invasion of Spain.

When Bonaparte was gone, Talleyrand observed to those remaining, "What a pity, gentlemen, that so great a man should have such bad manners." Before leaving the palace, Talleyrand was required to give up the key he held as Imperial Grand Chamberlain.

Talleyrand intensified his flattery of the Emperor, and far from being hanged, he was given five million francs by the treasury after an investment gone bad left him deep in debt. The Emperor said "My wish is that Talleyrand should be reduced to living on what my generosity provides."

After Napoleon took the Grand Army into Russia, Talleyrand managed, despite being under the closest police scrutiny, to get a letter to the Bourbon prince exiled in

England who styled himself Louis XVIII. The content of Talleyrand's letter is unknown, but Louis's reaction isn't: "Good God, Bonaparte must be finished."

After the Grand Army was destroyed in Russia, every enemy rose against Bonaparte – Russia, Prussia, Austria, England, even Sweden. Talleyrand counseled Bonaparte to play the pieces he had, before he lost them. Bonaparte rejected the counsel, and lost the pieces.

After a military defeat at Leipzig, Bonaparte asked Talleyrand to again be foreign minister. To do so, Talleyrand would have to abandon his rank of Vice Grand Elector of the Empire, and distance himself from the Duchess of Kurland, now mother of his niece by marriage, and perhaps the great love of his life. Talleyrand declined.

The allied armies advanced slowly on Paris, and Talleyrand got a message to Metternich and to the Russian ambassador Nesselrode: "You are walking on crutches. Use your legs. You can do all you want."

With the allies near, Napoleon ordered his court to leave Paris. Talleyrand managed to be late for departure with the Empress, and to be turned back in his own flight because his papers weren't in order. He thus was in Paris in order to offer the hospitality of his mansion to the Russian tsar.

As the ranking member of government still in the capital, Talleyrand called the Senate into session, and it proclaimed a provisional government headed by ... Talleyrand. Before the Bourbons were restored with Louis XVIII, Talleyrand had negotiated a peace treaty with the allies that reduced France to its 1792 borders, and abandoned French extraterritorial forts, but paid not one sou in reparations. Looted artworks remained in French hands, lest they be damaged in return transit. During these negotiations, the Duke of Wellington could be found most evenings at Talleyrand's supper table.

Louis XVIII was preceded in his return to France by his brother, the Comte d'Artois. Talleyrand offered the Comte a florid public welcome to Paris, to which d'Artois could only say "Thank you! You make me too happy!" Talleyrand told an aide to write something more appropriate for the press, saying "I promise you that Monsieur will not only accept it, after two days he will believe that he said it, and indeed he will have said it."

Here's what the press quoted:

No more divisions. Peace and France. At last I see her again. Nothing has changed – except there is one more Frenchman.

“One more Frenchman” came in the third draft. The Comte was proud to have said it.

Talleyrand’s relations with the restored Bourbons were difficult. He was for constitutional monarchy, and they were for monarchy. It was Talleyrand who said of the returned émigrés, “They have learned nothing and forgotten nothing.”

Louis offered Talleyrand the post of foreign minister. In taking the oath of office, Talleyrand told Louis, “Sire, this is my thirteenth oath. I hope it will be my last.”

With the new title of Prince Talleyrand, he represented France at the Congress of Vienna, convened to rearrange Europe after Napoleon’s defeat. The victorious allies had met early (without French representation) to decide things. When the Congress was actually convened, it heard a two-hour harangue from Talleyrand on the theme that the “legitimate” French Bourbon monarchy was not the target of any alliance, and could not legitimately be object of any punishment.

Legend of the Congress added another to the store of Talleyrand quotes. To the Tsar’s assertion that Saxony should be carved up, since its treasonous king had betrayed Europe by siding with Napoleon, Talleyrand supposedly responded that “Treason is a question of dates.”

Incredibly, Talleyrand’s appeal to “legitimacy” at the Congress of Vienna worked. Or perhaps more accurately, this, plus Talleyrand’s chef, and his beautiful niece, and many dinners, worked. The council to carve up France resulted with a secret pact of France, Austria and England against Russia and Prussia.

Then, Napoleon escaped from Elba. Louis XVIII fled to Ghent. Napoleon reached Paris, froze Talleyrand’s assets in France and floated overtures to Talleyrand in Vienna. Talleyrand did not respond. After Waterloo, Talleyrand left Vienna to join the King in Belgium, and was fired. Wellington intervened, and Talleyrand became both prime minister and foreign minister. Talleyrand chose his old adversary Fouche as minister of police, setting the stage for the writer Chateaubriand (who hated Talleyrand) to describe Talleyrand and Fouche arm-in-arm as “vice on the arm of crime.”

It is not Talleyrand's most significant, but perhaps his most quotable, accomplishment in this period to have stopped the destruction Paris's Pont de Jena. The now-victorious Prussian General Bluecher had no use for a bridge that commemorated a Napoleonic defeat of the Prussians. Talleyrand renamed the bridge "Pont de l'Ecole Militaire" (military school bridge)." He privately observed this was "a designation that satisfied the savage vanity of the Prussians, and which, as a play of words, may be a more pointed allusion than the original name of Jena." (Gentlemen – there is a creative solution to every problem!)

After French elections produced a Senate "more royalist than the king," Louis fired Talleyrand as premier and foreign minister, but kept him as Grand Chamberlain. At an 1815 banquet Talleyrand described Louis's new minister of police, who had been intercepting correspondence between Talleyrand and his beloved niece Dorothy, as a "gutter rat." The King barred him from court. It was two years before Talleyrand resumed his ceremonial duties as Grand Chamberlain.

When Louis XVIII died in 1824, Talleyrand, though politically estranged from the regime, was at his bedside. As the government tilted rightward under Louis's brother, who now was king as Charles X, Talleyrand spent more time at Valencay, where he was appointed mayor. He devoted the same energy to local welfare as he did to rearranging Europe.

As a hereditary peer, he spoke frequently for freedom of the press in the Senate. Of an 1827 proposal for press censorship, he said "I think that it is not French, because it is stupid." He became increasingly familiar with the Duc d'Orleans, an advocate of constitutional monarchy.

In 1830, Charles X signed a series of repressive bills after royalists lost parliamentary elections, and Paris took to the streets. Another Talleyrand legend was born:

Talleyrand: The alarms have stopped. We're winning!

Servant: Who is "we", my prince?

Talleyrand: I'll let you know tomorrow.

The Duc d'Orleans became "King of the French" (not "King of France") after Charles X decamped, and Talleyrand was named the new king Louis-Phillippe's

ambassador to England. He was warmly welcomed there by his old friend the Duke of Wellington, and became a fascination to London, where the press dubbed him “Old Talley.”

The Belgians had at this time revolted against Dutch rule and Talleyrand’s diplomacy in England focused on “the Belgian question.” He succeeded in averting a partition of Belgium that would have also given the English control of Antwerp. When a Tory peer attacked Talleyrand’s role in the Belgian matter in the House of Lords, Wellington, also a Tory, literally rose to Talleyrand’s defense. Talleyrand was touched, and said that Wellington was the only statesman in the world who had ever spoken well of him.

To the recurring charge that he was an untrustworthy opportunist, Talleyrand offered this assessment to the poet Lamartine, who visited him in London:

They think that I am immoral and Machiavellian, yet I am simply impassive and disdainful. I have never given perverse advice to a government or a prince, but I do not go down with them. After shipwrecks, you need pilots to rescue the shipwrecked. I stay calm and get them to port somewhere. No matter which port, as long as it offers shelter.

In 1834, Talleyrand succeeded in making France a party to an alliance between England, Spain and Portugal. At eighty, he retired from public life.

He did not take his final exit without drama. His niece and grand niece wanted him to make peace with the Church. At eighty-four, and in worsening health, he began negotiations of his final peace treaty. It was, as he had specified, two documents – one submission to the Church, the other a letter to the Pope. His great-niece’s confessor handled negotiations, and discarded Rome’s drafts for very general admissions. After agreeing to the content, Talleyrand refused to sign. At last, about six hours before he died, he did sign; but he backdated the documents to the date he delivered his last public speech, so no one would think signing was the act of a desperate or diminished man.

More and Less

In these two figures we have almost perfect negative images. The bourgeois lawyer’s son and jurist who refused to take an oath and (to take him at his word) died by the will of the sovereign over a point of religious doctrine, in fact a victim of dynastic

necessity. The aristocrat-cleric who dispossessed his church, outlived three sovereigns, arguably made two of them, and arranged dynastic marriages. Orthodox trier of heretics, scandalous protector of Jews. The man unmade by women, and the man made by women. They are archetypes: More the Suffering Servant, Talleyrand the Trickster.

More is today a saint to both the Roman Catholic and Anglican communions -- patron to adopted children, difficult marriages, stepparents, widowers, civil servants, court clerks, statesmen, and politicians. Yes, there is a patron saint of politicians.

Talleyrand in popular repute remains the touchstone Machiavellian. A recent book, *THE 48 LAWS OF POWER*, offers lessons from history to those who want to achieve and hold onto power. (*The New Yorker* reviewed the book, which became popular among gangsta rappers, under the article title "Fresh Prince.") *THE 48 LAWS* cites Talleyrand 17 times.

The Director of the New York Archdiocese's Office of Spiritual Development recently called Talleyrand "the worst scoundrel who ever lived," citing as proof that as Bishop of Autun, Talleyrand never set foot in its cathedral – which is, in fact, not true. Talleyrand spent at least enough time in Autun to get the clergy there to elect him to the Estates General, starting his political career.

Who would be Robert Bolt's true "hero of selfhood?" The jurist who sacrificed self to principle, or the diplomat who sacrificed principle to self-interest? Bolt used water as his symbol of titanic forces. Talleyrand used shipwreck, with himself as rescue pilot, as the metaphor for his career. More said he chose between "beheading and hell." In that sense, he acted in self interest as Talleyrand did.

To the charge that Talleyrand acted always without principle, a complete defense is found in a saying of Everett Dirksen's, who, though not a man for all seasons, was certainly a man for marigold season. Dirksen said: "I'm a man of principle, and my first principle is ... flexibility."