

**The Pivotal Roles of Henry Dundas and William Pitt in the
British Cabinet Fiasco of 1800**

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At the end of the eighteenth century, Europe found itself embroiled in the Napoleonic Wars. In 1799, the outcome of the war between France and Great Britain was uncertain at best and little change had occurred in seven years of war. Even less changed in the next three years. In the end, neither side was completely successful in its war aims. The Peace of Amiens recognized Napoleon as the legitimate head of the French government and Britain managed to maintain an influence on the continent. Unknown to both countries, that end was three years away but, before that could happen, both sides were faced with critical decisions that affected the situation on the continent as well as lands in the far parts of the world.

In November of 1799, the very dynamic Napoleon was a fresh face as First Consul of France and the British Cabinet was unsure of their next course of action. This paper will examine the Cabinet's decisions of 1800 and the reasoning behind them, aspiring to explain how the actions of the Cabinet members as a whole led Britain to sign an "unsafe and dishonorable peace."¹ Piers Mackesy and others believe that there were multiple causes that led to the British failure to achieve its war aims of 1793. The sheer distance of London from the theatres of war led to communication difficulties that inhibited the Cabinet's ability to oversee the operations, and as the war progressed, William Pitt, the Prime Minister, and his Cabinet struggled harder and harder to define the purpose of the conflict.² With the purpose of the war increasingly unclear, individual members of the Cabinet were free to propose competing military strategies with competing goals. Numerous war aims and policy proposals bred a great deal of dissension within the ranks of the Cabinet. Members fought each other and energy that

¹ Henry Dundas cited in Piers Mackesy, *War Without Victory: The Downfall of Pitt 1799-1802* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1984), 141.

² Mackesy, *War Without Victory*, vii-viii.

could have been used for consultations with military tacticians was wasted on endless debates.³ Unable to unite under a common objective or their trusted leader, Pitt's indecisiveness directly led to second-guessing by the ministers and inactivity by British military forces.

In explaining British power politics around 1800, past historians have characterized the Secretary of State for War, Henry Dundas, as the minister with the best foresight and the man who did everything within his scope to avoid the precipice of a perilous peace with Napoleonic France. Mackesy claims that Dundas was the minister with the most accurate perspective on the future of the war, who recognized why it was being and should be fought, and who knew how to bring it to a successful conclusion.⁴ Dundas proclaimed the Second Coalition was doomed to failure, insisting that the situation on the continent would turn into quicksand trapping any and all British forces placed there. The only road to peace, and possibly victory, was to pursue a policy of colonial conquest that would increase bargaining power against France at the peace table as well as bolster Britain's commercial strength. In the end, these events occurred to the letter, and interestingly enough, the policy of colonial conquests undertaken by the Cabinet in October of 1800 was the exact policy proposed by Dundas earlier that year, which is why Mackesy and others describe Dundas as being prophetic. Dundas made no secret of his opposition to Pitt and Foreign Secretary Lord William Grenville's desire to intervene on the continent and sought instead to further British power through her colonial possessions.

My views on Pitt are in agreement with my predecessors but the idea of Dundas

³ Michael Fry, *The Dundas Despotism* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 1992), 209.

⁴ Mackesy, *War Without Victory*, viii.

as a savior of Britain is where our accord ends. My study, in contrast, argues that Dundas opportunistically stepped into the power vacuum left by Pitt and proceeded to create an alternate foreign policy to that of Pitt and Grenville, solely based on his views and objectives. Pitt and Grenville sought to pursue continental operations against France but Dundas used his position in the War Department to block any such attempt. Dundas' ideological track record and personal correspondence point to a high probability that he intentionally sabotaged the Cabinet's attempts to intervene on the continent. In Dundas' own words, "decisive victory was unattainable" and he labored to keep it that way.⁵

Pitt's puzzling role in this debacle centers round his odd refusal to step in and order Dundas to follow his wishes and those of the Cabinet. Dundas clearly had his own foreign policy and, as it was he and not Grenville who was in control of the military, he alone had the ability to carry it out. Through his actions of 1800, Dundas violated the chain of command, overstepped the authority of Pitt and Grenville, and altered his country's foreign policy. The result of this was the abandonment of Pitt's war aim of security against French expansionism and a condemnation of Britain to, what Dundas described in his own words, "an unsafe and dishonorable peace." Dundas' colonial policy gamble certainly contained potential benefits for Britain but, when compared to the situation his country faced on the continent, his policy was completely out of line with Britain's best interest, the defeat of Napoleonic France. His policy served to distract Britain from her true purpose and resulted in his country signing a meaningless peace that left Britain bereft of the security it so desired.

Dundas' actions, or more importantly his lack of action, played a large part in the Austrian defeat at the crucial battle of Marengo in June 1800 and led directly to the

⁵ Mackesy, *War Without Victory*, 85.

collapse of the Second Coalition in February 1801, which in turn opened the door to his policy of focusing on colonial operations; his colonial expeditions had no prospect whatsoever of achieving victory against France but they did promise to strengthen Britain's bargaining position at the negotiation table. Officially, Dundas lacked the authority to impede Cabinet decisions, but Pitt's reluctance to exercise his final say-so opened the door for Dundas to shrewdly outmaneuver Pitt and Grenville. Dundas' part in the debacle at Marengo is the primary reason Pitt was forced to admit, "The question of peace and war had become a question of terms."⁶ Dundas may have been proven right in his prediction that the continent was hopeless, but his opposition to intervention prevented the full potential of the coalition with Austria from being realized and erased any possibility of pulling off an upset at Marengo and overthrowing Napoleon a full decade and a half earlier than Waterloo.

A second useful aspect of this paper is its contribution to our historical understanding of Great Britain's reluctance to become involved in continental affairs.⁷ Britain reveled in its advantage of having no territorial possessions on the continent to defend and no desire to gain any.⁸ Whenever a situation on the continent became threatening to British interests, Britain would have to incorporate a continental ally to perform most of the military tasks, but Britain would be free to choose who this ally would be for each respective situation.⁹ In 1815 and the pre-war years of both World War I and II, Britain displayed its deep determination to avoid entanglements on the continent. Dundas' efforts to prevent Britain from getting militarily involved provide a

⁶ *The London Chronicle*, November 3, 1801.

⁷ Fry, *The Dundas Despotism*, 210-211.

⁸ Henry A. Kissinger, *Diplomacy* (New York: Simon & Shuster, 1994), 97.

⁹ *Ibid.*

prime example of the foreign policy that Britain would follow for almost two centuries. Britain has always taken solace in the fact that its geography provides them a certain degree of isolation from the continent, and as Britain was known for her world-class navy, it did everything possible to spare the army and let the Royal Navy do the work.

Ideologies:

With the outbreak of the French Revolution in 1789 and the ensuing regicide of Louis XVI in 1793, Britons were swept up in a national fervor of everything anti-republican or anti-Jacobin. For the most part, the masses supported Britain's entrance into war with France in 1793 for ideological purposes. Over the next six years of unsuccessful attempts to overthrow the French republic, British public opinion gradually transformed into a desire for peace.¹⁰ Perhaps they felt hypocritical when they realized their ancestors in Parliament had furiously fought to reduce the power of the monarchy throughout the entire English history by consistently forcing the King to accept demotions and even going as far as committing the same act of regicide by executing Charles I in 1649. When both situations were compared side by side, the French had not done anything the British would not have done themselves.¹¹

Looking for any political event that indicated France had stabilized, the common Briton perceived Napoleon's ascension to power as a concrete sign that the republic no longer posed an ideological threat to Britain. Napoleon ingeniously fostered this speculation by following his rise to power with immediate peace overtures to Britain. Having bluntly rejected these, Pitt and the Cabinet witnessed public opinion as well as Britain's political bargaining position deteriorate to the point where Pitt believed that

¹⁰ Mackesy, *War Without Victory*, 182.

¹¹ A.D. Harvey, *Collision of Empires: Britain in Three World Wars, 1793-1945* (London: Hambledon, 1992), 13.

peace was inevitable. MPs [Members of Parliament] of the peace party made constant comparisons between the war with France and the American Revolutionary War. In May of 1800, Sir William Pulteney argued, "To wage war with principles is madness. Force never yet changed human opinion. Persecution only riveted opinion more strongly."¹² He drew upon the American Revolution as supporting evidence for his case that no amount of force could succeed in mandating a foreign nation and its people on how they should live and be governed. Parliament had tried to dictate to the American colonies how they should be governed and six years of expensive warfare had failed to convince the Americans they were wrong.¹³ Unaffected by their previous debacle, the Cabinet thought it had the right to ordain how France would be governed and would not stop until the French accepted the model the British prescribed.¹⁴

Ignoring the arguments made in the hope of peace, the Cabinet pressed on to overthrow Napoleon by purchasing Austria's participation in the Second Coalition by means of a substantial subsidy to Austria in addition to planning Britain's own military strategy.¹⁵ However, before an analysis of the Cabinet decisions of 1800 can be made, it is necessary to examine the political ideologies of the individuals that composed the highest political body in Britain. It is the personal ideology of each individual that caused them to create the personal goals that they desired to see realized in the war as well as the policies they believed would help achieve their goals.

George III (King):

Of all the men that composed the upper echelons of the British government,

¹² *The London Chronicle*, May 8, 1800.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ Mackesy, *War Without Victory*, 43.

¹⁵ *The London Chronicle*, February 17, 1800.

George III was perhaps the man who opposed peace the most. He also might have had the best ideological justification for entrenching himself in the pro-war camp. Sven Forshufvud and Ben Weider provide one of the best possible explanations for George III's blatant resistance to peace, even when it became inevitable. "The monarch [George III] would not be met by his equal in regality but by a soldier [Napoleon] who, though adopting some of the ceremonial styles of monarchy, was the head of a republican state."¹⁶

George III was clearly not above fickle ideological differences as he allowed Pitt, his best and most capable Prime Minister, to resign in 1801 because the King would not back down from what he perceived as his monarchical duties in regard to the Catholic question. The King made it clear he would only deal with his equal in station and that K would require the restoration of the Bourbon monarchy, which he proceeded to hint would also go a long way in convincing Britain that France was serious about peace.¹⁷

Combined with his lack of interest for peace negotiations, George III could not bring himself to personally respond to Napoleon; he felt it beneath his regal station to do so and left that menial task to his ministers, whom he ordered to give a simple response, not to Napoleon, whom he would only refer to as "General Bonaparte," but to Charles Louis Talleyrand, the French Foreign Minister. The King wrote to Lord Grenville, "It is impossible to deal with a new, impious, self-created aristocracy . . . I do not enter on the want of common civility of the conclusion of the Corsican tyrant's letter, as it is much below my attention, and no other answer can be given than by a communication on paper, not a letter, from Lord Grenville to Talleyrand."¹⁸ Later in life when Napoleon had

¹⁶ Ben Weider and Sven Forshufvud, *Assassination at St. Helena Revisited* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1995), 81-82.

¹⁷ *The London Chronicle*, December 23, 1799.

abdicated the throne and was exiled to St. Helena, despite having recognized Napoleon as First Consul in the Treaty of Amiens, George III only referred to the former emperor by the highest military rank he had achieved, Lieutenant General, which obviously was meant as a low blow to Napoleon's pride. During the entire tenure of his exile, the British forces in charge of his captivity were ordered to follow their King's example and actually derived great pleasure in tormenting their prisoner by not addressing him as royalty.¹⁹

Upon being informed by Pitt and Grenville that the Franco-Austrian armistice threatened to assure French domination over the continent and that peace might become inevitable, George III responded, "Any operation which would postpone peace with France is desirable."²⁰ If no such operation was possible, the King replied that the only peace he would accept was a permanent peace that allowed Britain to maintain the majority of her wartime acquisitions; in the end, neither of the King's stipulations was possible.²¹ The exorbitant pride of the King would prove to be one of the greatest obstacles to overcome in the long and arduous road to peace with France, but eventually the circumstances of the world forced even him to come down off his pedestal.

In addition to adamantly resisting peace, George III opposed Britain agreeing to a naval armistice with France even when it became apparent that sole concession was all that might prevent Napoleon from annihilating Austria. On September 16, 1800, he wrote, "I am very much pleased with Mr. Secretary Dundas' having . . . expressed his dissent to the entering in the smallest degree into negotiation on so novel and dangerous

¹⁸ A. Aspinall, ed., *The Later Correspondence of George III*, vol. 3 (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1967), 308.

¹⁹ Weider, *Assassination at St. Helena Revisited*, 61.

²⁰ Mackesy, *War Without Victory*, 129.

²¹ Aspinall, *Later Correspondence of George III*, 374.

a measure as a naval suspension of arms. The impudent manner in which Bonaparte has broken that with Austria at the moment he was giving that as a precedent which he was proposing here is now notorious . . . ”²² At the time George III wrote this, the armistice was still honored on both sides, but the Austrian emperor had surrendered three strategic fortresses in exchange for an extension of the armistice; George III was upset because Napoleon had continued to use the current French allowance of Austria resupplying these fortresses to justify the First Consul’s desire for a naval armistice so French forces in Malta and Egypt could be reinforced.²³

William Windham (Secretary at War):

Aside from King George III, William Windham may have been the biggest opponent of peace; Grenville accepted the inevitability of peace when Austria signed the Treaty of Lunéville in February 1801 and even George III admitted peace was necessary in October of that year. Windham was a strong advocate for using royalist forces in the western French province of Chouan to overthrow Napoleon. He knew the royalists would never succeed on their own, so he wanted to support them by landing British troops on the western coast of France at Brest and jointly marching on Paris while Napoleon’s attention was concentrated on the east. He promised the Cabinet that, if 20,000 troops landed in the west in cooperation with a French prince, the western half of France would rise up “and give us more soldiers that you would know what to do with.”²⁴ Windham was astounded how the Cabinet could continue to subsidize foreign powers, Russia in 1799 and Austria in 1800, with millions of pounds while he calculated the French royalists would require sums in the mere hundreds.²⁵ Not only that, but the

²² Aspinall, *Latter Correspondence of George III*, 412-413.

²³ *The London Chronicle*, November 18, 1800.

²⁴ Mackesy, *War Without Victory*, 29.

French royalists were already within striking distance of Paris and had a greater chance of success than Austria and Russia, both of whom were eventually driven out of the war.

Unfortunately for Windham, the big three, Pitt, Dundas, and Grenville, disagreed with his premise that an invasion of western France was the best course of action to take. Unknown to all of them was the fact that Napoleon had already wiped out any chance of success for Windham's plan when he had ordered General Brune to wipe out all of the royalists in his *Vendée militaire* of January 1800.²⁶ Throughout the entire time that peace negotiations were underway, Windham never failed to scorn the negotiations, "I still hold that we are never completely ruined but by a peace . . . the utmost we have to hope is the difference of a few possessions one way or another in a peace that is to leave the French masters of Europe."²⁷

William Pitt (Prime Minister):

Pitt was somewhat less ideologically rigid than his sovereign but he still managed to allow breaches in the etiquette of diplomacy to influence his actions. Napoleon's peace overtures of December 31, 1799, were addressed to the King, a clear breach in diplomatic protocol that deeply offended Pitt and the rest of his Cabinet.²⁸ Napoleon's mistake in addressing the King instead of his Prime Minister assured that his overtures would be met with a blunt rejection. This episode of diplomatic etiquette reveals that, at the beginning of the nineteenth century, the etiquette used to maintain open lines of communication was as important as simply keeping the lines open; not only must peace be pursued, but it must be pursued using universally-accepted methods.

²⁵ Mackesy, *War Without Victory*, 21.

²⁶ *The London Chronicle*, January 1, 1801.

²⁷ Mackesy, *War Without Victory*, 166-167.

²⁸ William Hunt, ed., *The Political History of England*, vol. 10 (London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1905), 433.

While Pitt would prove to be less than decisive about British military policy, he never wavered on foreign policy when it concerned British security from French expansionism, especially when it threatened the Netherlands, which Britain considered vital to her commercial and physical security.²⁹ When faced with Napoleon's peace proposal, which presented the choice of either overthrowing the dictator or outlasting him, Pitt chose the former.³⁰ He chose this path based on his observation of the French governments for the past six years and his belief that Napoleon would fall quickly due to the rapid succession of governments in France and the short lifespan of militarily-despotic governments.³¹ Linda Colley argues that Pitt's motivations were less ideological and more self-preserving. She claims that Pitt openly admitted that the Anglo-French war was truthfully a fight to defend British rank and property from the "example of successful pillage" demonstrated in France in 1789. If this is true, it seems that Pitt and his entourage of powerful and wealthy people feared the elite of Britain would suffer the same fate as the French aristocracy if Napoleon succeeded in spreading his radical ideas of liberty, equality, and fraternity across the Channel.³²

Pitt sheltered numerous reservations that led to his flat rejection of Napoleon's peace proposals in January of 1800. Pitt's position found an incredible degree of support from the throne due to the King's strong opposition to the possibility of peace. As long as Pitt remained in the good graces of his majesty and did not alienate a majority of the House of Commons, he had no fear of being replaced as Prime Minister, and the surest way to do that was to shun peace at every opportunity. No political body was

²⁹ Frank O'Gorman, *The Long Eighteenth Century: British Political & Social History 1688-1832* (London: Arnold, 1997), 234.

³⁰ Mackesy, *War Without Victory*, 7.

³¹ R. Coupland, *The War Speeches of William Pitt the Younger* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1940), 276-277.

³² Linda Colley, *Britons: Forging the Nation 1707-1837* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1992), 150.

unanimously behind any course of action, however, and six years of fruitless war had pushed several members of the House of Commons into the camp of the opposition party who desired peace with France and were amenable to Napoleon's proposals.

Hoping to address the concerns of the Peace Party and bring them over to his side, Pitt delivered several speeches to the House of Commons to explain exactly why the Cabinet had rejected Napoleon's peace overtures and to justify the continuation of the war with France. On February 3, 1800, Pitt stressed the degree to which Napoleon could not be trusted to honor a peace, pointing to the French leader's deceitfulness regarding previous treaties and personal oaths. Arguing that militarily-despotic governments must maintain their military operations in order to preserve their power, Pitt remarked, "his [Napoleon's] hold upon France is the sword . . . He appeals to his fortune; in other words to his army and his sword."³³ Pitt realized that Napoleon could not allow his military accomplishments to fade from the memory of the populace. Peace would prevent his pursuit of further military conquest and glory and, without these things, the masses would rise up against him.

Pitt also feared that ambition would lead Napoleon to pursue the unconditional surrender of Great Britain. Pitt declared to the Commons in his same speech on February 3, 1800, that Napoleon wrote, "The Kingdom of Great Britain and the French Republic cannot exist together."³⁴ Not only would Napoleon continue seeking territorial expansion for France, but he would most likely not stop until he had removed his last obstacle to world domination, Great Britain.

To justify his fears, Pitt pointed to proof of Napoleon's character and previous

³³ J. Holland Rose, *Pitt and Napoleon: Essays and Letters* (London: G. Bell and Sons, 1912), 14.

³⁴ *The London Chronicle*, February 3, 1800.

transgressions. In Napoleon's personality, Pitt envisioned the most formidable combination of each of the worst characteristics of the First Consul's predecessors, Brissot, Robespierre, Tallien, Reubell, and Barras.³⁵ In his relatively short military and political career, Napoleon had served under multiple governments of the infant republic. In 1795, the Directory came to power and Napoleon swore to serve the new government and defend the new constitution on three separate occasions, yet he proceeded to help Paul Barras abolish this constitution two years later in the coup d'état of Fructidor.³⁶ Pitt provided additional examples of Napoleon's reputation for breaking his word by detailing the general's treatment of the Venetians during his peninsular campaign in 1797.³⁷ Napoleon had succeeded in liberating Venice from the rule of the Austrian empire and promised the Venetians that his main objective was to never hand the city back to that "iron yoke of the proud House of Austria," but that is exactly what he did; in return for the Austrians signing the Treaty of Campo Formio, Napoleon reneged and returned Venice to Austria.³⁸

Pitt doubted the sincerity of Napoleon's desire for peace but readily admitted that it was in Napoleon's best interest to negotiate.³⁹ Negotiation would serve to distract the Cabinet members while buying Napoleon time to pursue additional continental operations and, should Britain commit the folly of agreeing to peace and relaxing her guard, Napoleon would only be further tempted to aid an anti-British insurrection in Ireland or even risk crossing the English Channel for a full-on invasion. Pitt requested that the Commons continue to support the war, if not to a victorious conclusion, then at

³⁵ *The London Chronicle*, February 3, 1800.

³⁶ Coupland, *War Speeches*, 266.

³⁷ *The London Chronicle*, February 3, 1800.

³⁸ Coupland, *War Speeches*, 270-271.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 273.

least long enough for Austria to overthrow Napoleon.⁴⁰ Reports from the continent portrayed France and Napoleon to be in a vulnerable position; strong royalist support still existed in the western French province of Chouan and only needed foreign intervention to march on Paris. Only upon a coup against Napoleon and the restoration of the Bourbon monarchy would Pitt throw his support behind the peace process, but until then, the war must be continued. The reasoning behind the condition of the Bourbon restoration was Pitt's need to maintain strong Parliamentary support for the war that led him to create a coalition government in 1794 which, in return for the support of the Portland group, Pitt agreed to make a war aim.⁴¹

In Pitt's mind, negotiation "would leave us only the option of submitting without a struggle to certain loss and disgrace, or of renewing the contest which we had prematurely terminated, and renewing without allies, without preparation, with diminished means, and with increased difficulty and hazard."⁴² Strategically, a temporary peace would benefit France and only promise disaster for Britain. Pitt knew this and, desiring a permanent peace that promised security for his country, publicly condemned a nominal peace for any reason. Pitt concluded his speech with a Latin quote that successfully related his true reason for snubbing Napoleon, "I will not sacrifice it [security] by grasping at the shadow, when the reality is not substantially within my reach – *Cur igitur pacem molo? Quia infida est, quia periculosa, quia esse non potest.* (Why, then, do I refuse peace? Because it is deceptive, because it is dangerous, because it cannot be)."⁴³

⁴⁰ Coupland, *War Speeches*, 276-277.

⁴¹ Michael Duffy, *The Younger Pitt* (London: Longman, 2000), 63.

⁴² Coupland, *War Speeches*, 275-276.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 280.

After waiting for Austria to ratify the loan agreement of 1797 in early February 1800, Pitt went before the Commons two weeks later on February 17 with the task of requesting the passage of a bill that would send a 2.5 million £ subsidy to Austria in return for her joining Britain in the Second Coalition against France.⁴⁴ Unfortunately, the issue of the subsidy opened the floor up to debate, initiated by MP George Tierney [with whom Pitt had fought a duel on May 27, 1798] on the justification for continuing the war.⁴⁵ When asked to justify Britain's involvement in the war against France in one sentence, Pitt astutely retorted that he found it impossible to justify it in one sentence, but he could do it in one word, "Security." Abandoning his previous ideological reasoning of anti-Jacobinism, Pitt claimed it was security from French expansionism, something he considered to be the "greatest [danger] that had ever threatened the world...which in degree and extent was never equaled."⁴⁶ Tierney ended the debate with his own quip, "Security may be urged by every nation with equal prosperity, as the pretext for continuing expensive and ruinous wars. The Chancellor of the Exchequer [Pitt] has availed himself of a phrase which undoubtedly sounds well, and is in itself grateful to mankind; but...it is only using an indirect mode of evading a distinct answer to a most important question."⁴⁷

Lord William Grenville (Foreign Secretary):

Grenville's position in reference to France basically fell in line with those of the King and Prime Minister. The task of replying to Napoleon's peace proposal at the beginning of 1800 fell to Lord Grenville, who, on behalf of the King, rejected his offer

⁴⁴ *The London Chronicle*, February 17, 1800.

⁴⁵ E. Keble Chatterton, *England's Greatest Statesman: A Life of William Pitt 1759-1806* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1930), 297.

⁴⁶ Coupland, *War Speeches*, 284-285.

⁴⁷ Mackesy, *War Without Victory*, 71.

stating Britain was waiting to see a stable France and that the restoration of the monarchy might be the answer.⁴⁸ His rejection of peace prepared the road for the huge gamble of continental operations as this strategy promised either total victory for Britain or peace dictated on French terms, nothing in between. A previous example of his desire for continental operation occurred a year earlier in 1799, when he organized a BEF to be sent to Holland to expel the French and then link up with Austrian and Russian troops further south in operations against France.⁴⁹ Now, a year after the complete failure of the BEF in Holland, Grenville's attention switched from the north to the east.

Continuous pressure from the east, Grenville thought, would spark a successful counter-revolution in the west from the Chouan royalists, hopefully all without the deployment of a single British soldier. Dundas and he also harbored diverging beliefs regarding the political makeup of the French government and the strategic importance of Egypt. In response to Dundas' opinion that Napoleon's regime did not represent the same threat as previous ones and that the desired security had been achieved, he wrote, "The Jacobin principle has remained unshaken . . . and so it will be, as I believe, for a hundred such revolutions, till the principle itself be attacked and subdued in its citadel at Paris."⁵⁰ In regards to the French presence in Egypt, which Dundas presented as an added threat to Britain's most precious colony, India, Grenville dissented with his judgment that efforts expended for Egypt would be "useless and expensive."⁵¹

Henry Dundas (Secretary of State for War):

Stuck in the role of using the British military to pursue the foreign policy laid out

⁴⁸ *The London Chronicle*, January 23, 1800.

⁴⁹ T.C.W. Blanning, *French Revolutionary Wars: 1787-1802* (London: Arnold, 1996), 255.

⁵⁰ Mackesy, *War Without Victory*, 38.

⁵¹ Fry, *The Dundas Despotism*, 224-225.

by Grenville, Dundas consistently felt that Grenville's timetable was unreasonable when compared to what he considered to be the capabilities of the War Department and what he claimed to be the insufficient resources placed at his disposal. Quite the opposite from Grenville, Dundas had little concern for affairs on the continent, especially the restoration of the Bourbon monarchy or a peace which did not favor British interests, "We should not be seduced by the prospect of an early peace before we were certain of safeguarding our own interests."⁵² The interests he was referring to were the West Indies, and more importantly, Egypt and India.

Aside from the West Indies, Dundas placed a great deal of importance on the possession of Egypt, "There is no price too dear to be paid for it."⁵³ To him, Egypt was the key to India, the jewel of the British Empire. Dundas himself had extensive personal experience with India as he served as President of the Board of Control from 1793 to 1801. This important Cabinet position was the chief official in London responsible for overseeing the operations of the British East India Company as well as all other Indian affairs.⁵⁴ Dozens of his personal letters leave no doubt as to the importance he placed on the British possession of India. Were Britain to lose all other colonies, as long as it maintained control of India, Britain would still be the world's preeminent commercial power. It is Dundas' experience with India that led to his vehement and undying loyalty to defend the British jewel against any and all threats. This most definitely included the French expedition to Egypt which threatened to cut Britain off from its most valuable possession.

What actually kept Dundas up late at nights, and almost led to his resignation

⁵² Fry, *The Dundas Despotism*, 214.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 197.

based on his failing health, was his fear that Britain would give up other valuable colonies such as Malta and the Cape for peace.⁵⁵ He questioned Grenville's willingness to trade British colonial conquests for the restoration of the monarchy of their arch-nemesis by concentrating on the continent instead of the oceans where the British commercial lifeblood flowed. Why do so when the ascension of Napoleon to the First Consulship of France led Dundas to believe there was no longer a fear that Jacobinism still existed and that security from such was no longer essential? If it did still exist, Dundas argued that it would be useless to contest France. He held fast to a remark he had made earlier in the war that "if France is completely united and fascinated with the madness which at present reigns there, I am afraid to conquer them is impossible."⁵⁶

Disagreeing with Pitt's aspiration for "security," Dundas took it upon himself to push for a "reduced political aim and a return to limited warfare."⁵⁷ A few years earlier in 1796, Dundas clarified exactly what his priorities were regarding the war with France, "It is my conviction unalterably fixed that either with a view to peace or war . . . a compleat success in the West Indies is essential . . . No success in other quarters will palliate a neglect there . . . By success in the West Indies alone you can be enabled to dictate the terms of peace."⁵⁸ Correct in assuming the Cabinet did not share his point of view, he set about changing its mind and his accomplishment of that feat marks the watershed point of the direction of Cabinet policies. The priorities of the Cabinet can be separated into two time periods. During the first one, January to September 1800, Grenville convinced Pitt and the majority of the Cabinet to support Austria's actions on

⁵⁵ Charles Fedorak, *Henry Addington, Prime Minister, 1801-1804: Peace, War, and Parliamentary Politics* (Akron, OH: University of Akron Press, 2002), 74.

⁵⁶ Fry, *The Dundas Despotism*, 211.

⁵⁷ Mackesy, *War Without Victory*, 8.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 12.

the continent. Following the battle of Marengo in June, Austria's fortunes plunged into the depths and never recovered. Eventually, it became highly likely that Austria would be forced to sue for peace with France. Faced with this realization, Dundas persuaded Pitt, who manipulated a Cabinet vote to achieve a majority vote, to abandon Austria to its own fate and direct British efforts toward colonial conquests; the Cabinet's decision on October 3, 1800, to send the BEF to Egypt marks the line of demarcation between the two time periods, the second of which lasted until the end of the war in March 1802.

Dundas claimed to draw his opinions from Great Britain's historic aversion to continental entanglements [these reservations certainly continued well into the 20th century and played a role in events leading up to two world wars], "There exists in this country many strong prejudices against continental wars . . . and a strong preposition against the strength of the country being directed in any other channel than that of naval operations."⁵⁹ Dundas alleged that the manpower at the disposal of the War Department was a mere 24,000 actives, barely enough to create one capable expeditionary force, to use against France. He claimed the War Department's hands were tied in terms of manpower due to two previous armies committed to the continent (Quiberon Bay in 1795 and Holland in 1799) having been defeated, substantial human losses suffered in colonial conquests, a poor recruiting process, and persistent interference on the part of politicians to divide this singular force of 24,000 into several smaller pieces and deploy them against secondary targets.⁶⁰ Nothing was more abhorrent to Dundas than to entrap his sole expeditionary force on the continent in a conflict where "decisive victory was unattainable" and which left them unable to be withdrawn for use elsewhere. As clearly

⁵⁹ Mackesy, *War Without Victory*, 12-13.

⁶⁰ A.B. Rodger, *The War of the Second Coalition 1798-1801: A Strategic Commentary* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1964), 146.

as he could, Dundas explained to Earl Spencer, the First Lord of the Admiralty, what he felt British foreign policy should be, "We are a small spot in the ocean without territorial consequences, and our own power and dignity as well as the safety of Europe, rests on our being the paramount commercial and naval power of the world."⁶¹

Believing the future success of Britain to be on the high seas and not on land, Dundas' "reduced political aim" was to bolster the extent of British naval power, strengthen British colonial holdings, and create and protect new markets abroad in hopes of securing for Britain a prosperous commercial future.⁶² Two purposes would be served if Britain exerted its energy towards overseas operations against French colonies. First, captured colonies would provide new markets for British commerce flooding the treasury with additional revenues that would allow the nation to fight a war of attrition. He argued that British prosperity in war and peace was always dependent on the seas, not the continent; Britain was still financially able to continue the war only because the revenues earned from previous colonial conquests against her enemies, "Great Britain can at no time propose to maintain an extensive and complicated war but by destroying the colonial resources of our enemies and adding proportionately to our own commercial resources, which are and must ever be, the sole basis of our maritime strength. By our commerce and our fleet, we have been enabled to perform those prodigies of exertion which have placed us in the proud state of pre-eminence we now hold."⁶³ Second, each captured colony would provide Britain with additional bargaining power against France at the peace table and could be bartered back to France in return for advantageous terms.⁶⁴

⁶¹ Mackesy, *War Without Victory*, 13.

⁶² Fedorak, *Henry Addington*, 170.

⁶³ Edward Ingram ed., *Two Views of British India* (Somerset: Adams & Dart, 1970), 206.

⁶⁴ Mackesy, *War Without Victory*, 93.

From the beginning of 1800 until that summer, Dundas formed the minority opinion, finding himself outnumbered by Pitt and Grenville, who sought to topple Napoleon by exerting pressure from the east. To do this, Parliament approved a 2.5 million £ subsidy to enlist the support of Austria. Concerned that Austria might not be enough, Pitt and Grenville wanted to send an invasion force to Italy to link up with the Austrians against Napoleon. Pitt and Grenville designed the plan, but it was left to Dundas to execute it and this is where his importance to the war-effort is most apparent. His position in the Cabinet required him to organize all of Britain's military operations, including assembling the necessary troops, organizing all suitable shipping and naval escorts, and ensuring adequate supplies and ordnance.⁶⁵ Here was the point in time when his principles were put to the test. Did he obey the orders of the Cabinet and his trusted friend and ultimate superior, Pitt, possibly to the detriment of the country? Or did he fall back on his personal judgment that he knew what was best for Britain in order to justify his covert undermining of any attempt to place troops on the continent? He made his choice known after it was too late for Pitt to do anything about it.

Upon reflection after the window of opportunity [Marengo] on the continent had closed, Dundas confessed his actions to Pitt, "I could not assent to appropriate any such share of the force of this country to any expedition on the coast of France as would interfere with the objects which naturally present themselves in the West or East Indies. Success in those quarters I consider of infinite moment, both in the views of humbling the power of France, and with the view of enlarging our national wealth and security."⁶⁶ This illuminating quote clearly defines Dundas' motives and the fact that, as the

⁶⁵ Mackesy, *War Without Victory*, 3.

⁶⁶ Fry, *The Dundas Despotism*, 191.

Secretary of State for War, he “could not assent” to the decision of the Prime Minister and his Cabinet leaves little doubt of his blatant insubordination and his intentions to, not just remain idle in the face of continental intervention, but work actively against it in favor of colonial exploits.

The integrity of Henry Dundas was at stake, and though he never admitted to doing any such thing, the extent to which he vocalized his unshakeable support for colonial operations and desire to never see a continental landing take place makes it highly possible that he did play a part in the Cabinet’s inability to place an expeditionary force in Italy before it was too late. If he did so, it is most likely he did so because he felt “decisive victory was unattainable,” Britain was secure from French expansionism, and, most of all, that any energies expended away from colonial ambitions were squandered efforts. He would have never allowed his actions to lead to irreparable damage to Britain itself, but the collapse of the Second Coalition answered the continental question and left the Cabinet with only one option, which just so happened to be his, overseas conquests.

Regardless of reasoning, statistical records of that year betray Dundas’ actions and leave little doubt as to his manipulation of Britain’s resources to suit his desires. One year after the deployment of the BEF to Egypt, Dundas self-appraised his course of actions and, while he defended his choices, he surrendered the final judgment to historians, “With respect to the armament which I prepared in October 1800 . . . I acted to the best of my judgment after full deliberation; and I must leave my cause to the wisdom and justice of the authorities who are to judge me.”⁶⁷

Dissension and Breakdown in Cabinet - Pitt’s Role:

As the Prime Minister, Pitt was master of the Cabinet and, while he did not

⁶⁷ Ingram, *Two Views of British India*, 332.

dominate policy and the majority ruled in most cases, Pitt never found himself on the losing side of an issue as his stance always brought the majority of the Cabinet into line with his opinions. In the entire period of 1799-1801, the Cabinet failed to go against the wishes of their Prime Minister on a single issue. Pitt's problem was that he lacked self-confidence in his ability to make military decisions and went as far as to admit he was no war leader, "I distrust extremely any ideas of my own on military subjects."⁶⁸ His sagging self-esteem allowed a great deal of dissension between his subordinates to creep within the walls of the Cabinet. Time and time again, their unquestionable leader chose to abstain from forming opinions of his own, preferring to support one minister and then suddenly change his mind to support another. Earl Camden remarked that Pitt was "too much under the influence of anyone who is about him, particularly of Dundas."⁶⁹ Conversely, Dundas suggested that another minister had contributed to Pitt's indecisiveness, "which has often, too often, led him to give up his better judgment to the preserving importunity of Lord Grenville."⁷⁰

While Pitt alone could not dictate orders to his ministers, he most certainly could order them to carry out the decision of the Cabinet.⁷¹ Pitt's inability to oversee his subordinate ministers and hold them accountable for carrying out the Cabinet's orders meant that he failed to execute his duty as head of the Cabinet, thus creating a power vacuum that allowed Dundas and Grenville to battle each other for supremacy. His vacillation grew in scope as he lacked the conviction to dismiss those ministers who acted against the will of the Cabinet. Pitt simply preferred to avoid confrontations at all costs

⁶⁸ Mackesy, *War Without Victory*, 176.

⁶⁹ Duffy, *The Younger Pitt*, 91.

⁷⁰ Mackesy, *War Without Victory*, 39.

⁷¹ Duffy, *The Younger Pitt*, 70.

and attempted to be a people-pleaser more than an enforcer.⁷²

As Foreign Secretary, Grenville was in charge of establishing British foreign policy, which, in times of war, included military strategies to carry out these policies. The arduous task of executing Britain's foreign policy fell to Dundas, who as the Secretary of State for War, was the chief war minister and in control of how the war effort was carried out. Dundas claimed that Grenville's timetable was consistently unreasonable and too much for Dundas' War Department to keep up with, and Pitt's failed attempts to coordinate the two offices for the benefit of the country allowed an irreparable rift to grow between the men on what was desired and what was possible.⁷³ In most instances, Dundas and Grenville butted heads while Pitt seemed to enjoy playing the role of tie-breaker.⁷⁴ Instead of having one man to make the final decision, three men shared the responsibility, but almost never unanimously, which would have been beneficial for the sake of Cabinet unity. Almost every action taken by the Cabinet was decided upon by a 2 to 1 vote [Pitt was always on the winning side] with Dundas and Grenville splitting the decisions amongst themselves. Instead of choosing one of the men's strategies and moving on, Pitt persisted in drifting between one camp and the other, all of which served to cripple the Cabinet's ability to clearly define the strategy it would follow throughout the course of the war. Pitt's preference to sidestep his responsibility and delegate policy decisions to his ministers makes it understandable how he failed to bring the members to a consensus on how the British forces, meager as they were, could and should be deployed so as to best bring about the defeat of France.

⁷² Duffy, *The Younger Pitt*, 70.

⁷³ Mackesy, *War Without Victory*, 15.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 176.

Dundas' Role:

As Secretary of State for War, Dundas required the approval of the Cabinet to undertake military operations, meaning he needed the approval of Pitt. Before June of 1800 and the battle of Marengo, Dundas found himself outvoted in the Cabinet as Pitt was securely in Grenville's camp because it was the only one that offered any chance of attaining what he truly sought, security from French expansionism. Finding his options limited, he resorted to dragging his feet by using his position to lay obstacles in the path of any plans to place troops on the continent. In constructing the invasion force of 60,000 ordered by Pitt and Grenville, he claimed he needed 80,000 effectives and that his options were limited.⁷⁵ At the beginning of the 19th century, it was said that the sun never set on the British Empire. Therefore, it is no surprise that a maritime empire that spanned the globe required an extensive navy to protect and nurture its commercial lifelines. In 1800, France's population was three times larger than Britain and, with such a considerable percentage of its human resources committed to the navy, a relatively small number of men were available for the army.⁷⁶ With France able to place several hundred thousand men in the field, Britain would have been outnumbered almost 10 to 1. With only 24,000 troops able to be pulled out of action in Holland, Dundas complained that he would have to resort to additional sources to provide the remaining 56,000 men, which included 3,000 French *émigrés*, 5,000 Dutch from Texel who had never seen action, 15,000 sailors and marines spread throughout the empire, and 16,000 actual and 25,000 hopeful volunteers.⁷⁷

Unfortunately for Dundas, records still exist from his tenure as Secretary of State

⁷⁵ Mackesy, *War Without Victory*, 55.

⁷⁶ Fry, *The Dundas Despotism*, 210.

⁷⁷ Mackesy, *War Without Victory*, 55-56.

for War that shed light on his deliberate manipulations and suspicious interpretations of the resources placed at his disposal. He claimed that the War Department did not have 80,000 men enlisted and available for deployment on the continent. Evidence shows that in the year 1800, the British regular army had exactly 80,275 men enlisted.⁷⁸ With 5,000 men reserved for the homeland, 10,000 men deployed throughout Ireland to maintain civil order, and another considerable force of men stationed in India to protect the jewel of the British Empire, the number of men actually available to Dundas for action on the continent was closer to 50,000 than 80,275. This fact does not exonerate Dundas as he still had ~50,000 men with which to utilize, thus he still concealed the true size of the army in the hope that it would not be sent to the continent. Dundas' case that the desired expedition of 1800 would surely suffer the same fate as the two previous ones that had failed to bring about the defeat of France is further weakened by the fact that the two previous times Britain had committed expeditionary forces to the continent, it had done so with fewer men available than when the possibility was raised in 1800. In 1795, a BEF was sent to Brittany with only 60,244 total enlisted men and in 1799, another BEF was sent to Holland despite the War Department being handcuffed by a meager 52,051 men.⁷⁹

To cover his tracks, Dundas chose to make another risky assertion to his peers. Even if the force of 60,000 men were possible, he stated the shipping logistics were completely impossible to meet and maintain, "I have my serious doubts if all the maritime resources of this country can be so brought and concentrated together in the execution of the details necessary on such an occasion as that of sending to sea at once,

⁷⁸ Chris Cook and John Stevenson, *British Historical Facts: 1760-1830* (London: MacMillan, 1980), 98.

⁷⁹ Cook, *British Historical Facts: 1760-1830*, 98.

and directed to one point, an army of 70 thousand men, with all its necessary accompaniments.”⁸⁰ Dundas cited his expertise in asserting that there simply was not the available shipping in the whole of the British Isles to transport the invasion force, which by April had been pared down to 20,000, as well as the equipment and supplies [supposed to be over 350,000 tons] necessary to support such a large amphibious force. If Britain could not supply its own forces, the Cabinet would be forced to rely on Austrian hospitality and cooperation. If Austria refused, General Sir Charles Stuart, who was selected to command the invasion army of 20,000, would be unable to advance any further than a two days’ march from the sea and remain practically stranded on the Italian coast. In defense of his stance that the operation was unfeasible, Dundas wrote the King, “In matters of small detail he [Dundas] has presumed to act on his own judgment.”⁸¹

Dundas’ judgment comes under sharp criticism when, once again, statistical evidence survives that proves that he had ample resources at his disposal for the task of supplying the task force. In 1800, the total amount of supplies granted for the army by Parliament was 18,207,510 £, which at that time was a record amount.⁸² Added to that substantial budget, Britain had 15,734 registered ships with a capability of 1,699,000 tons [both all-times highs to date] to which it would have been possible to rent, or even commandeer by force in the interest of national security, as long as the army received the means to transport it to Italy and keep it supplied.⁸³ Dundas hid these facts from the Cabinet and claimed that he had less manpower and shipping at his disposal than he actually did. His manipulations succeeded as, on April 8, in hopes of preventing that

⁸⁰ Mackesy, *War Without Victory*, 60.

⁸¹ Aspinall, *Later Correspondence of George III*, 386.

⁸² Cook, *British Historical Facts: 1760-1830*, 98.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 185.

which he abhorred the most, he convinced Pitt to only send 5,000 men to the Mediterranean until Stuart had assessed Austria's need for assistance; the 5,000 men actually set sail on April 28th. Until then, the remaining 10,000 men could remain in the English Channel to perform an attack on Belle Île, an island off the northwestern coast of France.⁸⁴ This offered two advantages: a location closer to home would save the shipping, transport, and time problems of a force in Italy, and his personal favorite, the island attack would occur instead of a full continental invasion.

Unfortunately for the unity of the Cabinet, the confusion and split interests did not stop there. The Mediterranean island of Malta began to receive increasing amounts of attention from Dundas who, staying in line with his colonial priorities, considered it of vital importance to the security of British interests in Egypt and India. Dundas remarked, "To France its value is incalculable" and a French presence there was intolerable because whoever possessed the island controlled the eastern Mediterranean and had a distinct advantage regarding the possession of Egypt.⁸⁵ Therefore, Britain needed to act quickly to regain possession to protect her interests in the Near East and to keep the Mediterranean Sea a British lake; Dundas weakened the invasion force intended for Italy when he ordered that 3,000 of the 10,000 men assembled to that point to be sent to Malta to complete the British siege of that island.⁸⁶ The Russian Czar Paul I's choice to become involved in the contested possession of Malta only made the topic more heated to debate. Paul I made crystal clear his desire to gain possession of Malta from Britain and how its response to his desire might affect their relationship in the future. Dundas resented the idea of Russia taking control of Malta because Britain did all the work

⁸⁴ Mackesy, *War Without Victory*, 88.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 96.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 99.

wresting it from France and British superiority in the eastern Mediterranean would be severely weakened.⁸⁷ Contrary to Dundas, Grenville did not consider Malta valuable enough to fight Russia over and refused to even consider it as an option. As the Foreign Secretary, Grenville had the authority to overrule Dundas' objections and eventually conceded Malta to Russia.

Grenville's decision to concede Malta to Russia led to the immediate resignation of General Stuart. Dundas proceeded to replace him with Sir Ralph Abercromby, whose first task was to detach 3,000 soldiers to complete the British siege of Malta, leaving only 6,000 free to support the Austrians on the continent. Dundas' second order granted Abercromby a considerable degree of autonomy by allowing the general to decide if British support for Austria was feasible or not. If not, Dundas suggested using the force to strike the island of Tenerife in the Canary Islands, an obvious tactic on his part to leave any door open that would lead to colonial operations.⁸⁸ Before Abercromby could report back to the Cabinet regarding Austria's need for assistance, the Cabinet was informed that there had been sightings of Napoleon crossing the Alpine passes, so Britain was pressed for time to put troops on the continent and make a difference. Future events would show that the Cabinet acted too late and allowed their window of opportunity to make a difference in Italy to slam shut.

Devastating news arrived from the continent that the Austrian army had suffered a catastrophic defeat at the hands of Napoleon at the battle of Marengo on June 14, 1800. Austria was subsequently forced to sign an armistice a month later.⁸⁹ Britain had lost her only major continental ally and the only country powerful and able enough to undertake

⁸⁷ Mackesy, *War Without Victory*, 96.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 99.

⁸⁹ *The London Chronicle*, January 3, 1801.

the endeavor of an invasion of France. Pitt and the remainder of the Cabinet members came to the somber realization that, while their gamble that Austria by itself could defeat France had failed miserably, the disaster at Marengo might have been avoided if only they had acted earlier and with more conviction. Dissension within the Cabinet and Dundas' claims that the logistics of the proposed invasion were wholly unrealistic had cost them precious time during the early months of 1800 and led to the decisive battle of the entire war occurring without a single British soldier even setting foot on the continent.

Details of the events of the battle revealed how narrowly Napoleon had escaped a crushing defeat, fostering speculation that if 25,000 British troops had been present at Marengo, Napoleon almost definitely would have surely been defeated. However, for that to have been a possibility, Pitt would have had to have brought the Cabinet to a consensus by the end of February so that the expedition could have sailed for the Mediterranean by mid-March.⁹⁰ In comparison to the date of the battle of Marengo on June 14th, the exact date, June 15th, that Pitt finally made a stand by ordering reinforcements sent to Abercromby and for him to use it in collusion with Austria is almost comical; he was a mere three months too late to make a difference.⁹¹ While Pitt and Grenville were the fathers of the Second Coalition and received the lion's share of the blame for its collapse, it was in fact Dundas who deserved to shoulder the blame for his actions and lack thereof. He clearly lied to his superior and fellow Cabinet members about the capability of the British army, misleading them into believing that continental intervention was completely out of the question. He had a considerable force of men

⁹⁰ Mackesy, *War Without Victory*, 114.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 111.

[80,000+], ample shipping at his disposal [15,000+ ships and 1.5 millions tons], and a substantial budget [18,207,510 £]. Not only had practically all resistance to French aggression on the continent disappeared for the time being, but Dundas' persistent efforts to block British forces from landing in Italy until it was too late resulted in several negative consequences for Britain: temporary forfeiture of involvement in continental affairs, the firm establishment of Napoleon as dictator of France, and the fulfillment of his prior estimation that "decisive victory was impossible" and that peace was inevitable and most likely on Napoleon's terms.

Conclusion:

Not enough correspondence of Henry Dundas exists to allow historians to ascertain with any certainty exactly why he manipulated the statistics of the army and whether he truly believed in his heart that his actions within the Cabinet were wholly honorable or were self-admittedly aimed at securing his preferred interests. Dundas pursued one of two possible courses of action. Dundas might have been altruistically correct in his apparent oracle-like prediction regarding the fate of the continent and labored to prevent Britain from becoming entangled in a doomed affair, choosing instead to save British forces for where he felt they were truly needed and would be able to make a difference. Or he selfishly sabotaged the coalition by doing all he could to block continental operations and help to bring about its collapse leaving colonial operations as the sole option remaining to the Cabinet. Regardless of intent, the fact remains that his actions, altruistic or not, resulted in Napoleon remaining the dominant power on the continent and Britain having no choice but to agree to, in his own words, an "unsafe and dishonorable peace."

Perhaps an episode from the later life of Dundas might shed more light on his character. While highly respected by his peers, Dundas failed to exit from political life without his share of bruises. The following account detailed by Michael Fry illustrates the true nature of Henry Dundas and provides corroborating evidence that he was not as honest and virtuous as many believed. Deep down, he was more concerned with money and his personal well-being than executing his public duties ethically and morally. In 1806, the House of Commons formally impeached Dundas, now known as Viscount Melville, on charges of misappropriating public funds while holding the office of First Lord of the Admiralty from 1782-1800 and 1804-1806.⁹²

In a letter to his son, Dundas includes an unmistakable admission of guilt on his part regarding how he had concealed the laundering of funds by blending them with his personal funds and that the only men made privy to such dealings were either dead or known only to himself. He expressed to his son a certain degree of fear that the investigators would uncover the truth but felt he had done an adequate job of covering up his infractions. Despite his faith in his cover-up, Lord Sidmouth [formerly Henry Addington who had succeeded Pitt as Prime Minister in 1801] successfully proved Melville's guilt and forced his resignation.⁹³ The trial marked the end of his political life and proved to be a permanent stain on his legacy.⁹⁴ This only raises the probability of his sabotage of the Cabinet and the Second Coalition. If he was clearly guilty of blatant money-laundering, to which he expresses no shred of remorse of guilt to his son, is it so hard to question that he would place his personal perspective regarding the war with France above that of the Cabinet or his superior, Pitt?

⁹² Fry, *The Dundas Despotism*, 272.

⁹³ O'Gorman, *The Long Eighteenth Century*, 260.

⁹⁴ Fry, *The Dundas Despotism*, 275.

Dundas' position as Secretary of State for War presented him with multiple opportunities to hinder the invasion force intended for Italy. First of all, he had to construct the army, and it is impossible to know how hard he looked for ways to assemble 60,000 from all the resources he had at his disposal. He falsely claimed to be in such dire straits that he had no other option than to employ French émigrés, Dutch, and borrowing from naval manpower. The only British army in action in 1800 was in Holland and Dundas admitted he could reduce that force by 24,000 to use for the continental invasion, but those were the only British regulars he could find; apparently, it would have been impossible to withdraw any troops from Ireland, India, or the homeland to use against Napoleon. Not only that, but he claimed that the resources of the greatest commercial nation in the world, with over 15,000 ships in its control, were incapable of transporting and supplying the forces. Obviously, Dundas did everything within his power to conceal the true potency of the British army as well as the shipping capability of the empire, all to satisfy his colonial policy of conquest. In order to make a noticeable difference in the war between France and Austria, Dundas need not have sent all 50,000 men to Italy. Considering the razor-thin margin of victory of the battle of Marengo, a fraction of that force might have swung the victory to the side of Austria, but Dundas' obstinacy proved too great of an obstacle.

Despite his apparent prophecy that the Second Coalition was doomed from its creation, Dundas was less a psychic than a person who made a prediction and then set about making it come true. Dundas predicted that the coalition would fail and the continent would be conceded to Napoleon in exchange for increasing Britain's overseas possessions, and his actions and dealings within the Cabinet prevented the full potential

of the coalition from being realized. His opposition to Grenville's plan to send an expedition to Italy to cooperate with Austrian forces served as a filibuster within the Cabinet and no troops ever landed on the continent. He claimed the nation did not have the naval means of simultaneously transporting the troops and supplying the expedition. In addition to pointing to logistical problems, Dundas claimed to harbor severe skepticism regarding Austria and voiced concern in regard to committing forces to the continent because he did not believe British forces could influence the outcome of any battles between France and Austria.⁹⁵ He could not have been more wrong as the battle that assured French domination of the continent was decided by the slimmest of margins. While nothing is certain, the presence of the BEF might have made the difference in the battle and, in turn, made Austria the favorite to win the war. As it turned out, Marengo led to Austria's early exit from the war and served to answer the continental question. His prediction proven correct, Dundas pushed his expedition to Egypt upon the rest of the Cabinet where, lo and behold, the BEF found success.

Dundas' prophecy of the collapse of the Second Coalition and the subsequent success of his policy of colonial conquest cast him in the light as a clairvoyant, but he was anything but a prophet. The combination of his actions and abstentions proved to be a fatal blow to the Second Coalition, a result welcomed by Dundas since it opened the door to his personal pet project of colonial operations. For all the effort he invested into bringing his strategy to fruition, the results of his strategy of colonial conquests were at best mixed. The BEF successfully evicted the French from Malta in 1800 and Egypt in 1801 but these feats were of secondary importance as they only helped decide the terms of the future and inevitable peace. In return for the French evacuation of Egypt, Great

⁹⁵ Fry, *The Dundas Despotism*, 191.

Britain returned 22 of the 24 enemy colonies it had captured throughout the war and, to the utter repugnance of Dundas and George III, agreed to the dreaded naval armistice. Dundas had cunningly maneuvered himself into the position of pushing his ideas through the Cabinet and bartered any chance of success for decisive victory in the war, all for his hope of improving the terms of the peace he himself made inevitable. But at what cost? In the end, he and Britain lost practically everything for which they had fought. France was still under the thumb of Napoleon and six years of expense, effort, and bloodshed had been thrown away due to the indecisiveness of Pitt and the insubordination of Dundas.

Whatever their rationalizations were, history considers Pitt to be a weak wartime Prime Minister and Dundas to have saved Great Britain from certain annihilation on the continent while doing all he could to improve the terms of the inevitable peace with France through colonial possessions. Before these historians present Dundas with the accolades they feel he so richly deserves, they should take the time to measure what he did against what he could have done. Instead of playing for second place, what would history have been if Dundas had striven for first place and put forth a fraction of the effort he expended for the colonies toward the continent? History might have recorded that Austria was victorious at the battle of Marengo, Napoleon was immediately overthrown in France, and that the next fifteen years of carnage resulting from the Napoleonic Wars had never even occurred.

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