

# Benjamin Constant— Liberty and Private Life

by Jim Powell

**T**he French thinker Benjamin Constant was, according to respected Oxford University scholar Isaiah Berlin, “the most eloquent of all defenders of freedom and privacy.” Constant’s most important contribution: he recognized that “the main problem . . . [is] how much authority should be placed in any set of hands. For unlimited authority in anybody’s grasp was bound, he believed, sooner or later, to destroy somebody.”

Constant described the dynamic of collectivism that would become a scourge during the twentieth century. For instance: “the primitive conquerors were satisfied with outward submission; they did not inquire into the private lives or local customs of their victims . . . the conquerors of today are resolved to gaze over the level surface of their empire and to encounter no deviation from uniformity . . . local interests and traditions contain a germ of resistance, which a centralized authority tolerates unwillingly and attempts to eradicate at the first opportunity. It finds the isolated individual easier to deal with; without effort it crushes him beneath its mighty weight.”

He denounced war, “the greatest offense that a government today can commit. It

destroys every social guarantee without compensation; it jeopardizes every form of liberty; it injures every interest; it upsets every security; it weighs upon every fortune. It combines and legitimizes every kind of internal and external tyranny.”

Constant believed the key issue is to keep political power out of private life. “For forty years,” he reflected, “I have defended the same principle: freedom in everything, in religion, in philosophy, in literature, in industry, in politics—and by freedom I mean the triumph of the individual both over an authority that would wish to govern by despotic means and over the masses who claim the right to make a minority subservient to a majority. . . . The majority has the right to oblige the minority to respect public order, but everything which does not disturb public order, everything which is purely personal such as our opinions, everything which, in giving expression to opinions, does no harm to others either by provoking physical violence or opposing contrary opinions, everything which, in industry, allows a rival industry to flourish freely—all this is something individual that cannot legitimately be surrendered to the power of the state.”

Constant made some spectacular flip-flops, he had tangled love affairs, and he ran up big gambling debts, so he was an easy target for criticism. These things, noted intellectual historian Biancamaria Fontana, “were all distinctive marks of a traditional aristocratic

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education. Though they may strike the modern reader as adventurous and romantic, there was nothing especially odd or unusual about them. What was truly eccentric about Constant's life was . . . the unsettling extent of his cosmopolitanism." He moved easily among intellectuals in France, Germany, Holland, Belgium, and Britain, as well as his native Switzerland. He absorbed the ideas of Baron de Montesquieu about law and the ideas of Adam Smith and Jean Baptiste Say about markets. He was a friend of Wilhelm von Humboldt, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, and Johann Christoph Friedrich von Schiller. In the French Chamber of Deputies, Constant championed civil liberties with the legendary Lafayette.

Victor Hugo believed that Constant was "one of those rare men, who furbish, polish, and sharpen the general ideas of their times." Said Lafayette: "Endowed with one of the most extensive and varied esprits which has ever existed . . . the master of all the languages and literatures of Europe, he united to the highest degree sagacity . . . and the faculty, especially attributable to the French school, of making clear abstract ideas."

Constant was an eyeful. "His appearance was striking," noted biographer J. Christopher Herold, "tall and gangling, in his late twenties; a pale, freckled face surmounted by a shock of flamboyant red hair, braided at the nape and held up by a small comb; a nervous tic; red-rimmed myopic [blue] eyes; ironic mouth; a long, finely curved nose; long torso, poor posture, slightly pot-bellied, long-legged, wearing a long flapping riding coat—a decidedly gauche, unhandsome, yet interesting and attractive figure of a man, certainly somebody altogether out of the ordinary."

By his fifties, Constant had become a familiar figure as a member of the Chamber of Deputies, the French elected legislative body where he was an outstanding champion of freedom of speech and freedom of the press. Baron de Loeve-Weimars recalled Constant "dressed in his gold-embroidered deputy's uniform so as to be ready to address the House from the tribune where it was obligatory to wear this formal dress. His hair was blond and turning white, and on his head he

wore an old round hat. He carried under his arm a coat, books, manuscripts, printer's proofs, a copy of the budget and his crutch. Once he had got rid of all these impedimenta and was seated on his bench, on the far left, he began to write and send off an unbelievable quantity of letters and notes to people . . . answered the questions of all those crowding around him."

According to historian Paul Thureau-Dangin, "At first sight one would never have said that he had the usual qualities necessary to make an orator. He seldom improvised without having a pen in his hand; but his pen had the quickness of speech, and sometimes he wrote out his reply in full while still listening to the harangue he was to refute. He normally read his speeches from little pieces of paper which he was constantly obliged to put in order. . . .

"With his clever rather than highly coloured speeches, subtle rather than powerful in their delivery, he showed great skill in argument, rare presence of mind, he had a way of saying everything, despite legal restrictions, so that even the most intolerant audience understood what he was implying, and he was nimble enough to slip through his opponent's fingers and to stand up for himself even in the tightest corner."

## Beginnings

As Constant began the story of his life, he wrote that "I was born on 25 October 1767, in Lausanne, Switzerland, the son of Henriette de Chandieu, who was from a formerly French family which had taken refuge in the Pays de Vaud for religious reasons, and Juste Constant de Rebecque, a colonel in a Swiss regiment in the service of Holland. My mother died as a result of giving birth, a week after I was born."

He had a succession of tutors and read eight to ten hours a day. After trying to get him admitted to Oxford University (he was too young), Juste sent him to the University of Erlangen (Bavaria), where he began learning German and became addicted to gambling. Then he transferred to the University of Edinburgh where faculty included such dis-

tinguished friends of liberty as Adam Smith, Adam Ferguson, and Dugald Stewart. Constant mainly studied history and Greek. After two years, he went to Paris and studied with the intellectual Jean-Baptiste-Antoine Suard—his friends included Scottish philosopher David Hume, English playwright David Garrick, English novelist Lawrence Sterne, French mathematician Jean le Rond d'Alembert, French philosopher Marquis de Condorcet, and Lafayette. Before Constant was 18, he had learned to get along in three languages, and he was exposed to the ideas of brilliant thinkers.

In May 1789 he married Baroness Wilhelmina von Cramm, lady-in-waiting for the Duchess of Brunswick, but she didn't share his intellectual curiosity, and they were divorced.

Constant watched the French Revolution as it lurched from constitutionalism to Jacobin Terror. "I am currently busy reading and refuting Burke's book against the French levellers," he wrote a friend. "This famous book contains as many absurdities as it does lines, and thus it is highly successful in all English and German circles. He defends the nobility, the exclusions of the *sectaires*, the establishment of a dominant religion, and other things of this nature. . . . I believe, as you do, that what we are witnessing is fundamentally knavery and fury. But I prefer the knavery and fury which overthrow citadels, destroy titles and similar follies, and place all religions on an equal footing, to those which seek to preserve and hallow these wretched monstrosities. . . ."

## Madame de Staël

On September 18, 1794, Constant met Germaine de Staël on a road between Nyon and Coppet, Switzerland. She was the 28-year-old daughter of Suzanne Curchod, former lover of historian Edward Gibbon, and Jacques Necker, a Geneva banker who had served as the last finance minister under French King Louis XVI and had lent him some 2 million francs. She was married off to Eric-Magnus de Staël, impecunious Swedish aristocrat who became ambassador to France. He got some of her money, and she got better

connections at the French court. Madame de Staël emerged as the most influential woman in Europe—brilliant, bold, vain, and sensuous.

She launched a fabled salon that attracted the leading lights of French life, including Condorcet and Lafayette. As Constant described his impressions of her: "I have seldom seen such a combination of astounding and attractive qualities; so much brilliance coupled with so much good sense; such expansive, positive kindness; such immense generosity; such gentle and sustained politeness in society; such charm and simplicity; such absence of all restraint within the circle of her intimates." Constant particularly admired her for operating a remarkable network to help friends escape from the French Reign of Terror.

One of Madame de Staël's friends, Jean Lambert Tallien, launched the political attack on Maximilien Robespierre that brought his overthrow and execution in July of 1794, ending the Reign of Terror. Almost a year later, May 25, 1795, Constant and Staël ventured to Paris and witnessed the ruins of revolution amidst runaway inflation. They found many neighborhoods deserted. All around they saw signs saying that properties which the government had confiscated were for sale. Impoverished aristocrats held tag sales on the streets, offering their clothing, furniture, draperies, statues, anything that might fetch money for food. "The capital of the world," according to Staël's friend Henri Meister, "looks like an immense junk shop."

On September 23, 1795, the ruling Convention approved the third constitution since the Revolution began. This one established an executive consisting of a five-person Directory and a two-chamber legislature. The franchise was limited to those of substantial means. Members of the Convention wanted to retain their power, so they proposed a law which would require that two-thirds of the new legislature come from the Convention. Constant launched his political career by writing three articles opposing the proposed law, published in the June 24, 25, and 26 issues of *Nouvelles Politiques*—a newspaper edited by his former tutor Jean-Baptiste-Antoine Suard. He and Staël were accused of being

dangerous counterrevolutionaries, and they left Paris.

## Napoleon's Ascent

Staël's friend Paul Barras, a member of the Directory, turned his mistress, Josephine de Beauharnais, over to an unemployed military commander named Napoleon Bonaparte. During the Revolution, Napoleon had emerged as a Jacobin and, after the government declared war against Britain and Holland in February 1793, then against Spain the following month, the country was soon surrounded by enemies. Napoleon demonstrated his resourcefulness by driving British and Spanish forces out of Toulon, about 40 miles east of Marseilles on the Mediterranean. This throttled royalist hopes of inciting an anti-Jacobin rebellion throughout southern France. In December 1793, amidst the Reign of Terror, the Convention named Napoleon a brigadier general. When royalist forces threatened to crush the Convention, Barras summoned Napoleon, and on October 5, 1795, he unleashed his artillery.

In April 1796, Napoleon struck at the Sardinian army and crushed it. By boldly throwing himself into battle when his subordinates got bogged down, Napoleon captured Milan, the financial and cultural capital of Lombardy—and his awed men began calling him "*Le Petit Caporal*" ("the Little Corporal"). At Castiglione, Napoleon faced an Austrian army that had grown until it was three times bigger than his own forces, but he took some 15,000 Austrian prisoners. Outnumbered by another Austrian army at Lodi and Rivoli, Napoleon won again as he killed some 30,000 Austrian soldiers. He set up administration of his spoils—about half of Italy—then returned triumphant to Paris.

On September 4, 1797 (known as 18 Fructidor on the revolutionary calendar), Napoleon helped Barras seize power, expelled Directors who wanted to restore the Bourbon monarchy, suppressed royalist newspapers, and deported 165 dissidents to French Guiana. Horrified at the prospect of seeing the Bourbons back in power, Constant praised Barras.

Napoleon thirsted for military glory, so he sailed for Egypt, which he hoped to capture and thereby cut off Britain from its Indian empire. The campaign was a disaster, and Napoleon was lucky to escape back to France—without his army or his fleet.

France was a mess. There was unrest because of high taxes, forced loans, military conscription, and the seizure of gold, silver, and works of art. Poor people resented greedy government officials who seized their crops and their sons. There were price controls, chronic shortages, and endless lines for the simplest things like bread. Armed gangs terrorized merchants and travelers. In once-prosperous Lyons, an estimated 13,000 out of 15,000 shopkeepers had been driven out of business. Directors responded by ordering dissidents arrested, suppressing newspapers, and deporting editors. French forces were driven out of Germany and Italy. Napoleon's stunning gains had been lost. On November 9, 1799 (18 Brumaire), Napoleon decided it was time for him to seize power, and Constant and Staël supported him as a lesser evil than Jacobins or Bourbons.

Napoleon established a façade of representative government. There was a Tribune whose members received a 15,000-franc salary and were expected not to cause any trouble. Constant was appointed a Tribune, but in his first address, January 5, 1800, he presented a case for freedom of speech. He denounced Napoleon's demand to have himself named Consul for Life, which took place August 2, 1802. This meant gaining absolute power and suppressing civil liberties. "These intellectuals are like vermin in my clothes," Napoleon remarked, "I shall shake them off." Constant was dismissed. "He put himself into opposition, thinking I would pay a high price for his co-operation," Napoleon recalled later. "He should have known that I do not buy my enemies; I stamp on them."

## Exile

Madame de Staël fled with Constant to Coppet, her family estate near Geneva. Then they traveled to Weimar, Germany, where he worked on a history of religion. He got to

know Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749-1832) and Johann Christoph Friedrich von Schiller (1759-1805).

After the death of her father, Jacques Necker, Madame de Staël turned for consolation to Constant, but he yearned to be free of her dominating influence. "Never have I met a woman who is so incessantly exacting," he noted in his diary. "One's whole life (every minute, every hour, every year) must be at her disposal. When she gets into one of her rages, then it is a tumult of all the earthquakes and typhoons rolled into one. We must part . . . it is my sole chance for a peaceful life." During their years together, she wrote about French and German romanticism, but Constant's important political writings came after their romance ended in 1808.

He had already been at work two years on his autobiographical novel, *Adolphe*. It chronicled the doomed on-again, off-again affair between aimless Adolphe and a Polish woman named Ellenore. For years, Constant held public readings of the evolving story, which almost everybody assumed to be about himself and Madame de Staël. The novel wasn't published until 1816. By then, Constant had married Charlotte von Hardenberg, who offered him the closest thing to domestic harmony he would ever know.

Meanwhile, Napoleon had emerged as a world-class monster. As historian Paul Johnson wrote, Napoleon "created the first modern police state, and he exported it. Austria, Prussia, and Russia all learned from the methods of Joseph Fouché, Bonaparte's minister of police, from 1799 to 1814. . . . Over 2 million people died as direct consequence of Bonaparte's campaigns, many more through poverty and disease and undernourishment. Countless villages had been burned in the paths of the advancing and retreating armies. Almost every capital in Europe had been occupied—some, like Vienna, Dresden, Berlin, and Madrid, more than once. Moscow had been put to the torch. . . . The wars set back the economic life of much of Europe for a generation. They made men behave like beasts, and worse."

In late November 1813, Constant started writing a pamphlet, *De l'esprit de conquête et*

*de l'usurpation*, which developed a sophisticated, new vision of liberty. He focused not on politics, which had preoccupied the leading thinkers for decades, but on private life. He insisted that commerce was the standard-bearer of civilization and peace. The Hanover edition appeared on January 30, 1814. This was followed by a London edition (March), and two Paris editions (April, July).

Constant offered historical perspective, writing that "what we now call civil liberty was unknown to the majority of the ancient peoples. All the Greek republics, with the exception of Athens, subjected individuals to an almost unlimited social jurisdiction. The same subjection of the individual characterized the great centuries of Rome; the citizen had in a way made himself the slave of the nation of which he formed a part. He submitted himself entirely to the decisions of the sovereign, of the legislator; he acknowledged the latter's right to watch over his actions and to constrain his will."

Constant observed how tyrants demand conformity. "The love of power," he wrote, "soon discovered what immense advantages symmetry could procure for it. While patriotism exists only by a vivid attachment to the interests, the ways of life, the customs of some locality, our so-called patriots have declared war on all of these. They have dried up this natural source of patriotism and have sought to replace it by a factitious passion for an abstract being, a general idea stripped of all that can engage the imagination and speak to the memory."

## Napoleon Deposed

The British and their allies entered Paris on March 31, 1814. On April 6, the Senate, whose members were nominated by Napoleon and given the power of overthrowing laws considered unconstitutional, voted to depose him. He found sanctuary on the island of Elba, between Corsica and western Italy. At the same time, the Senate assigned some respected liberals like the economist Destutt de Tracy (1754-1835) to help draft a new constitution. It soon became clear that the British favored the restoration of the Bourbon mon-



archy as the best bet for peace—the Bourbon heir Comte de Provence, Louis XVIII, had been an exile in Britain.

Upon his return to France, Louis XVIII set aside the Senate's draft constitution, and in May 1814 he issued the *Declaration de Saint-Ouen* promising toleration and yet another constitution. The resulting *Charte*—presented as a gift from the king—assured religious toleration and equality before the law. It affirmed the abolition of feudal fees and church tithes. It accepted the *Code Napoleon*. There was an ambiguous commitment to freedom of the press. It specified that private property which had been seized during the Revolution wouldn't be taken away from those who had acquired it during subsequent decades. There would be a two-chamber legislature: the king would name members of the House of Peers, and voters would elect members of the Chamber of Deputies. Louis XVIII acknowledged the inevitability of some constitutional limitations on government power, but he certainly didn't intend to introduce British-style parliamentary government to France.

Ultra-royalists, led by the king's brother, the Comte d'Artois, considered the king a sellout for accepting so many changes from the Revolution and Napoleonic era. They denounced Louis XVIII as a "crowned Jacobin" and "King Voltaire." As the first French political party, the Ultras demanded that royalists take over the administrative bureaucracies Napoleon had established. They wanted royalists who had fled the Revolution either to get their property back or be compensated. They urged that dissidents be suppressed. When the king cut back the army, the Ultras exploited bitterness among former soldiers who needed money. And the Ultras fanned resentment against the continued Allied occupation of France and interference in French affairs. Ultras gained respectability from the intellectual counterrevolution against liberalism.

Constant responded to the Ultras by writing pamphlets that helped educate French people about parliamentary government for the first time. For instance, in *Les Reflexions sur les Constitutions (Reflections on Constitutions and the Necessary Guarantees)*, he in-

sisted that the king must be politically neutral as in Britain, ministers must be responsible for government policy, and there should be an unpaid, elected legislature. He asserted the primacy of civil liberties, including trial by jury and freedom of the press. When government censors suppressed this pamphlet, Constant wrote another, *De la liberté des brochures, des pamphlets et des journaux (The Freedom of Pamphlets and Newspapers)*.

## Napoleon's Return

On March 1, 1815, Napoleon escaped from Elba and landed on the Cap d'Antibes, near Cannes, with about 800,000 gold francs and 1,100 soldiers. As they marched north toward Paris, more soldiers joined them.

Although Constant had loathed the Bourbons, he gave Louis XVIII credit for acknowledging some liberal principles, and he wrote an attack on Napoleon, published in *Journal de Paris* on March 11. He followed this with a March 19 attack in *Journal des débats*: "Napoleon has not promised clemency. . . . He is Attila, he is Genghis Khan, but more terrible and more odious because the resources of civilization are his to use. I have sought liberty in all its forms; I have seen the king ally himself with the nation." Constant added what would prove to be embarrassing hyperbole: "those who love liberty, will prefer to die upon the steps of a throne by which that liberty is safeguarded and assured."

The next day, Napoleon entered Paris with his Polish Hussars, and Constant went into hiding at Angers, about 150 miles southwest of Paris. When he heard that Napoleon had declared a general amnesty, he met Napoleon's brother Joseph Bonaparte at the Palais Royal and provided assurances of his cooperation. Joseph Bonaparte claimed that Napoleon learned his lesson and would support constitutional government. The emperor would purportedly need the help of respected liberals like Constant, and, accordingly, he was ushered into the Tuileries palace for a face-to-face meeting with Napoleon on April 14. "I need the support of the nation," Napoleon told Constant. "In return, the nation will ask for liberty; she shall have it."

Constant's friends like Lafayette hooted at the idea of Napoleon as a born-again liberal. Constant countered: "I did not for one moment believe in the sudden conversion of a man who for so long had exercised so absolute an authority. . . . I wanted to find out for myself what we could still hope for, whether his bitter experiences had in any manner altered his mind."

Constant adapted the constitution which had been accepted by Louis XVIII, and on April 24 Napoleon accepted a modified version. To avoid public debate, Napoleon presented it as a mere addition to existing laws—*Acte Additionnel aux Constitutions de l'Empire*. There were many features which reflected Constant's views, but the *Acte Additionnel* stressed monarchy much more than Constant would have liked. The *Acte Additionnel*, known as *La Benjamine*, was approved in a plebiscite and proclaimed June 1.

## Principles of Politics

Constant had been working on *Principes de politique* (*Principles of Politics*), and it was published in May as an analysis of constitutional principles. "The citizens possess individual rights independently of all social and political authority," he wrote, "and any authority which violates these rights becomes illegitimate. The rights of the citizens are individual freedom, religious freedom, freedom of opinion, which includes the freedom to express oneself openly, the enjoyment of property, a guarantee against all arbitrary power. No authority can call these rights into question without destroying its own credentials."

Ultras demanded power to enforce virtuous behavior, but Constant warned that "Arbitrary power destroys morality, for there can be no morality without security; there are no gentle affections without the certainty that the objects of these affections rest safe under the shield of their innocence."

Constant challenged the doctrine that unlimited power was acceptable as long as it was exercised in the name of popular sovereignty: "When sovereignty is unlimited, there is no means of sheltering individuals from govern-

ments. It is in vain that you pretend to submit governments to the general will. It is always they who dictate the content of this will, and all your precautions become illusory."

He reaffirmed the urgency of limiting government power: "You may divide powers as much as you like; if the total of those powers is unlimited, those divided powers need only form a coalition, and there will be no remedy for despotism. What matters to us is not that our rights should not be violated by one power without the approval of another, but rather that any violation should be equally forbidden to all powers alike."

But before anything could come of the new constitution, the Prussian general Marshal Blucher and the British Duke of Wellington gathered 213,000 British, Prussian, Dutch, and Belgian soldiers and on June 18, 1815, routed Napoleon at Waterloo, near Brussels. Napoleon demanded dictatorial power, but Lafayette, a member of the Chamber of Deputies, demanded Napoleon's abdication. He was banished to a shabby, pink six-room house (shared with his top officers and families) on St. Helena, a British-controlled volcanic island in the South Atlantic Ocean about 1,140 miles west of South Africa, where he was to die six years later. Allied armies entered Paris on July 7, and the following day Louis XVIII was again installed at the Tuileries palace.

Constant offered an apology to Louis XVIII, and the king let him stay in France. Constant settled down with his wife, Charlotte. (Madame de Staël died of a stroke in Paris, July 17, 1817, at 51.) While trying to jump over a garden wall, he injured his hip, and for the rest of his life he needed crutches to get around.

Ultra-royalists gained a majority in the Chamber of Deputies, and they did everything they could to undermine Louis XVIII. They made divorce illegal, imposed restrictions on publishing and established the *Cours Prévo- tales*, a court to deal with defendants accused of treason. People were arbitrarily arrested, jailed for weeks without being brought to trial, then hit with long prison sentences. The Allies feared that such policies might trigger a new revolution, and they urged Louis XVIII to dissolve the Chamber of Deputies, which he did.

In 1817, the liberal-leaning Minister Elie Décazes pushed through an extension of the voting franchise to every Frenchman over 30 who paid more than 300 francs of taxes—about 88,000 out of an estimated 30 million people. Constant and Lafayette were elected from Sarthe, a district in central France. They emerged as leaders of the new Liberal party. By 1819, a new law granted more freedom of the press.

Political debates intensified. Ultras promoted their views through newspapers like *Quotidienne* and *Drapeau Blanc*. Moderates had the *Journal des Débats*. Constant edited *Minerve Française*, and there was *Constitutionnel*, another liberal newspaper.

Constant defied laws against seditious speech and writing—court decisions couldn't be appealed, and sentences were carried out within 24 hours. He produced dozens of newspaper articles and pamphlets, and he delivered hundreds of speeches. Nobody was as steadfast a champion of freedom of speech and freedom of the press. He went on to launch a campaign against the African slave trade. He kept attacking slavery for years through articles, speeches, and debates.

Constant hailed commerce which “inspires in men a vivid love of individual independence. Commerce supplies their needs, satisfies their desires, without the intervention of the authorities. This intervention is almost always—and I do not know why I say almost—this intervention is indeed always a trouble and an embarrassment. Every time collective power wishes to meddle with private speculations, it harasses the speculators. Every time governments pretend to do our own business, they do it more incompetently and expensively than we would.”

On December 22, 1824, Louis XVIII died, and he was succeeded by his Ultra-royalist brother, the Comte d'Artois, who became Charles X. He pushed for a succession of laws to imprison people found guilty of offending Catholic clergymen; to give Catholic clergy the power to appoint all teachers in primary school and to control secondary schools; and to make it illegal for anybody to publicly question the doctrine of the divine right of kings. Constant, elected to the Chamber of

Deputies from a Paris district, led the opposition.

Constant's health deteriorated seriously during 1830. His legs became swollen. He experienced paralysis in his feet, tongue, and other parts of his body. He was confined to his house at 17 rue d'Anjou, Paris. He told a friend: “I have been unable to sustain an hour's conversation.”

On May 7, the king dissolved the Chamber of Deputies and called new elections, but Liberals won 274 of the 417 seats. On July 25, the king dissolved the new Chamber of Deputies, which hadn't yet met, and announced a tougher censorship policy aimed at suppressing political pamphlets—nothing under 25 pages could be published without prior approval of censors. Journalists spurred by Louis Adolph Thiers issued a call for resistance, and the next day merchants closed their shops throughout Paris. There were riots July 28 and 29 in which some 2,000 people were killed. The king had dispatched 40,000 of his best soldiers to achieve colonial glory in Algiers, so he was caught unprepared.

Lafayette wrote Constant: “A game is being played here in which our heads are all at stake. Bring yours!” He got out of bed but soon encountered barricades that blocked many of the streets in Paris. When he finally made it to the Chamber of Deputies, they resolved to depose the king and name as the successor the Duc d'Orléans who, though related to the Bourbons, had fought as a republican during the French Revolution. Constant was among those who secured his agreement to honor the fundamental protections specified in the *Charte* of 1814. Soon afterward Charles X abdicated.

Constant died on December 8, 1830, with his wife, Charlotte, at his side. He was 63. There was a funeral service December 12 at a Protestant church on rue Saint Antoine. As his coffin was brought to the Cemetery of Père Lachaise, people waved the tricolor flags of the Liberal Party. Lafayette told the crowd: “Love of liberty, and the need of serving her, always ruled his conduct. To say this is a justice due him, over his grave, by a friend who, less trusting and temperate than he, was nevertheless the confidant of his most intimate thoughts.”



And there was this letter to Constant's wife, Charlotte, signed by 13 people in the French colonies of Martinique and Guadeloupe: "How could we forget the Honourable Deputy who by his efforts did so much to abolish, at least in part, the revolting ill-treatment of which we were the victims. . . . The entire family of coloured peoples dares to hope that in your justifiable grief you will deign to accept the expression of the regrets which his loss inspires in us—the loss of a man who was always the staunchest supporter of our rights."

Constant's most influential ideological successor was Alexis de Tocqueville (1805-1859). "The last generation in France," Tocqueville wrote, "showed how a people might organize a stupendous tyranny in the community at the very time when they were baffling the authority of the nobility and braving the power of kings. . . . When I feel the hand of power lie heavy on my brow, I care but little to know who oppresses me; and I am not the more disposed to pass beneath the yoke, because it is held out to me by the arms of a million men . . . unlimited power is in itself a bad and dangerous thing."

Although the French liberal journalist Edward Laboulaye brought out an edition of Constant's works in 1861, collectivism was coming into fashion, and Constant was re-

membered as an author of French romantic literature (mainly *Adolphe*). This view continues in some quarters—a 1993 biography of Constant, by French literature professor Dennis Wood, belittles his political philosophy. Elizabeth Schermerhorn's 1924 biography remains the best in English.

But twentieth-century government horrors have brought recognition that Constant had fantastic insight. Political theorists F.A. Hayek and Isaiah Berlin helped revive interest in Constant's political writings during the 1950s, and there was a new Paris edition of his works in 1957. In 1980, the Institut Benjamin Constant got started in Lausanne, Switzerland, and the first English-language assessment of Constant's political contributions was published—*Benjamin Constant's Philosophy of Liberalism* by Brown University political science professor Guy H. Dodge. Cambridge University Press published the first English translation of Constant's major political writings in 1988. New documents have come to light, and since 1993 the prestigious German publisher Max Niemeyer Verlag has issued the first three of a projected 40 volumes of Constant's publications, memoirs, and correspondence. Let us hope that more people will discover the genius of this great thinker for liberty. □

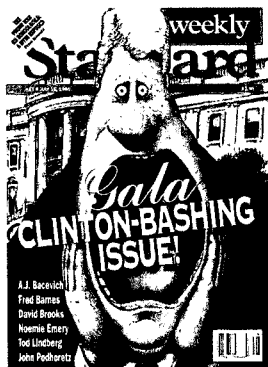
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## Preaching to the Choir

“Love your enemies, for they tell you your faults.”

—*Poor Richard's Almanac*

**T**his past summer I attended the annual meetings of the Eris Society, an organization created by investment writer Doug Casey. The purpose of the Eris Society is to expand our horizons, meet new people, make us think, and challenge our views on politics, economics, science, and philosophy. Most of the members of the Eris Society are, like Doug, libertarians. And so, not surprisingly, 18 of the 25 speakers were libertarians, even though the format of the Eris Society is officially nonpartisan. Libertarians are not alone in seeking out their own. People seem more comfortable among friendly voices. Agreement among friends seems more agreeable than argument among critics.

And yet, like many of you, I enjoy a good argument. Contending with those who disagree—sometimes violently—teaches me far more about the weakness of my arguments than talking to colleagues who nod their head. And there is nothing more satisfying than convincing an opponent of the truthfulness of a theory or policy.

Undoubtedly one of the reasons the Chicago School of free-market economics has been more successful than the Austrian School is because members of the Chicago

School have traditionally addressed the entire economics profession in mainstream journals and books, while Austrians typically spend most of their time writing and chatting among themselves.

In the early 1950s, Ludwig von Mises was invited by a major Ivy League university to give a one-hour lecture on his vision of free-market economics. He declined the invitation, arguing that it would be “impossible for me to present the operation of the market economy in a short lecture.”<sup>1</sup> What a pity! Surely he could have countered the anti-capitalist mentality on this major campus, even if he were limited to an hour lecture. He might have changed the minds of only one or two students or faculty members, but that’s a beginning. Eventually one or two become a group and a group becomes a school and a school becomes a movement. . . .

I always make it a point of talking, corresponding, and reading the works of non-believers and critics. I enjoy reading John Kenneth Galbraith, Robert Heilbroner, Paul Samuelson, and Alan Blinder. I’ve made a point of seeking them out at annual meetings of the American Economic Association. You may have noticed that I frequently cite critics in my columns, not because I agree with them, but because they offer a useful counterpoint. And maybe I’ve even had an impact. Sure, I gain much from reading Milton Friedman, Ludwig von Mises, Henry Hazlitt, and other free-market economists, but it’s not enough to preach to the choir.

I know many of you have a hard time

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