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Response to William Olejniczak's review of Philip G. Dwyer, *Talleyrand*.

By Philip Dwyer, University of Newcastle.

In the course of writing *Talleyrand* for the Longman Press's 'Profiles in Power' series, I came to the realisation that, as a diplomat, he did not deserve his reputation and that most of his political career—especially during the Directory and the Empire—had been spent carrying out policy rather than formulating it. This is not to deny Talleyrand's skills as a negotiator as is evident from the parts he played at the Congress of Vienna (1814–15), and the Conference of London (1830–34). Most of his diplomatic career, however, was less than illustrious as I attempted to demonstrate through two examples—the lead up to the expedition to Egypt, and the Strasbourg memorandum.

That left me in a bit of a bind: how does one justify the writing of biography whose subject is all glitter and no substance? It is one that I attempted to overcome by re-thinking, if you will, Talleyrand's role in the governments he served. A career that spans eight regimes at a time of great upheaval is no mean feat. It means that Talleyrand, like a number of his compatriots, was a survivor, but does it tell us any more than that? If we approach Talleyrand from a different perspective to past biographers we can come, or at least that was my intention, to a fuller understanding of his role. I thought it more worthwhile, for example, to consider Talleyrand as representative of the political views inherent in certain circles of the French ruling elite—the liberal aristocracy who worked with the Revolution rather than against it. I also thought it more profitable to look upon Talleyrand, compromised in so many coups, not as an unscrupulous intriguer willing to participate in the overthrow of governments for his own personal benefit—that is part of the 'black legend' surrounding the man—but rather as a mediator between competing political interests and ideological tendencies, always working towards a settlement. Is my interpretation convincing? I don't know because the reviewer did not pick up on these points in any substantial manner. In the same vein, a discussion of some of the principles which, I think, can best explain Talleyrand's political behaviour would have been desirable—limited territorial expansion at a time of unlimited wars; the notion of the legitimacy of government based on the people, which he admittedly used as a justification for the overthrow of one regime or another; or the idea that the public good and private interests could and often did coincide. History is about new interpretations based on new ideas. These are my ideas, and this is *my* Talleyrand.

The reviewer is quite correct in stating that there are a number of passages too close to a biography written in the early 1970s by J. F. Bernard. The similarities came as a shock to me—I am my harshest critic—all the more so since I gave the manuscript to a number of colleagues to read beforehand, some of whom are perfectly familiar with the literature. At the time, I was writing an undergraduate textbook with a limited amount of space (80,000 words); paraphrasing secondary sources was a legitimate part of the preparatory process although at some point in the note-taking that took place over a number of years I obviously failed to clearly distinguish between what I had paraphrased and what were my own thoughts. Having said that, I have not used arguments or ideas from other sources unacknowledged. The passages cited, moreover, are descriptive, and in one instance contain footnotes that are not to be found in Bernard. I would reiterate that there are significant differences in interpretation between Bernard, a standard, popular biography without a compelling thesis, and my own work, whose arguments I have outlined above. It is a pity that the reviewer did not point this out.

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