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Robertson, Hume, and the Balance of Power

FREDERICK G. WHELAN

William Robertson, like his Scottish Enlightenment colleague David Hume, practiced a kind of philosophic history which, although it appears to consist mainly of narratives of political and military events, is also designed to teach moral and political lessons of general significance and utility. The principal theme of Hume's *History of England*, for example, is the growth of legal and constitutional government in connection with the emergence of modern society; Hume's narrative implicitly justifies both such a government and the moderate politics on which it depends. A theme of comparable importance in Robertson's *History of Charles V* (1769) is the emergence of a balance of power and thence a relatively stable international system among European states in the early sixteenth century, when the policy of balance first clearly appeared. As he declares in his Preface:

The political principles and maxims then established still continue to operate. The ideas concerning the balance of power, then introduced or rendered general, still influence the councils of nations. (R 307)¹

Robertson both describes the relevant policy decisions (especially the alliance between the traditional enemies, England and France, to counter the threat posed by Charles V's unprecedentedly large empire) and justifies such policies as reasonable and beneficial.²

In treating this theme, Robertson was taking up a topic that was of interest to Hume as well. Hume refers on a number of occasions to the sixteenth century balance of power in his *History* chapters on the reign of Henry VIII (1759),³ especially in the portion extending through the 1520s, and he treats the topic more systematically in his earlier essay "Of the Balance of Power" (1752).⁴ Hume like Robertson defends balance of power policies in general, and Hume certainly (Robertson probably) had a more particular reason for doing so: to justify contemporary British (Whig) foreign policy (and several wars), which since the reign of Louis XIV had aimed at maintaining a European counterbalance to France.⁵ Hume's and Robertson's favorable descriptions of the sixteenth century anti-Habsburg policy provide a useful background for defending the eighteenth century anti-Bourbon policy.⁶ Indeed, both Hume and Robertson probably exaggerated the prevalence of the balance of power, at least as a conscious policy, in the early sixteenth century; although they were no doubt correct in noting that something like the modern state system first began to take shape at that time, they seem to have projected the eighteenth century emphasis on balance backwards in time as a way of legitimizing it.⁷

Robertson sums up the fifty year period he covers by observing that the similar stage of development of the states of Europe at that time, together with the policy of balance, permitted the preservation of a fairly stable system of independent states that has lasted until the present:

But the advantages possessed by one state were counterbalanced by circumstances favourable to others; and thus prevented any from attaining such superiority as might have been fatal to all. The nations of Europe in that age, as in the present, were like one great family.... There was not among them that wide diversity of character and of genius which, in almost every period of history, hath exalted the Europeans above the inhabitants of the other quarters of the globe, and seems to have destined the one to rule and the others to obey.
(R 704)

Hume's concern with contemporary policy, and with France, is more conspicuous:

Europe has now, for above a century, remained on the defensive against the greatest force that ever, perhaps, was formed by the civil or political combination of mankind. And such is the influence of the maxim here treated of, that tho' that ambitious nation, in the five last general wars, have been victorious in four, and unsuccessful only in one, they have not much enlarged their dominions, nor acquired a total ascendant over EUROPE.... In the last three of these general

wars, BRITAIN has stood foremost in the glorious struggle; and she still maintains her station, as guardian of the general liberties of EUROPE, and patron of mankind. (*Essays* 634–35)

European liberty, the foundation of its claim to pre-eminence over the rest of the world, depends on the balance of power.

In their histories Robertson and Hume offer complementary narratives of early sixteenth century diplomatic events. The outset of Henry VIII's reign found England allied to Spain "to counterbalance the power of France," an alliance Henry's marriage to Catherine of Aragon was intended to consolidate (HE 82). The approximate equality of France and Spain, both seeking to extend their influence, and counteract each other, in Italy, created a situation (around 1509), according to Hume, "when the balance of power was better secured in Europe" than at any other time (HE 83), although the equilibrium was soon disturbed by Francis I's conquest of Milan (1515), which aroused renewed worry in England. Shortly thereafter, in 1519, a vacancy in the Imperial throne brought forth the candidacies of the two greatest monarchs in Europe, Francis I and the soon-to-be Charles V. Despite the usual fears of the German princes for their traditional liberties, Charles was elected, perhaps because the proximity of the Turkish Sultan Suleiman suggested the need for a stronger-than-usual Emperor (R 447); Charles thus added the Holy Roman Empire to his vast Austrian, Spanish, and Burgundian inheritances, and so was initiated the life-long rivalry between him and Francis. Although Charles's empire was the most extensive seen in Europe since the Romans, it was disunited and far-flung, whereas the kingdom of France, "being close, compact, united, rich, populous, and being interposed between the provinces of the emperor's dominions," was still roughly its match (HE 121). This situation made it possible as well as in the interest of Henry VIII "to hold the balance between these two powers," thus giving him an especially important role in European politics (HE 121; R 452).

In 1520 Henry concluded an alliance with Charles, a move both Hume and Robertson criticize as an error (from the point of view of the balance of power); although France may still have appeared stronger, Henry failed to appreciate the potential strength and ambition of Charles, who adroitly played on traditional Anglo-French enmity and on Cardinal Wolsey's ambition to be Pope (HE 124; R 473). A major shift occurred, however, after Charles V's armies defeated and captured Francis I at the battle of Pavia (1525) and sacked Rome (1527), and Charles's brother Ferdinand was elected king of Bohemia and Hungary (1527). The power of the House of Austria was now at a peak, and the "terror of the emperor's greatness" aroused an opposing coalition (HE 160). Henry VIII, instead of taking advantage of France's defeat, followed balance of power logic and switched his support to the weaker side, which led to a temporary truce (the Peace of Cambrai, 1529). After about 1530

Henry VIII became preoccupied with domestic policy (marital and religious) and with Scotland, and played a less active diplomatic role in Europe. Francis I remained the principal antagonist of Charles V, "counterbalanc[ing] the emperor's superior power" through occasional alliances with German Protestant princes, Sultan Suleiman, and the Pope, all of whom had fears or quarrels respecting the Habsburgs (R 577). Despite the combined opposition of all these, Charles V towards the close of his career seemed on the verge of imposing his absolute authority on Germany, thus jeopardizing the Reformation, until his final defeat by Maurice of Saxony (1552) and his subsequent abdication. The empire of the Habsburgs, soon after divided into separate but allied Spanish and Austrian branches, continued to predominate in Europe for a century, but its complete hegemony was forestalled and a balance of independent states preserved.

In the course of their narratives Robertson and Hume indicate the meaning of the balance of power both as a system of international politics and as a statesman's maxim in foreign policy. In the systemic perspective, the balance of power refers to a situation in which an equilibrium or "equipoise" is maintained among a number of states or coalitions of states so that none of them is able to enlarge its possessions and power excessively—in particular, to the extent of abolishing the independence of any other state. This result is achieved through the counterbalancing of the power of the strongest state, or a state that appears to be growing in power, by an opposing combination of weaker states, which in concert can check the stronger and overcome the threat that it poses to them. In this way general stability is maintained in the system as a whole, and, although wars may be fought to maintain the balance, the existence of a balance may deter ambitions of conquest and thereby contribute to a greater degree of international peace than might otherwise be the case.

"Uncommon lustre" is shed on the early sixteenth century, Robertson comments, by the simultaneous presence of five outstanding monarchs: Pope Leo X, Charles V, Francis I, Henry VIII, and Suleiman the Magnificent (as well as other significant German and Italian states).⁸

In every contest, great power as well as great abilities were set in opposition; the efforts of valour and conduct on one side, counter-balanced by an equal exertion of the same qualities on the other...served to check the exorbitant progress of any of those princes, and prevent their attaining such pre-eminence in power as would have been fatal to the liberty and happiness of mankind. (R 454)

Warfare was nearly continuous during the fifty years Robertson surveys, and there were incremental changes in the relative weight of various states, and yet the rough equality of opposing forces (often Charles V against some

combination of the others), and the interest of rulers in "interpos[ing], and balanc[ing] any temporary advantage" gained by another, meant that no major conquests were made. The result, rather, was an intensification of international awareness and contacts, and the development of Europe as

one great political system, in which each took a station, wherein it has remained since that time with less variation than could have been expected after the events of two active centuries. (R 704)⁹

Viewed from a systemic perspective, the balance of power has the interesting feature that the common good, namely the international stability and relative peace that an outside observer might identify as the system's purpose or end, is promoted not through the moral or benevolent intentions of the state-actors, but rather as a side effect or byproduct of each actor's pursuing its own rational self-interest (state security and independence). Statesmen may consciously aim at preserving the balance as a generally desirable object, but they need not do so in order for the system to work; and those who do consciously try to maintain the balance normally do so in an instrumental spirit, as a strategy for promoting their national interest. Although the balance of power produces moderation in international relations, it does not depend on the virtue of moderation in the actors involved, but rather on the opposition of forces. Hume, as an advocate of both political moderation and the balance of power, thus embraces two distinct prescriptions for modern politics.

The theory of the balance of power may therefore be thought of as an "invisible hand" theory, hence an instance of an important paradigm of classical liberal social theory more generally.¹⁰ Hume notes the similarity of the balance of power among states to other balanced or self-regulating systems: to Athenian ostracism, in which the excessive power of one man provoked an opposite reaction (*Essays* 334), and to a balanced constitution. With reference to the latter Hume also clearly argues that a balanced system could work beneficially even if every individual participant in it is "supposed a *knave*": through "the skilful division of power, this [self-]interest [of each part] must necessarily, in its operation, concur with public [interest]" ("Of the Independency of Parliament" 42-43).¹¹ Although the conceptual materials would thus seem to have been at hand, however, neither Hume nor Robertson ever explicitly presents or analyzes the international balance of power system in the terms suggested here.

In addition to denoting the source of stability in an international system, the balance of power can also refer to associated maxims or prudential rules of foreign policy for states whose first interest is presumed to be the avoidance of being conquered. One such maxim would be that if a state faces a rival state that is stronger, or is increasing in strength, or that acquires allies, it too

should acquire allies so as to balance the opposing force. A conscious grasp and observance of this rule was frequently exhibited by sixteenth century rulers, and most persistently by the beleaguered French king, who went so far as to cultivate Suleimen as well as other potential allies:

However just Francis might esteem his own cause, he did not trust so much to that as to neglect the proper precautions for gaining other allies besides the sultan, by whose aid he might counterbalance the emperor's superior power. (R 577)

The most familiar rule of policy, however, is that a state that is not immediately involved in a conflict between two other states or coalitions should remain neutral so long as the contestants are evenly matched, but otherwise should enter the conflict on the weaker side so as to prevent the stronger power from becoming so strong that it could threaten the independence of all. Hume clearly sets forth this practical maxim of statecraft, citing examples from the ancient world of states that "always threw themselves into the lighter scale" or "support[ed] the weaker side in every contest" (*Essays* 333–34). A state that follows this policy is sometimes termed the "balancer" in the system, and this useful role, according to both Hume and Robertson, was played by England in the early sixteenth century, as in the eighteenth. From about 1519, when the rivalry between Charles V and Francis I became apparent, Henry VIII "often boasted that he held the balance of Europe in his hand" (R 446). Henry's position and power rendered him "the natural guardian of the liberties of Europe, and the arbiter between the emperor and the French monarch," who both courted his friendship.

Henry himself was sensible of this singular advantage, and convinced that, in order to preserve the balance even, it was his office to prevent either of the rivals from acquiring such superiority of power as might be fatal to the other, or formidable to the rest of Christendom. (R 452)

Henry was not always consistent in abiding by his own principle, but after Charles's great victory in 1525, he realized that "it was no longer safe for England to remain entirely neutral;" the terms demanded by Charles would "forever have annihilated the power of France, and destroyed the balance of Europe" (HE 154–55). Henry

had never dreamt...of any event so decisive and so fatal as the victory at Pavia, which seemed not only to have broken but to have annihilated the power of one of the rivals.... He saw all Europe in danger of being overrun by an ambitious prince, to whose power there now remained no counterpoise. (R 501)

He accordingly bowed to the logic of the situation and transferred his support to his traditional rival, the King of France.

Balance of power policy is therefore opposed to the specious contrary notion that one should always join what appears to be the stronger (and thus winning) side so as to join in the spoils of the defeated victim. When it seemed that Hannibal had decisively defeated Rome, Philip of Macedon "most imprudently formed an alliance with the conqueror," says Hume, to share in the conquest of Italy (*Essays* 336). In the similar situation following the battle of Pavia, Henry VIII was tempted to seize the opportunity to "acquire the dominion of considerable provinces [in France], or dismember that great monarchy" (HE 150). A better grasp of the desirability of a balance of power, however, led Henry to behave on this occasion more prudently than the ancient king. When in 1540 Henry once again joined the stronger Charles against Francis, it was due, as in 1520, to "pride" rather than to "true judgment" (HE 266).¹²

As is already evident from quoted passages, both Robertson and Hume not only analyze the balance of power but explicitly endorse it in their commentaries on the historical events. At the time of the Imperial election, Robertson remarks, the common interest of European princes "ought naturally to have formed a general combination in order to disappoint both competitors, and to prevent either of them from obtaining such a pre-eminence in power and dignity as might prove dangerous to the liberties of Europe;" it was primarily an imperfect understanding of the idea of "a proper distribution and balance of power," an idea only lately revived in Europe, that hindered this course of action (R 446). Only that skilled politician Pope Leo X exhibited "a proper solicitude for the public safety"; realizing that the election of either Charles or Francis would "be fatal to the independence of the Holy See,...and perhaps to the liberties of Europe," he shrewdly though unsuccessfully supported the weaker Francis, hoping to bring about a tie that would lead to the election of a minor German prince (R 447). Both Hume and Robertson frequently speak in normative terms of a "proper" balance, and they seldom miss an opportunity of criticizing Henry VIII for the "caprice" and "vanity" that kept him from pursuing a rational policy of balance as consistently as he might have (R 446, 452, 473, 501; HE 124, 266, 293).

Hume's essay "Of the Balance of Power" is—even more openly than the two histories—an effort to defend and praise the balance of power in general as reflecting "true politics and prudence" (*Essays* 335), and the eighteenth century balance against France in particular as "so necessary and so just a cause" (*Essays* 338). His main strategy is to suggest that "the maxim of preserving the balance of power is founded so much on common sense and obvious reasoning" (*Essays* 337) that it is supported by a broad consensus of opinion among capable statesmen and political writers. To this end, his most original contribution is to make the case that this policy was widely

understood and employed among intelligent people in antiquity, especially the Greeks. Elsewhere, however, Hume somewhat contradictorily remarks that the balance of power is "a secret in politics, fully known only to the present age," and thus a major example of the general improvement that the art of government has undergone in modern times ("Of Civil Liberty" 93).¹³ Hume provides a justificatory account of a balance of power policy that resembles the account he gives of other legitimate or praiseworthy social institutions, such as the rules of justice or government itself: it is (at first) not formally designed or agreed to, but emerges as a convention from the mutual interest that many individual parties have in promoting their recognized interests. It is subsequently conceptualized more systematically, reflectively approved because of its evident utility or beneficial effects, endorsed as a prudential (if not an obligatory) rule of conduct, and possibly given formal ratification in law.

One variation on this normative theme should be mentioned. In defending a policy of balance, Hume urges that it must be pursued in a moderate and calculated fashion. Although the ancient Greeks understood the idea of balance, many of their wars were actually wars of "jealous emulation," driven by the love of honor and victory, rather than of cautious or rational politics (*Essays* 334). The English too, in their contemporary wars against France, have sometimes seemed "more possessed with the ancient GREEK spirit of jealous emulation, than actuated by the prudent views of modern politics." Wars that were initiated out of a justifiable concern for the balance of power have been carried on with "imprudent vehemence," and "too far pushed from obstinacy and passion" (*Essays* 339). This unfortunate tendency could have been due to England's traditional antagonism towards France, or to the nationalistic popular passions that are inevitably stirred up by wars that statesmen regard as instruments of policy.¹⁴ In Hume's view, however, this tendency in foreign affairs exemplifies a more general phenomenon that is worrisome in political life—the tendency of actors in balanced systems to push their opposition (whenever they are able) to the point of destroying the generally beneficial balance. "The just balance between the republican and monarchical part of our constitution," for example, is maintained by the two opposing parties of Court and Country; a combination of interest and passion (or jealousy), however, causes adherents of both parties "to go greater lengths than their principles would otherwise carry them," thereby endangering the constitution. Likewise during the great rebellion, the "jealous and implacable" pretensions of parliament and king to liberty and absolutism, respectively, "broke the balance of the constitution" ("Of the Parties of Great Britain" 64–65, 68). Hume recognized the value of both liberty and authority, and of restrained partisanship, within a balanced constitution, and so he repeatedly urged moderation on both parties. His plea for moderation in a foreign policy that aimed at the maintenance of a European balance appears to represent the same pattern in his political thought.

Another reason for moderation, moreover, lies in the fact that the active foreign policy and warfare required to maintain the balance of power may be expensive. Great Britain's eighteenth century European commitments were financed by an increasing public debt, which Hume deplored on various grounds, including the fear that an excessive debt would eventually sap the will or strength needed to resist foreign ambitions. Hume's advocacy of moderation in foreign policy should thus also no doubt be viewed in light of the tension between his support for the balance of power policy and his opposition to the public debt that paid for it.

In addition to defending balance as the key to international stability, Hume and Robertson share another concern as well. The balance of power generally protects the independence of states (especially smaller ones) against conquest by a dominant state. In the extreme case, however, what it prevents is the emergence of a universal state, as at times seemed to be threatened in modern Europe first by Habsburg and later by Louis XIV's power and ambitions. Hume and Robertson agree with Gibbon, who, speaking of the Roman empire in explicit contrast to the modern plurality of states, provides what is probably the best statement of the fear that a universal state (or "universal monarchy") would probably become a universal despotism, to which there could be no opposition and from which no escape:

The division of Europe into a number of independent states, connected with each other, however, by the general resemblance of religion, language, and manners, is productive of the most beneficial consequences to the liberty of mankind. A modern tyrant, who should find no resistance either in his own breast, or in his people, would soon experience a gentle restraint from the example of his equals, the dread of present censure, the advice of his allies, and the apprehension of his enemies. The object of his displeasure, escaping from the narrow limits of his dominions, would easily obtain, in a happier climate, a secure refuge, a new fortune adequate to his merit, the freedom of complaint, and perhaps the means of revenge. But the empire of the Romans filled the world, and when that empire fell into the hands of a single person, the world became a safe and dreary prison for his enemies.¹⁵

It is the modern balance of power that maintains the international system of states and keeps the latter gloomy scenario from being reenacted.¹⁶

As—generally speaking—liberal and nationally minded writers, Hume and Robertson, like Gibbon, prefer on various grounds the diversity and competition of a plurality of states to a single, monopolistic state, and their histories show how the balance of power was responsible for ensuring that this preference was historically realized.¹⁷ As soon as he had been elected Emperor,

according to Robertson, Charles V formed the "grand system of enterprising ambition" that was evident throughout his reign (R 449). Soon afterwards he suppressed a revolt and abolished the traditional liberties of Castile, thereby both increasing his power and revealing his absolutist inclinations (R 705). After Pavia, Charles was generally—and accurately—suspected of "aiming at universal monarchy" (R 503), although neither then nor later did he have sufficient resources to succeed. Robertson later revises this claim: the contemporaneous assessment of Charles's actual aim may have been unfounded, but at any rate he indisputably sought conquests on an extensive scale (R 700). Robertson concludes by looking ahead to the tremendous territories and power in the hands of the Spanish and Austrian Habsburgs in the following century: "A family so great and so aspiring, became the general object of jealousy and terror. All the power, as well as policy, of Europe was exerted, during a century, in order to check and humble it"—so much so, that doing so became "a kind of political habit" of other nations, even after the power of Spain began to decline (R 705–706).

Hume also relates his analysis of the balance of power to the desirability of preventing universal monarchy, and to the "exorbitant ambition" of Charles V (HE 150). In the ancient world, he says, the successors of Alexander practiced "true politics and prudence" in acting to prevent any one of their number from becoming a universal monarch, whereas it is puzzling that other states failed to see in the Roman Carthaginian struggle a "contest for universal empire" and to react appropriately to this threat (*Essays* 335–36). With the replacement of feudal by modern institutions of war and governance, "mankind were anew alarmed by the danger of universal monarchy, from the union of so many kingdoms and principalities in the person of the emperor CHARLES" (*Essays* 338). Hume goes on to express the hope that the balance of power, along with other unforeseen causes, will succeed in averting the same danger now posed by France (*Essays* 634–35), even though the fear that France might actually dominate all Europe became increasingly anachronistic as the eighteenth century progressed.¹⁸

The fear of a hegemonic or universal state was naturally even more salient to Protestant Britons when the threatened universal monarch was a Catholic, and one moreover who persecuted Protestants. Since his is a civil history, Robertson offers only a brief but favorable account of "that happy reformation in religion which rescued one part of Europe from the papal yoke" (R 454), a sentiment that Hume generally shares. The Protestant princes of Germany were occasional participants in the coalitions against Charles V, and Louis XIV's revocation of the Edict of Nantes closely coincided with England's first participation in a coalition against him. Although Charles V at first wavered in his reaction to the Reformation, his decisive victory over the Lutheran princes at Muhlberg in 1547 and subsequent measures indicated that "he aimed at nothing less than at bringing all Germany to an uniformity in

religion, and at rendering the imperial power despotic" (R 636). A universal monarchy over all Europe may not have been within Charles's reach, but the transformation of the Empire into a unified, hereditary, and absolute state, tied to his other dominions, would have been a major step in that direction; the ensuing suppression of Protestantism in its heartland would have aggravated the disaster. Hence Charles's defeat by Maurice soon afterwards, and the reversal of all these plans through the treaty of Passau, are the climactic event of the history (R 653). Hume explicitly draws out the parallel to the present, pointing out that France, the new power threatening the liberties of Europe, shares in "that spirit of bigotry and persecution, with which the house of AUSTRIA was so long, and still is so much infatuated" (*Essays* 338). The danger posed by a universal state resembled, in the Protestant view, the danger presented by a universal church, such as Catholicism aspired to be: in both cases universality was associated with—and presumably achieved through—monarchical absolutism or tyranny. Thus there appeared to be a natural or logical affinity between the two leading modern contenders for the position of universal monarch and the Catholic Church (notwithstanding the opposition of actual Popes to imperial designs), and this association increased both the dread of a European empire and the attachment to pluralism and balance in Britain.

Hume and Robertson then set out to defend the balance of power as generally beneficial: as a safeguard against universal empire and despotism, as maintaining liberty in the sense of the independence of European states, and as promoting relative stability in the international system. But why did the balance of power need defending? There had of course always been opponents of the policy in Britain, both disgruntled opposition politicians who distrusted ministerial motives, and Tories who persistently warned against excessive continental involvements and their cost.¹⁹ Robertson, writing in the 1760s, may have been especially disturbed by Britain's diplomatic isolation after the Seven Years' War.²⁰

More generally, however, it seems reasonable to suppose that by the mid-eighteenth century, balance of power policy was only just becoming respectable, at least among the general educated public for whom Hume and Robertson were writing. By exhibiting its lengthy historical lineage and its favorable consequences in the past, Hume and Robertson sought to confirm its value and legitimacy, as well as to satisfy the growing desire to understand the historical origins and development of political institutions.

The balance of power policy had been reasonably clearly described much earlier, indeed contemporaneously with the period Robertson covers. Guicciardini (1561) describes the state system that had developed in fifteenth century Italy, emphasizing the role of Lorenzo de Medici, who sought to maintain a "state of balance" and who therefore directed his policy towards counterbalancing the Venetians, who "were undoubtedly stronger than any

of the allies alone, but much weaker than all of them together."²¹ Bacon (1612) refers to the early sixteenth century system to illustrate the "general rule," which he endorses, that

princes do keep due sentinel, that none of their neighbors do overgrow so....During that triumvirate of kings, King Henry VIII. of England, Francis the I. King of France, and Charles the V. Emperor, there was such a watch kept, that none of the three could win a palm of ground, but the other two would straightways balance it, either by confederation, or, if need were, by a war.²²

While statesmen and diplomats clearly recognized and sometimes enunciated the idea of the balance of power, however, philosophers and general writers may have been inhibited from openly praising it because of its amoral or "Machiavellian" appearance and reputation.²³

The balance of power was morally disreputable for three reasons, the first two of which are suggested by Hume and Robertson. First, it reflects a pure "power politics" approach to political practice, recommending that one align one's policy exclusively according to calculations of national interest and power (maintaining the balance and hence one's security) rather than more praiseworthy norms. A ruler may accordingly have to change sides, regardless of previous agreements or a sense of loyalty, if the overall balance so dictates.²⁴ Hume describes how Henry VIII correctly recognized that Charles V's victory at Pavia destroyed the "proper counterpoise to his power" and responded by shifting his support to France. Henry could not, however, openly invoke the power balance as an acceptable ground for breaking off his previous alliance, and so he disguised his policy under the chivalric pretext of "generosity in raising a fallen enemy" (HE 150).²⁵

Along the same lines, a policy of balance may well be opposed to the determination of foreign policy according to justice or to what one believes to be the morally or religiously (or ideologically) right cause. Francis I, like Richelieu a century later, sporadically allied himself with German Protestants (even while persecuting Protestants at home) to counterbalance Habsburg power, although intensity of religious sentiments during the Reformation did certainly sometimes interfere with strict balance of power policy (R 533, 546-47).²⁶ The most notorious case, however, was Francis I's alliance with the Turks in the 1530-40s, notwithstanding "the horror of christians in that age at any union with infidels, which they considered not only as dishonourable but profane," and intermittent efforts by Popes to negotiate Christian unity against Suleiman (R 555-56). In 1543, "to the astonishment and scandal of all Christendom, the lilies of France and crescent of Mahomet appeared in conjunction" in military operations against Savoy, pursuant to the logic of "counterbalance" (R 581, 579).

Finally, balance of power considerations can dictate aggressive (pre-emptive) war to counter a state that is growing in power, contrary to traditional just war theory. Bacon couples his comments on the balance of power with the presumably controversial assertion that "a just fear of an imminent danger, though there be no blow given, is a lawful cause of war."²⁷ The War of the Spanish Succession against Louis XIV was the classic modern case of a preventive war waged to balance or forestall the emergence of an excessively threatening power.²⁸ Hume's and Robertson's silence on this issue suggests that they accepted this implication of balance of power doctrine as not only legitimate but not particularly controversial.²⁹

Scruples about the morality of balance of power policy certainly declined during the eighteenth century. Maintenance of the European balance was explicitly cited as a goal of the parties in the Anglo-Spanish Treaty of Utrecht and other agreements ending the War of the Spanish Succession (1713), and the policy was upheld by such prominent public figures as Fenelon and Bolingbroke.³⁰ At midcentury Vattel enshrined the balance of power as a principle of international law in his influential treatise on the subject, with references to the dangers posed in the past by Charles V and Louis XIV, to the contemporary bipolar rivalry of France and Austria, and to the role of England as the holder of the "political scales":

Europe forms a political system in which the Nations inhabiting this part of the world are bound together by their relations and various interests into a single body....The constant attention of sovereigns to all that goes on, the custom of resident ministers, the continual negotiations that take place, make of modern Europe a sort of Republic, whose members—each independent, but all bound together by a common interest—unite for the maintenance of order and the preservation of liberty. This is what has given rise to the well-known principle of the balance of power, by which is meant an arrangement of affairs so that no State shall be in a position to have absolute mastery and dominate over the others.³¹

By the end of the century no less an anti-Machiavellian moralist than Kant was prepared to advocate a right to maintain the balance of power by force, if necessary, and the moral statesman Burke upheld it as a beneficial policy.³²

This change in the moral-intellectual climate reflects several things: the rise of liberal-constitutional thought, in which generally power must be restrained through checks and balances; the rise of "invisible hand" theories, in which self-interest (of individuals or states) is seen as producing good overall outcomes; and the decline of traditional Christian moralism, at least in political theory. Hume probably contributed to all of these developments. He and Robertson surely added another dimension, helping to make balance of

power politics respectable among the broad educated British public for whom they wrote by giving it a historical pedigree and showing how its results in a key period of the past were ones that enlightened readers could applaud.

NOTES

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1 William Robertson, *History of the Reign of Charles V*, in *Works*, edited by Dugald Stewart (London: Joseph Ogle Robinson, 1831), 307; cited in the text as R. I find 13 passages in *Charles V* in which Robertson explicitly refers to the "balance of power" or cognate terms; nearly the whole work, apart from the famous introductory survey of the Middle Ages, is concerned with diplomatic and military relations among European states and rulers.

2 In the only previous study of this subject of which I am aware, Schlenke argues that Robertson deliberately rejected *Kulturgeschichte* in the manner of Voltaire in favor of political history, especially *Machtpolitik* and the origins of the modern European state system, to which the balance of power is the key. He also notes that these themes link *Charles V* to the earlier *History of Scotland*, where Robertson spoke of *Gleichgewichtsgedanken* as "the great secret of modern politics" (Manfred Schlenke, "Kulturgeschichte oder politische Geschichte in der Geschichtsschreibung des 18. Jahrhunderts," *Archiv für Kulturgeschichte* 37 [1955]: 60–97, esp. 78–79).

3 David Hume, *The History of England* vol. III (Boston: Phillips, Sampson, 1849); cited in the text as HE.

4 David Hume, "Of the Balance of Power," in *Essays Moral, Political, and Literary*, edited by Eugene F. Miller, rev. ed. (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1987); cited in the text as *Essays* or by title of individual essay. Somewhat oddly, Hume does not mention this topic in the *Treatise of Human Nature* III ii 11, on the laws of nations.

5 As John Brewer points out, the century after 1688 marked the longest period of intermittent but steady British warfare, against France and her allies, since the Middle Ages (Brewer, *The Sinews of Power: War, Money, and the English State 1688–1783* [London: Unwin Hyman, 1989], 27).

6 Hume, in his essay of 1752, looks back over the period to 1689, when England broke with Stuart policy and turned against France. Robertson, writing after the Seven Years' War, joined this retrospective view to concerns about Britain's indecisive foreign policy in the 1760s in the face of the Franco-Austrian alliance. Interventionism in the name of the balance of power was largely a Whig policy. Although Robertson like Hume sought to write non-partisan history, his Whiggish affinity is clear. See D. B. Horn, "Principal William Robertson, D.D., Historian," *University of Edinburgh Journal* 18 (1956): 157, 159, 165.

7 This conclusion follows if Sheehan is correct in arguing that a

clear-sighted balance of power policy in England should be dated only from the late sixteenth century. Hume's and Robertson's impulse was perhaps a common one. Even in the eighteenth century the maintenance of balance was sometimes announced as a war aim after wars had begun for other reasons, and then projected back and said always to have been England's policy. M. Sheehan, "The Development of British Theory and Practice of the Balance of Power before 1714," *History* 73 (1988): 25, 32.

8 One wonders if this passage alludes (perhaps unconsciously) to the famous five-state balance of power system that was emerging in later eighteenth century Europe, replacing the Habsburg-Bourbon bipolarity of the previous century.

9 Robertson also refers to the "balance of power in Italy" as a subsystem in which the great powers often intervened, and which was disturbed by the death of Francesco Sforza in 1535 (R 549). The problem of reconciling regional power balances, such as in Italy or the Baltic, with the general European balance, which could influence or be influenced by them, was a major concern of eighteenth century politicians (Jeremy Black, "The Theory of the Balance of Power in the First Half of the Eighteenth Century: a Note on Sources," *Review of International Studies* 9 [1983]: 55).

10 Among writers who have commented on this, see Hans J. Morgenthau, *Politics among Nations*, 3rd ed. (New York: Knopf, 1960), chap. 11; and Terry Nardin, *Law, Morality, and the Relations of States* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983), 30–31.

11 For "proper counterbalance" in the parts of the constitution, see 46.

12 In 1557 Queen Mary briefly re-entered the war against France at the wish of her husband, Charles's successor, King Philip II of Spain. This action was unpopular, opposed by her Privy Council, and contrary to balance of power policy. Robertson remarks, possibly with contemporary reference, that this was the only occasion on which the English went to war against France reluctantly (R 689).

13 Cf. note 2. And only in modern Europe? The effectively independent rulers in the fluctuating political system of Mogul India seem not to have comprehended or practiced the balance of power, which facilitated the creation of the British Empire there by Clive and Hastings later in the eighteenth century (C. Collin Davies, *Warren Hastings and Oudh* [London: Oxford University Press, 1939], 2). Herbert Butterfield rejects Hume's effort to find the balance of power in the ancient world and would agree with the latter statement (although he overlooks it) that it is a modern invention, one that he believes was influenced by the familiar analogous conception of an equilibrium of forces in modern physics or mechanics ("Balance of Power," in *Dictionary of the History of Ideas* vol. 1 [New York: Scribner's, 1973], 180, 184).

14 Stewart emphasizes this theme in Hume's essay and relates it to Hume's generally favorable view of France, which was of course the traditional orientation of the Scots. Insofar as Hume means to criticize British policy as excessively belligerent towards France (beyond what the balance of power required), his position might be seen as inclining to the Tory side: it was William III who reversed Stuart policy and turned England decisively against

France, and Hanoverian ministries that made the anti-French balance of power central to British foreign policy. Overall, though, Hume's (Whiggish) defense of the balance of power is what stands out (John B. Stewart, *Opinion and Reform in Hume's Political Philosophy* [Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992], 271–72).

15 Edward Gibbon, *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* vol. 1 (New York: Modern Library, n.d.), 72–3.

16 A threatened “universal monarchy” would, more plausibly, have replaced the European state system with a continental European empire. Great Britain's own empire, by contrast, which many Englishmen preferred to European involvement, comprised overseas colonies and commerce and therefore did not threaten the “liberties of Europe.” Britons could have their own type of empire while praising and defending these liberties.

17 Since a single world state would presumably provide peace and stability at least as effectively as the balance of power does, if not more so, the defense of balance must rest on other grounds, such as the value of liberty and the contributions to progress of a diverse plurality of states. These are of course standard themes of classical liberal political theory.

18 John Robertson argues that Hume's fear of French power and ambition lessened after 1763; anti-French passages were deleted from “Of the Balance of Power” in the 1768 and 1770 editions. This shift corresponds to Hume's more pronounced conservatism on other matters in the last decade of his life (John Robertson, “Universal monarchy and the liberties of Europe: David Hume's critique of an English Whig doctrine,” in *Political Discourse in Early Modern Britain*, edited by Nicholas Phillipson and Quentin Skinner [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993], 354–55, 368–69).

19 M. S. Anderson, “Eighteenth-Century Theories of the Balance of Power,” in *Studies in Diplomatic History*, edited by Ragnhild Hatton and M. S. Anderson (Archon Books, 1970), 197; Jeremy Black, “The Tory View of Eighteenth-Century British Foreign Policy,” *Historical Journal* 31 (1988): 469–77.

20 Horn, “William Robertson,” 161. Horn guesses that Robertson's concern that Britain adhere to its traditional role in the policy of balance influenced his choice of Charles V as a topic, against the advice of his friends, including Hume. However, as Schlenke points out, Robertson's interest in the European state system and Scotland's and England's role in it (as opposed to the more insular concerns of earlier British historians) is apparent in his *History of Scotland* as well as *Charles V*. Robertson's more cosmopolitan histories parallel his Europe-oriented foreign policy preferences (Schlenke, “Aus der Frühzeit des englischen Historismus: William Robertsons Beitrag zur methodischen Grundlegung der Geschichtswissenschaft im 18. Jahrhundert,” *Saeculum* 7 [1956]: 109, 124).

21 Francesco Guicciardini, *The History of Italy* (1561), in *Theory and Practice of the Balance of Power 1486–1914*, edited by Moorhead Wright (London: Dent, 1975), 9–11.

22 Francis Bacon, “Of Empire,” in *Essays* (London: Dent, 1968), 58–59. This account is at variance with the usual view of Henry as the “balancer” between

the other two. The historians offer no instances of Charles and Francis combining to resist acquisition of territory by Henry.

23 Machiavelli himself evidently does not explicitly mention the concept of a balance, but he comes close to the central maxim in advising against "joining an aggressive alliance with someone more powerful than oneself," lest one end up as the prisoner of one's ally (cited by Wright, xi).

24 As late as the nineteenth century Britain was called "perfidious Albion" because of its readiness to switch its allegiance as dictated by its national interest in the balance of power, according to William H. Riker, *The Theory of Political Coalitions* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1962), 80.

25 In an exactly parallel case Hume says that the Athenians, acting as balancers, supported Thebes against Sparta until the former gained their decisive victory at Leuctra, "after which they immediately went over to the conquered, from generosity, as they pretended, but in reality from their jealousy of the conquerors" (*Essays* 333).

26 Placing national interest (calculated in terms of power) above loyalty to one's co-religionists may seem disreputable. By the eighteenth century, however, religious politics had acquired an image of dangerous "fanaticism" for philosophers like Hume. Since a foreign policy based on religious affinity and goals was the opposite of one based on the balance of power, to defend the balance of power was implicitly to endorse an anti-religious (or anti-ideological) policy and diplomacy. Hume's support of the balance of power thus corresponds to his general approach to politics.

27 Bacon, "Of Empire," 59.

28 Cf. Montesquieu's perfunctory defense of the right of pre-emptive attack, *The Spirit of the Laws*, translated by A. M. Cohler, B. C. Miller, and H. S. Stone (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), X.2, 138. Montesquieu also alludes to the fear of universal monarchy under Louis XIV (IX.7, 136), and in the earlier *Reflexions sur la Monarchie Universelle en Europe*, in *Oeuvres completes* vol. 2, edited by Roger Caillois (Paris: Pleiade, 1951), 19–38, in which he suggests that the chance of a universal monarchy being established in modern Europe is remote. The jurist Vattel argues that the increase in power of one state justifies neighboring states in warring against it, provided that there is a "reasonable presumption" that it has threatening intentions against them; he then adds that there is "perhaps no case in which a State has received a notable increase of power without giving other States just grounds of complaint." Unchecked power is always dangerous (E. de Vattel, *The Law of Nations*, translated by C. G. Fenwick [New York: Classics of International Law, 1964], III, sec. 42–45, 248–50). More generally, any war fought to defend the balance of power could be held to be justifiable (Anderson, "Eighteenth-Century Theories," 190).

29 But cf. Robertson's Dedication, warning George III against the pitfalls of "military glory" and conquest (R 306).

30 See the selections in Wright, 39–45, 50–58.

31 Vattel, III, sec. 47, 251. Since a republic can be thought of as a regime stabilized by an internal constitutional balance of powers, the international

system, likewise maintained by balance, is like a republic. Both, at a higher level of abstraction, are balance-of-power systems.

32 Immanuel Kant, *The Metaphysics of Morals*, section 56, in *Kant's Political Writings*, edited by Hans Reiss (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970), 167; Edmund Burke, "Thoughts on French Affairs," in *Further Reflections on the Revolution in France*, edited by Daniel E. Ritchie (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1992), 217.