

“To Win Souls as well as Towns”?:

Cardinal Richelieu, La Rochelle and the
Political Testament

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December 2008

Early seventeenth-century France stood at a crossroads. Several decades after the last religious war had been fought, France remained a nation divided between two religions. The years of civil wars perhaps too far behind to be remembered, fighting broke out once again between the Catholics and Huguenots in the 1620s. This last conflict reintroduced an old question for the largely Catholic nation: Could France survive with two religions? While it would be up to the royal government to decide the fate of the Huguenot community at the conclusion of this final conflict, opinions on a proper course of action varied across the nation.

Cardinal Richelieu, perhaps the most powerful man in all of France, once explained that, “Since princes are expected to establish God’s true church, they should be very thorough in banishing all false imitations of it, which are so dangerous to the state that one may say with complete truth that this kind of hypocrisy has always been used to clothe the enormity of the most pernicious undertakings.” This opinion is hardly surprising given the historical treatment that Richelieu has received over time. Believed for centuries to be the epitome of a sinister and calculating ruler, it seems logical to read that he would espouse a harsh extermination of any non-Catholic church in France.

But there were also other sides to the debate. An opposing point of view countered, “There is not a single sovereign in the world who is not obliged by this principle to procure the conversion of those who, living within his kingdom, have deviated from the path to salvation. But as man is reasonable enough by nature to find his way ultimately to so good an end, prudence does not permit anything so hazardous as to risk uprooting the grain while pulling out the tares, for it would be difficult to purge the state in any way but a gentle way without a shock capable of bringing down ruin upon it, or at the very least greatly weakening it.” This concise

yet eloquent statement urged continued tolerance of the Huguenots, fearing that the process of ridding the kingdom of them might destroy France.

Curiously, the second statement also comes from the hand of Cardinal Richelieu. The two points of view did not come at different times in his career, reflecting the changes of opinion wrought by years of experience. Rather, they appeared side by side in Richelieu's final composition, his *Political Testament*, written before his death in 1642. While the Huguenot question was indeed answered and came to its conclusion in 1629, the appearance of these conflicting statements years later reveals that it was an issue that Richelieu pondered for the rest of his life. It also sheds light on the complexity of the internal struggle Richelieu faced when dealing with the Huguenots. There is more to Richelieu's character than history, until recently, has provided. The confrontation with the Huguenots in La Rochelle in the late 1620s and the impact that this event had on his later political thinking reveals a more pragmatic and restrained Richelieu that previously thought.

It would be an understatement to say that Richelieu is an incredibly complex character in French history. From a young age, he harbored ambitious schemes for his rise to personal wealth and power. Once he secured his position in the royal government, Richelieu began acquiring numerous governorships in unruly western France, extending his power base from Paris into the provincial countryside.¹ As Chief Minister, he toiled within the shadows of Louis XIII's government to execute his plans. Richelieu was notorious for burning many of his papers and notes, eliminating any potentially incriminating paper trail. As if to explain his actions, he once wrote that, "secrecy and diligence...are so necessary to the success of affairs as to dwarf all other

¹ R.J. Knecht, *Richelieu* (London: Longman, 1991), 23.

attributes.”² Yet he did not rule as a tyrant, but instead introduced rational policies that helped to modernize France and strengthen the authority of the monarchy both at home and abroad.

Perhaps these different components of his personality were borne of his own life experiences as he went from a typical young nobleman to the most powerful man in all of France.

The future Cardinal Richelieu was born Armand Jean du Plessis in Paris in September 1585. He was the youngest son of a nobleman, François du Plessis, *seigneur* de Richelieu, who had at one time worked for the royal government under King Henry III. As a young man, Richelieu showed a clear penchant for the military and began his studies in this field, among others, at the Academy of Antoine de Pluvinel. Fate, however, would pull the young Richelieu away from his militaristic ambitions. In 1584, Henry III had given François du Plessis control of the bishopric of Luçon in exchange for his service and loyalty to the crown. This gave François the right to appoint a bishop of his choosing. This position was reserved for François’s eldest son, but he turned down the appointment. In the interest of keeping this position within the immediate family, the youngest son was instead called upon to assume the title of Bishop of Luçon in 1602.³

Richelieu abandoned his traditional studies and instead began learning philosophy and theology so that he could be prepared for his new role. He was insistent that he be well educated for this position and his preparation paid off in the end. As Bishop of Luçon, Richelieu was strict about enforcing the regulations passed by the Council of Trent to ensure the future stability and success of the French Catholic Church. The Poitou region, in which Luçon is located, was a notoriously religiously divided community with a relatively high population of Huguenots. He was committed to the flowering of the French Counter Reformation in the early seventeenth

² *Testament of Cardinal Richelieu*, trans. Henry Bertram Hill (Madison, WI : The University of Wisconsin Press, 1961), 75.

³ Knecht, 3.

century in the face of this Protestant challenge. In so doing, he earned a favorable reputation in Luçon.

Richelieu's desire for greater things began here in Luçon. Bolstered by his success as a bishop, he started to believe that he might be destined for things more important than this small town in provincial western France. Fate intervened again in Richelieu's life, this time in his favor. The assassination of King Henry IV in 1610 provided him a singular opportunity—the young Louis XIII was too young to rule on his own and so his mother, Marie de Medici, took the reins of government as the Queen Regent. Richelieu acted quickly to be noticed by her favorite and Maréchal of France, Concino Concini.

In that same year, Richelieu was selected as one of two clergy representatives from the Poitou region for the meeting of the Estates-General. Sensing the platform provided to him by this occasion, Richelieu made a name for himself by representing the clergy in a speech before the whole assembly. He eloquently proposed reforms to reestablish the power of the French church, which had been “deprived of all honor, robbed of its wealth, denied authority and profaned.”⁴ Somewhat prophetically, one of his plans of action was also to “severely punish” any violence on the part of the Huguenots.

His passionate speech elevated his stature and reputation and helped him to earn the appointment of secretary of state in November 1616. In this position, his tasks related primarily to foreign diplomacy. Unfortunately for Richelieu, this post was quite short lived. In April of 1617, his ties to Concini and Marie de Medici backfired on his plans for power. Concini responded to increased hostility against him at court by staging a dramatic coup that ended in his own assassination. Any members of the court and government with known links to Concini were quickly banished from the court, including the queen.

⁴ Ibid., 8.

During these years of exile, Richelieu worked tirelessly to secure Louis XIII's good graces. He would not return to favor until 1622 when Louis appointed him as Cardinal Richelieu. His rise to power was complete when Louis admitted Richelieu to his *Conseil d'en haut*, the highest royal council, in April 1624.

In the king's council, Richelieu's lust for power and his astute capabilities quickly worked in his favor. Within a matter of months, he carefully positioned himself in the king's inner circle and was rewarded by being named Chief Minister in August 1624. But this dizzying rise to power came with its costs: Richelieu earned many enemies at court that in turn fed his own distrust of others. This suspicious trait would haunt his conscious for the rest of his life. Because of their complicated history, Louis never fully trusted his Chief Minister—but he did become dependent upon him for nearly all political decisions.

The other nobles were especially wary of Richelieu and presented one of his first major challenges in power. Richelieu survived numerous conspiracies against him during his tenure in the royal government. He details one such incident in his *Mémoires*. Louis XIII's brother, the duc d'Orléans, harbored bitterness at his own relative political nothingness. He directed this frustration at the newly minted Chief Minister. Jealous of Richelieu's position and relationship with the king, Orléans tried many times to oust him from power, but to no avail.

In 1627, following the conclusion of a yet another attempt on Richelieu's life masterminded by Orléans, the Chief Minister opted for clemency and bribed the traitor with land and titles in exchange for his avowed support. Richelieu would hold all deceitful nobles, Orléans included, at arm's length and restrict their power and liberties. This political reaction to the strengthening nobility helped to bolster the burgeoning absolutist state in France. Reflecting on

the incident, Richelieu later wrote in his *Mémoires*, “Qu’en cela le Cardinal a regardé au présent pour le Roi, au présent et à l’avenir pour l’État, mais point au présent et à l’avenir pour lui...”⁵

This short excerpt demonstrates an aspect of Richelieu that would remain constant throughout his career: his devotion to *raison d’état* as a governing philosophy. Far from reacting to a serious situation as a cruel tyrant might with harsh punishment, Richelieu instead chose to react in a way that he deemed most politically practical. At the same time, the passage also illustrates the conscientious portrayal of selfless subservience to the good of the state that permeates all of Richelieu’s *Mémoires*. His decision to destroy many personal documents allowed him the luxury of a clean slate for historical memory. He then utilized his personal writings to fill that void, providing justification for his actions and presenting a truly humble and obliging servant of the state. Richelieu was known for his skillful use of propaganda, but perhaps his greatest task was in persuading public opinion of his own reputation.

If the nobles were the first to challenge Richelieu’s authority, the Huguenots certainly provided a more complicated threat. To understand the intricacy of the relationship between the French crown and the Huguenots, it is important to look at the development of Huguenot existence in France. These French Protestants were not political enemies of the king to begin with, but years of brutal civil war in France eventually pushed them into that treacherous category.

For centuries, the French monarchy and the Catholic Church were very neatly entwined in the system of Gallicanism. Simply put, this meant that papal authority in France was limited by the king’s own religious power. As if to exemplify the king’s high standing in the French church, his coronation ceremony was considered to be a sacred right during which the newly

⁵ *Mémoires du Cardinal de Richelieu, Tome Huitième [1627]*, ed. Robert Lavollée (Paris : La Société de l’Histoire de France, 1927), 35.

anointed king swore an oath to defend the Catholic Church.⁶ Politics and religion were patently joined together in France and thus any threat to the Catholic Church was also interpreted by French kings as a threat to the monarchy.

As the Reformation gathered momentum in sixteenth-century Europe, Calvinist missionaries based in Geneva, Switzerland began to infiltrate neighboring France. John Calvin, a native Frenchman, understood the implications of Gallicanism and the French government's thoughts towards reformed religion. He therefore feared the Calvinists would be mistakenly perceived as political threats. Calvin went so far as to dedicate his *Institutes of the Christian Religion* to King Francis I, hoping to persuade him that the religions could peacefully coexist. His tactic did not succeed, and the king was quick to distrust the Huguenots thanks to the nonexistent separation of church and state in France.⁷

At the peak of their popularity in the mid-sixteenth century, only roughly 10% of the French population was Protestant. Converts to Calvinism came mainly from the literate artisan classes of towns and cities. They were not rural, nor were they typically lower class. A map of French Protestants in the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries forms a crescent shape, stretching from southeastern to southwestern to northwestern France. It is not coincidental that Protestantism was most popular in areas the farthest from the central government in Paris.

Notably, many nobles became Protestants in the mid-sixteenth century. Among them, many did join for religious purposes. However, others joined the Protestant ranks as a political statement against the king. Nobles from both of these categories would lead the movement during the French Wars of Religion. This would only heighten the monarchy's belief that the Huguenots were a dangerous obstacle to an increasingly centralizing government. The

⁶ Mack P. Holt, *The French Wars of Religion, 1562-1629*, 2nd Ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 7.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 22.

involvement of these nobles has led many historians to conclude that these wars were solely fought over political disputes as opposed to religious ones. Certainly it is a logical conclusion to think that nobles, desperate to retain their shrinking feudal privileges, would react against the strengthening monarchy under the pretense of religion. Recent research, however, paints a different picture.

Historian Mack P. Holt's *The French Wars of Religion, 1562-1629* convincingly argues that far from political in nature, these wars were initially fought over contemporary religious views.⁸ His contention is that the Catholics and Protestants viewed one another as cancerous threats to the delicate fabric of their society. Each side fought in an effort to purge such scourges from France. Holt does not deny political and economic influences, however. The politically-minded conversions of some nobles do add a layer to the interpretation of the wars. He maintains that religious disputes were the primary focus of the wars while politics and other issues were secondary and more minor influences. While the monarchy may have seen a political threat in the Huguenots, French Catholics saw a social dilemma based on religious differences. The Huguenots, for the most part, trusted the French king as the sole person who could grant and protect their rights to religious freedom. This relationship between the crown and the Protestants would change dramatically as the wars raged on.

The Wars of Religion began in 1562 and ravaged France. Queen Catherine de Medici, who ruled alongside her husband Francis I and three of their sons, would try several times to plan colloquies between the warring sides. Her plan was to bring both the Protestant and Catholic leaders together to discuss their differences and reach a compromise. This plan was too idealistic for the early years of the religious wars. It was highly unpopular on both sides and never

⁸ Ibid.,1-3.

reached its fruition in the form of a colloquy. Ironically, however, the notion of a reconciliation based on compromise would be the hallmark of the peace processes throughout the wars.

Because of the intensity and fervor on either side of the battlefields, these wars were both bloody and inconclusive. Neither side was ever able to completely dominate the other. While there were victories and there were defeats, there never came a time when one side completely vanquished the opposing army. For this reason, each of the eight official wars concluded with a brokered peace that left neither side satisfied: each peace granted the Huguenots limited freedoms and still allowed their existence in Catholic France. The Huguenots were dissatisfied with their gains, and the Catholics despised their continued survival.

A significant turning point in the wars came in 1572 with the St. Bartholomew's Day Massacres, during which roughly five thousand Huguenots throughout France were killed. The end result of the massacres was a whittled down Huguenot population thanks to executions and numerous ensuing abjurations. In its wake, this period of intense violence left a smaller but far more radical core of the Protestant population. These remaining Huguenots implicated Charles IX for his role in the assassination of Huguenot leader Admiral Coligny in Paris that had sparked the consequential spread of violence throughout all of France. This led to a dramatic shift in Huguenot aims and intentions in the religious wars. Whereas Huguenots had previously trusted the king to protect their interests if they did not revolt against him specifically, they were now "openly at war with the crown."⁹

In response, the Huguenots embarked on an openly seditious campaign of propaganda against the monarchy. The implications of the religious wars, for them, had changed. There was no longer the belief that they could trust the king to protect their rights. Instead, he was an enemy. This development did much to damage the reputation of the Huguenots in France. They

⁹ Ibid., 96.

were increasingly viewed by their Catholic counterparts as not just heretics but also subversive rebels fighting against the government. Far from perceived political threats, the Huguenots now openly admitted themselves into this classification.

The religious wars continued to rage until the War of Three Henrys in 1589 placed the Protestant Henri of Navarre onto the French throne. He inherited a war-weary kingdom and diplomatically converted from Calvinism to Protestantism. In 1598, he issued the Edict of Nantes to bring an end to the era of civil wars and grant tolerance to the Huguenots. This document was intended to bring temporary religious peace to France in the form of tolerated coexistence between the Catholics and Huguenots.

The Edict itself extended certain basic privileges to the Huguenots, such as the right to public worship in designated areas. What was more important for them, however, could be found in the secret articles and the two royal *brevets* that were tacked on to the Edict. The secret articles assured Huguenots that they could hold religious colloquies in Huguenot towns. While the articles stated that these meetings could not be political in nature, there was an unwritten understanding between the crown and the Huguenots that they would and could be more than just religious gatherings. Likewise, the *brevets* guaranteed an annual subsidy to pay Huguenot pastors and ensured Huguenot protection by allowing them to maintain troops and fortify their towns. These conditions were not groundbreaking, but were instead based on earlier peace treaties during the Wars of Religion.

While these additional portions of the Edict offered substantial gains for the Protestant community, they were not intended to be permanent. Henri IV clearly intended to reestablish the doctrine of “one king, one faith, one law” in France but did not want to run the risk of yet another religious war. Instead, he set an eight-year limit to the terms of the Edict, rendering the

Huguenot “state within a state” a temporary reality. When the terms expired in 1606, he opted against acting on the Huguenots and renewed the secret articles and *brevets* for another eight years, reducing the subsidy payments but leaving the original Edict largely intact. The Edict of Nantes, while imperfect in securing its ultimate aim of religious unity in France, was nevertheless successful in its creation of a lasting peace in France following over thirty years of intense civil war.

It will never be known what Henri IV might have done with the Edict in 1614 because he was assassinated in 1610. He left his son, the young Louis XIII, a divided but peaceful realm. It would be up to Louis and his mother, Marie de Medici, both devout Catholics, to determine the future of the Huguenot state within a state.

The accession of Louis XIII to the French throne sent the Huguenot community into a state of panic. Fears of renewed wars and the impending loss of their hard-won liberties reverberated throughout Protestant camps as they began to organize their small military. The Huguenot army was led by two brothers: Henri, Duke de Rohan and the younger Benjamin de Rohan, *seigneur* of Soubise. These two would continue to lead Huguenot resistance until the late 1620s, taking advantage of any foreign distraction that might preoccupy the government to reassert Huguenot independence. Because they came to represent a constant annoyance to the king, Richelieu would later dub them the “Antichrists.”¹⁰

Tensions between the two sides eventually reached a boiling point in the Poitou region, where royal forces decisively crushed the Huguenots, led by Rohan, in the spring of 1622. In October of that same year, the Peace at Montpellier made official what the most recent war had decided: the Huguenots lost all rights to political assembly and military organization. Most

¹⁰ Carl Buckhardt, Jr., *Richelieu and His Age: His Rise to Power* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1967), 214.

Huguenot fortifications were to be destroyed, while the king decided to erect Fort St. Louis outside the city of La Rochelle. The king's insistence on maintaining this fortification would be pivotal in the years to come.

It is through this filter of Huguenot history in France in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries that Richelieu's relationship with the Protestants can be best understood. It is quite clear that growing up during the late stages of the Wars of Religion left an important and lasting impression on Richelieu. He did not witness the time period in which Catholics viewed the Huguenots as a mere religious or social issue, but rather, he experienced the more hostile environment that followed the St. Bartholomew's Day Massacres. Like many of his contemporaries, Richelieu distrusted the Huguenots as political miscreants. In his 1627 *Mémoires*, Richelieu refers to the Huguenots as "les hérétiques rebelles," implying more than a simple religious disparity between himself and the Protestants.¹¹ As historian Mack P. Holt explains, "Heresy and sedition went hand in hand" for Richelieu.¹² Richelieu's unsavory opinion of the Huguenots would be persistent for the rest of his life.

The mid-1620s represented a delicate time for Richelieu and French diplomacy. The Thirty Years' War was well underway; it began in 1618 in the Holy Roman Empire. The war began as a Protestant revolt against the Hapsburg Emperor, Ferdinand II. This detail was certainly not lost on the French government. For roughly the first twelve years of the war, the Hapsburgs were enjoying great success. This was of particular concern to France because of its position nestled between the Spain and the Holy Roman Empire. Hapsburg hegemony in central Europe would threaten the European balance of power. France would not officially enter this war until 1635, but would keep a watchful eye on the events as they unfolded and the alliances

¹¹ *Mémoires du Cardinal de Richelieu, Tome Huitième [1627]*, 246.

¹² Holt, 188.

being formed. At the same time, France was also dealing with a threat from Spain in the Valtelline area. This valley between modern day Switzerland and northern Italy was an important passageway into the German states. Spain challenged France for control of this area. Richelieu undoubtedly had his hands full dealing with these foreign predicaments. Further complicating the issue, troubles arose on the domestic front thanks to the troublesome Protestant brothers Rohan and Soubise.

In 1625, the Huguenots were again showing signs of trying to reorganize themselves under the leadership of Rohan and Soubise. The Peace at Montpellier had greatly diminished Huguenot holdings and fortifications in France. They could claim only a few key cities left in their control, chief among them La Rochelle. This fortified city on the western coast of France was rich in wealth, trade, and Protestantism. For these reasons, Rohan and Soubise focused their efforts there.

While Huguenots represented a minority in the rest of France, the ratio was reversed in La Rochelle. There, Protestants far outnumbered Catholics and it was the Catholics who had very limited rights to public worship.¹³ But La Rochelle had always been a unique city in France. To the east, it was surrounded by rich and productive land. To the west lay a vast harbor shielded from storms and wind by two islands, Ré and Oléron. It was well protected by both natural barriers and manmade encasements. Historically, La Rochelle had been accorded many political and economic privileges from the king. This was not uncommon in seventeenth-century France, but the extent to which La Rochelle was allowed to operate independently was certainly exceptional.

¹³ David Parker, *La Rochelle and the French Monarchy: Conflict and Order in Seventeenth-Century France* (London: Royal Historical Society, 1980), 126.

La Rochelle was important to the Huguenot movement for several decades. It first became a popular destination for Protestants fleeing the chaos of the St. Bartholomew's Day Massacres in 1572. After the Edict of Nantes recognized many Protestant rights, the Rochelais worked to strengthen their town's fortifications—as if they had a premonition that the fate of France's Protestant population would boil down to this remote city's defenses. Of particular concern to the Rochelais were the royal forts that surrounded them. To the east lay the newly built Fort St. Louis, and on the island of Ré were the Forts St. Martin and Prée. The king also understood the importance of this valuable port city.

The monarchy's preoccupation with La Rochelle and its islands can be explained by its importance to France's economy. It was described as a “permanent fair” for all of its trade activities.¹⁴ The islands outside of La Rochelle's harbor were quite productive units. Both yielded lucrative loads of salt. The isle of Oléron featured good wheat and wine production but no harbors. Ré, on the other hand, produced no wheat but had several fine harbors. This distinction made it important to control not just one but both islands. Additionally, control of Oléron meant control of the mouths of the Charente and Soudre rivers. Both of these rivers fed into the Garonne, by which the king shipped all of his farm produce for trade. It was therefore critical to Louis XIII that La Rochelle and its islands remain in the king's hands. This could only happen if the Rochelais Huguenots were tamed into submission and deprived of any foreign assistance or dreams of independence.

Soubise struck first by attempting to seize Ré and Oléron in early 1625, with the initially reluctant support of the Rochelais. A royal fleet would quickly put down the rebellion, and Soubise fled to England to begin the long process of negotiations with Charles I for English monetary and military assistance. Soubise's actions began the transformation of the conflict

¹⁴ Parker, 7.

from an internal dispute to an international situation. Reflecting on this in his *Mémoires*, Richelieu admits his fear that the Huguenots would be able to secure a powerful alliance with a Protestant power such as England or the Dutch Republic.¹⁵

By now, Richelieu was the newly minted Chief Minister. He writes in his *Mémoires* that he understood the importance of resolving the Huguenot question in France once and for all but expressed grave concern that France was not ready to meet the challenge. As had become custom when dealing with the Huguenots for the past fifty years, Richelieu sought a quick compromise to postpone any real action against these rebellious subjects. Ideally, Richelieu wanted to calm the situation in La Rochelle so that France's attention and resources could be turned towards the ever threatening European-wide conflict.

In a memo to Louis XIII dated May 1625, Richelieu explains his fear of continued Huguenot resistance in France and the implications of it. He cautions that "As long as the Huguenots have a foothold in France, the King will never be master at home and will never be able to undertake any glorious action abroad...His majesty may give [some temporary] satisfaction to the Huguenots. He will thus be able to create unity for the war against the Spaniards."¹⁶ In this frame of mind, Richelieu began undertaking the task of a quick but temporary peace with the Huguenots.

The Edict of La Rochelle was the first step towards a provisional truce with the Protestants. Though it was not finalized until early 1626, negotiations began immediately following Soubise's siege. The Edict forced the destruction of a Rochelais fort and forbade the city from arming a fleet for its defense. These terms decisively ended the Huguenot's feeble

¹⁵ *Mémoires du Cardinal de Richelieu, Tome Septième [1626]*, ed. Robert Lavollée (Paris : La Société de l'Histoire de France, 1927), 284.

¹⁶ Richard Bonney, ed., *Society and Government in France under Richelieu and Mazarin, 1624-1661* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), 4-6.

hopes for any continued resistance without the help of foreign powers. Richelieu was also aware of this fact and worked quickly to secure the marriage of Louis XIII's sister Henrietta with the King Charles I of England. The terms of their marriage contract expressly prohibited the English from offering La Rochelle and the Huguenots any assistance in any form. An alliance between France and the United Provinces was also renewed so as to keep the Dutch out of the picture as well.

Richelieu and Louis XIII were initially quite satisfied with their diplomatic efforts. They understood that the Huguenots would be powerless without foreign aid and the government's work with the English and the Dutch made that a remote possibility. Despite these critical preparations, Richelieu began to grow more and more concerned about the possibility of La Rochelle rebelling once again. The Rochelais loudly claimed to be treated as "slaves" to the French government, believing that their "salvation can only come from the north, that is to say the most serene monarch..."¹⁷ They made it clear that they were still actively pursuing an alliance with the English through Soubise and other Rochelais diplomats in England. For Richelieu, this meant that a conflict with the Huguenots might be closer at hand than he had desired or expected.

It would not be Richelieu, however, who would strike the first blow. Instead, it was George Villiers, duke of Buckingham. On July 10 1627, Buckingham arrived on the coast of Ré with an English fleet. His purported reason for the attack rested on the continued presence of the royal Fort St. Louis outside of La Rochelle. The Rochelais had protested its existence ever since Louis XIII began building it, to which the government responded with annoyed disbelief. Richelieu remarks with weariness in his *Mémoires*, "Le Cardinal de Richelieu leur dit et répéta

¹⁷ Knecht, 74.

cent fois, qu'il ne falloit qu'ils prétendissent qu'on se voulut engager en aucune façon à raser le fort, non seulement en ce temps, mais en une autre..."¹⁸

Historian Richard Lodge would argue in 1896 that "the real author of the French war...was Buckingham."¹⁹ The events that transpired in the summer of 1627, however, do not support this statement. Buckingham was a favorite of Charles I and his mission was completely funded by the English monarch. It was Charles who opted to defy the terms of his marriage contract, not Buckingham. The later discovery of Buckingham's personal papers and correspondence would prove that he acted on the king's behalf. But sole credit cannot go to Charles I. He was in turn aided by Rohan and Soubise, who also played crucial roles in Buckingham's adventure. Soubise, in England, helped with preparations for the attack. Rohan, for his part, traveled through the southwestern region of France, attempting to win support from Huguenots in the regions of Languedoc and Guyenne for their shared Protestant cause in La Rochelle.²⁰

Buckingham's English fleet, despite its size and strength, was unable to advance beyond Ré to La Rochelle as he had hoped. He instead blockaded the French troops on the island. By November, the English troops were forced to abandon their plans thanks to the terrible weather, rampant illness, and a lack of supplies. This was considered to be a major triumph for the French, who had done little more than outlasting the English. It signified to Richelieu that great preparations would be needed if the French would ever have to face the English again in La Rochelle.

After the retreat of Buckingham, the French troops discovered certain important personal belongings of the English leader. In his private lodgings on Ré, he had left behind many of his

¹⁸ *Mémoires du Cardinal de Richelieu, Tome Huitième [1627]*, 220.

¹⁹ Richard Lodge, *Richelieu* (Port Washington, NY: Kennikat Press, 1896), 70.

²⁰ *Ibid*, 72.

personal papers and correspondence. Richelieu had long harbored suspicions that the English involvement in La Rochelle was not based on their desire to help their fellow Protestants, but rather, on a more sinister plan to sow rebellions in France. Doing so would distract the French from foreign issues and would prevent them from acting against English pursuits in Europe. Buckingham's papers confirmed this dreaded scenario. His papers included correspondence with Spanish ambassadors, hinting at an alliance against the French. The papers plainly spelled out that the purpose of the English mission, according to King Charles I, was to get control of the Huguenots and to keep a civil war going in France just as the English had been able to do in the Spanish Netherlands, encouraging and supporting their rebellion against the Spanish Hapsburgs during the Dutch Revolt.

The discovery of these incriminating documents put the plan for a siege of La Rochelle in motion. Richelieu realized that the English were directing their interests towards La Rochelle so in order to keep them from entering France via the port city, he "resolved himself to blocking it from all parts, in a way that nothing could enter it by sea or by land."²¹ Richelieu immediately began to develop plans for this blockade. As these preparations began to fall into place, Richelieu tasked the Prince of Condé, a staunch enemy of the Huguenots despite his Protestant lineage, with the job of fighting Rohan and his rebels in southwestern France. He was given clear orders to stop the progress of Rohan but to push the battles no further than that.

In early 1628, the English finalized a contract with La Rochelle that guaranteed their aid and assistance to the townspeople. Charles I agreed to help the Rochelais until the royal forts on Ré and outside the city had been destroyed.²² Soon, however, Richelieu realized that the English were not the only foreign aid that he need worry about. A captured agent of Rohan, La

²¹ *Mémoires du Cardinal de Richelieu, Tome Huitième [1627]*, 275.

²² *Mémoires du Cardinal de Richelieu, Tome Neuvième [1628]*, 16.

Milletière, was interrogated in early 1628 and revealed the requests from the Rochelais to the Dutch for their support as well.²³ Fearful that one of his greatest concerns, a combined attack from the Dutch and the English, might be realized, Richelieu recognized the need for the rapid completion of enclosures around La Rochelle.

As work around the city wore on, Louis XIII grew impatient. He left for Paris on February 10, placing Richelieu in command of the siege. While in charge, Richelieu devised a new system of troop organization to keep the soldiers paid and fed on a more consistent basis.²⁴ By essentially delegating many tasks to the commanding officers, Richelieu was able to maintain his army in a more effective manner that ultimately produced healthier soldiers and fewer deserters. It also allowed him to generate more accurate figures relating to the army's size in La Rochelle, a feat that had not been successfully achieved by past French kings who were prone to accidentally inflating the numbers. In so doing, Richelieu proved his prowess as a military commander.

By March of 1628, the land fortifications surrounding La Rochelle were complete. To blockade La Rochelle by sea, two engineers were commissioned to design a dike made of stone that would bar the entry of any ships into the city's harbor. The construction of the dike was an impressive feat and it took several months to complete the work. The first test for the dike came at the end of March when three Rochelais barges that had gone to England for supplies appeared at the entrance to the harbor. Because the defenses were not nearly complete, the ships were able to enter without much problem. The Rochelais eagerly unloaded their supplies, only to discover

²³ Ibid., 34.

²⁴ Ibid., 48.

that the English had given them several barrels of rotten rye and little else.²⁵ The people were understandably angry with the English “assistance” after so many months of waiting.

In a stroke of good luck for Richelieu, one of the ships feared being captured by a royal boat and so the sailors on board threw all of their papers into the water so that they could not fall into the wrong hands. Unfortunately for the sailors, the papers were found and dried by royal troops. The papers gave Richelieu even more of a chance to see the ongoing communication between the Rochelais and England. He learned that the English were preparing a fleet to help the Huguenots, but were having difficulty doing so and were uncertain about when they could come to La Rochelle. From this information, Richelieu deduced that he had plenty of time before he would have to worry about facing the English and therefore enough time to complete the dike.

Louis XIII returned to La Rochelle in early April to find more troops and better fortifications in place. Because both Louis and Richelieu were increasingly concerned about the growing diplomatic situation involving the English and the Dutch, they sought new ways to increase pressure on La Rochelle. They devised two ways to do this: by cutting off the city’s water supply or by diplomacy with the city’s leaders. Richelieu rejected the former, even though he knew it would lead to a quick surrender. He wanted to rely on negotiations instead. Louis XIII then sent summons to the mayor of La Rochelle, Jean Guiton. He refused the summons, stirring the ire of Louis and Richelieu.

In early May, Richelieu received word that an English naval force was setting sail for La Rochelle carrying both food and supplies.²⁶ The English assumed that it would be easy to enter the harbor. Upon their arrival, however, they found the harbor completely blocked off thanks to

²⁵ Ibid., 87.

²⁶ Ibid., 146.

the completed dike. On May 19, after lingering for a few days outside of the royal defenses, the English declared it impossible to access La Rochelle and left. This act crushed the hopes of the Rochelais, who began preparing for a fight with the royal troops as soon as they saw their fickle allies.

Times were getting desperate for the people of La Rochelle at this point. They fretted that they would not be able to survive for much longer without new supplies. In July, Rochelais deputies in England went before Charles I to plead their case once again. They cautioned the king that if he did not act quickly, there would not be much time left to help the starving city. Meanwhile, back in La Rochelle, there was an outbreak of mutiny against the mayor. Many of the townspeople wanted to give in to the king to avoid starvation. Guiton was quick to quash any revolt and hung those who went against him. He described outrageous scenarios of what would happen if the people surrendered to the king to trick them into submission. The scare tactic worked, and the people became too fearful to go against him again. Reports of life in La Rochelle reached Richelieu's ears as some daring townspeople made their escape. The Rochelais, long since out of food, were reduced to boiling leather to make soup. One observer remarked that "c'étoient squelettes, fantômes vains, morts respirantes plutôt qu'hommes vivants."²⁷

The Huguenot cause in La Rochelle received another major blow in August when Buckingham, their English champion, was killed by a Puritan radical named John Felton. Charles I tried to cover up news of his death for fear that the news would discourage the Huguenots. Regardless, word was quick to reach both La Rochelle and Paris.

Sensing a weak moment, Richelieu then determined to try a new approach. He orchestrated the distribution of pamphlets in La Rochelle with the hopes of spurring on new

²⁷ Ibid., 190.

conflicts within the city walls. The pamphlets explained that the poor citizens of La Rochelle were starting because of the “tyrannie injuste” of a small but powerful minority made up of the mayor and Madame de Rohan, the mother of Rohan and Soubise.²⁸ It encouraged the Rochelais to consider their position and to try a new course. The tactic worked: a group of townspeople sought out Richelieu to discuss the terms of the town’s surrender. Unfortunately, however, word reached La Rochelle that the English army would once again be sending aid, and that it would soon arrive. The Rochelais quickly abandoned their diplomatic talks with Richelieu, anchoring their hopes yet again to English aid that would yet again not materialize.

The English did arrive at the end of September and were once again repelled by the impressive royal fortifications in the harbor. A small skirmish broke out between the English and the royal troops, but neither side sustained any real damage. In the end, the English left and the Rochelais faced the sobering realization that they had exhausted their options and had no more supplies or hope of withstanding the royal blockade. On October 27, the Rochelais at long last sent deputies to meet with Richelieu. They made significant demands of the king in their negotiations, including retention of the city’s ancient privileges. By the next day, the king and the deputies signed a treaty ending the siege. The treaty was lenient, though perhaps not so much so as the Rochelais would have liked. In it, Louis XIII granted “la vie et les biens” to all inhabitants of La Rochelle and guaranteed their right to practice “la religion prétendue réformée” in their city.²⁹ Additionally, Louis decided to demolish the town’s fortifications with the exception of the small fort of Prée on Ré, deciding to maintain it in the event of another situation in La Rochelle that might require royal troops. The Rochelais deputies, in return, swore their allegiance and fidelity to Louis and admitted their crimes against him. Satisfied with this

²⁸ Ibid., 195.

²⁹ Ibid., 203.

exchange, Louis, alongside Richelieu and royal troops, marched into La Rochelle on October 30. They were greeted by a city “toute pleine de mortes.”³⁰ Richelieu led a mass in the church of Sainte-Marguerite, the first to be held there in decades.

The Huguenot population in La Rochelle began to shrink after the siege. The peace talks stipulated that no Protestants could move to La Rochelle after 1629, only Catholics. This was intended to cap the number of these problematic Protestants in such an important city. Historian Philip Benedict performed an intensive and thorough quantitative analysis of the Huguenot population in France to illustrate the declining numbers of this religious minority in the seventeenth century.³¹ In La Rochelle, the overall numbers of Huguenots remained fairly consistent: the total number changed from 19,500 in the 1610-1619 to roughly 22,500 in 1675-1684. What is more telling, however, is the statistical side of these figures. The total percentage of Huguenots in La Rochelle’s population decreased sharply in the years after the siege, tumbling from a peak of 86% in the 1610s to 21% in the final years before the revocation of the Edict of Nantes in 1685. The royal confrontation in La Rochelle thus had a lasting impact on the Huguenot population of the city.

Over the next several months following the siege, Louis and Richelieu would systematically set about dismantling all pockets of Huguenot resistance in southern France. With La Rochelle effectively defeated and humbled, there was a strong sense that the Huguenots would have difficulty reorganizing themselves and putting up any sort of sustainable revolt. Correctly assessing that the Huguenots were in a compromised and weakened position, this presented an opportune time to defeat these “hérétiques rébelles” once and for all.

³⁰ Ibid., 205.

³¹ Philip Benedict, *Huguenot Population of France, 1600-1685: The Demographic Fate and Customs of a Religious Minority* (Philadelphia: The American Philosophical Society, 1991), 55.

The royal troops waited until spring to launch a true assault on the Huguenots. With the warmer weather, these forces marched through town by town in their literal takeover of all Huguenot towns. Eventually, the troops reached Les Cévennes, the final region of Huguenot resistance. The king's army swept through the area, ultimately arriving at the town of Alais. The mayor of Alais wanted to surrender, but he was imprisoned by the ever impetuous Rohan. In spite of this final effort by Rohan, the king's forces prevailed and Alais surrendered. The Edict of Alais was signed in June 1629 and, in accordance with the Edict of Nantes, it maintained the Protestant right to public worship in certain areas. Importantly, it removed the military and political rights guaranteed (either implicitly or explicitly) to the Huguenots in the Edict of Nantes. Louis XIII and Richelieu did not force conversions on the Huguenots; instead, they allowed the continued existence of this religious minority in a Catholic state.

The events that transpired in La Rochelle in 1627-8 have been analyzed in a myriad of ways by historians. Early twentieth-century works on Richelieu and La Rochelle examined the conflict from a religious angle. Aldous Huxley, in his 1941 work *Grey Imminence: A Study in Religion and Politics*, focuses almost entirely on the religious aspect of Richelieu's endeavors. He examines the relationship between Richelieu and Père Joseph, a Capuchin monk, in La Rochelle. He asserts that Père Joseph played a key role in all decisions regarding the siege and therefore likens the event to a "crusade." A successful siege at La Rochelle would permit France to attack "another enemy of the holy church—the abominable Turk."³² According to Huxley, there is a clear relationship between Richelieu's religious beliefs and the offending heresy of the Rochelais Huguenots—so much so that it prompted a year-long siege of the city by the royal government.

³² Aldous Huxley, *Grey Eminence: A Study in Religion and Politics* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1941), 202.

Historian David Parker's 1980 work, *La Rochelle and the French Monarchy*, takes a similar yet less fantastic and literary approach than Huxley to the delicate situation of 1627. Parker filters the events of 1627 through a religious lens, viewing them as the culmination of decades of hostility between the Catholics and Huguenots in France. He bases his analysis on pamphlets and other primary source accounts in La Rochelle. He explains that "there was very much the air of a crusade about the campaign against La Rochelle," concluding that in the realization of the siege, "the interests of Church and State had been brought together."³³ To Parker, the siege of La Rochelle was the inevitable result of an Edict that was not pleasing to either the Huguenots or the Catholics and the atmosphere of heightened tension that it created in early seventeenth-century France. Interestingly, Parker very nearly ignores the entire question of foreign involvement. He does not credit the English for setting off any spark whatsoever in La Rochelle.

At first, Huxley and Parker seem to draw logical conclusions: a devout Cardinal given political power seeks to crusade against heretics who are audaciously living in his kingdom. Certainly there are elements of the siege that support this opinion. After all, Richelieu secured a papal bull in 1627 that granted indulgences to any man who fought or monetarily supported the royal army in the siege against La Rochelle.³⁴ However, to analyze these events with so narrow a focus is to ignore the complexity of the situation in its entirety. In his *Mémoires*, Richelieu leaves little evidence that he saw this as a religious "crusade." Certainly he did not like the Huguenots and would have preferred an entirely Catholic state. Growing up during the Wars of Religion, however, had left an important impression on Richelieu. He was pragmatic enough to

³³ Parker. 143, 144.

³⁴ *Mémoires du Cardinal de Richelieu, Tome Huitième [1627]*, 159.

understand that an overtly religious attack on La Rochelle would potentially open the doors to a new era of prolonged civil war.

Additionally, Richelieu was a staunch opponent of forced conversions, believing that they were not genuine and would secure no real gain in the realization of “one king, one faith, one law.”³⁵ He therefore accepted the reality of Huguenots in France. The Peace of Alais in 1629 underscores this fact. Huguenots were not asked to change their religion, nor was persecution of them allowed. Instead, the royal government chose to strip them of their political and protective rights to ensure that another rebellion could not take place. The Huguenots and their religious beliefs were not a threat, but the Huguenots with certain rights had proven to be a worrisome combination for France’s internal peace. Richelieu’s action did not indicate that he was trying “to win souls as well as towns,” as Parker references a contemporary having said regarding Richelieu. Instead, he wanted to “win” stability in France, even if it meant tolerating the Huguenots, so that France could eventually emerge as a stronger European power.³⁶ Thus religious differences, though they existed and he was cognizant of them, were not a decisive factor in his decision to lay siege to La Rochelle. In reality, many other factors were at play in France during the late 1620s.

Accordingly, historians of the late twentieth century have readjusted their collective frame of reference with which to analyze the events at La Rochelle. Foreign affairs have replaced religion as the critical key to Richelieu’s decision to attack the rebellious city. These historians look to outside sources as opposed to just the Huguenots as the primary cause for the siege. A prime example is David Parrott in his 2001 work *Richelieu’s Army*. Parrott utilizes the diplomatic situation of France in the 1620s as the background for his analysis of the siege. In

³⁵ Knecht, 69.

³⁶ Parker, 144.

Parrott's rendering of the story, Richelieu believed that "the persistence of this organized and independent military power within France jeopardized the prospect of waging a successful war abroad."³⁷ Thus it was necessary that France first tame the internal Huguenot threat before it could entertain any notion of foreign war—an increasingly inevitable fact given the ever-heightening tensions of the nearby Thirty Years' War. Parrott's approach to the situation goes beyond mere religion to show the true complication of the situation in which Richelieu found himself.

Mack P. Holt's 2005 edition of *The French Wars of Religion, 1562-1629* draws a similar conclusion regarding the siege. Rather than focusing on the greater European situation, Holt focuses on the involvement of the English in La Rochelle. He goes so far as to conclude that according to the terms of the Edict of La Rochelle in 1626, the siege should never have taken place because the Huguenots were clearly defeated. What prompted it, then, was an "explicit rebellion against the crown" in the form of English aid from Charles I.³⁸ The introduction of English support, in violation of Charles I's marriage contract, necessitated a reaction from the French crown. These analyses by Parrott, Holt and many others minimize the role played by religion in favor of foreign influences.

It appears that Richelieu's own *Mémoires* support these more recent conclusions. Richelieu was wary of the Huguenots not because of their religious differences but because he feared their seditious tendencies. In his own account of the Huguenots in the late 1620s, he always viewed them within a larger diplomatic context. His concern was that a conflict between the Huguenots and the crown could quickly escalate into an international situation. Making matters worse, the English and Dutch both had strong navies. The French Navy was far too

³⁷ David Parrott, *Richelieu's Army: War, Government and Society in France, 1624-1642* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001) 87-8.

³⁸ Holt, 190.

small and weak even to consider competing with them. As neighboring Protestant powers, these nations would be the most likely culprits to help the Huguenots. This fact led Richelieu to argue continually for the development of a true French Navy in case a war ever broke out. This dream, unfortunately, would not be realized until the late seventeenth century under the guidance of Jean-Baptiste Colbert. In short, Richelieu understood that France could subsist with two religions but the possibility of any alliance between the Huguenots and foreign powers would be grounds for disaster.

Accordingly, Richelieu makes it clear that the discovery of Buckingham's papers played a pivotal role in his decision to blockade La Rochelle. These letters contained proof that the English were going to be persistent and sly in their efforts to stir up troubles in France. The English had discovered in the dissatisfaction of the Rochelais towards the French government a type of Trojan horse that would allow them entry into France to generate continued civil wars. The involvement of the English necessarily added an international twist to what began as a provincial argument. In the months leading up to the siege, Richelieu understood "Qu'il falloit tout tenter pour chasser l'Anglois ; que, lui chassé, La Rochelle étoit grandement affoiblie et la réduction d'icelle beaucoup plus facile."³⁹ In his mind, there were thus two enemies: the English and the rebellious Rochelais. He had to eliminate the former in order to gain submission from the latter, a process that would eventually restore peace in France.

However, the English cannot solely take the blame for the siege, even though their involvement certainly precipitated the events of 1627-8. Likewise, the Rochelais cannot be held entirely accountable. Records indicate that the townspeople needed much convincing to side with Soubise in his attack of 1625 and again with Buckingham in 1627. Instead, the culprits could be found in those two troublesome French brothers. It was Soubise, under instructions of

³⁹*Mémoires du Cardinal de Richelieu, Tome Huitième [1627], 152.*

his brother Rohan, who convinced Charles I to support the Rochelais. Meanwhile, Rohan stirred up unending rebellions in southwestern France in support of the Huguenot cause. In 1627, Rohan authored a manifesto intended to encourage Huguenot resistance in southwestern France. He daringly explained his involvement in the movement and the steps that he had taken against the monarchy. In reaction, Richelieu rages in his 1627 *Mémoires*, "...[Rohan] ose bien confesser de sa propre bouche et signer de sa main qu'il a faussement emprunter le nom de ses prétendues églises pour appeler l'étranger contre le Roi son maitre et qu'il est seul cause en ce royaume de ce dernier embrasement."⁴⁰ Rohan's confession regarding his involvement with the Huguenots and England indicates that he was using the Protestant cause as a pretense for attacking the monarchy. When Rohan and Soubise were successful in securing English support, Richelieu's worst fears were realized—they had roused a hostile minority and now had the funds to make an actual impact in France.

Even if the English had decided against aiding the Huguenots, Richelieu and Louis XIII would still have had to come to terms with Soubise and Rohan. Their history of spreading revolts in France proves that these two posed perhaps the greatest threat to the monarchy. If Louis XIII could not rule absolutely with La Rochelle being independent, as Richelieu states countless times in his *Mémoires*, Richelieu would have to take care of both Rohan and Soubise. History proves that these brothers would take advantage of any weakness in the French monarchy to reassert Huguenot independence. Thus it would appear that a combination of both foreign and domestic factors were at work in the decision to lay siege to La Rochelle. The siege was a necessary step taken by the monarchy to address sedition within France. The main problem at hand for Richelieu was to subdue Rohan and Soubise and their Huguenot followers,

⁴⁰Ibid., 244.

but English involvement in 1627 complicated the issue and it transitioned from a local dilemma to an international conflict.

While these analyses all consider the factors at work in the decision to blockade La Rochelle and to tame the Huguenots in France, they do not investigate the long term impact of this critical time period in relation to the rest of Richelieu's reign as Chief Minister. While the French nobility provided the first test to his authority, this challenge was largely concentrated in the intrigues of the French court. The Huguenots, by contrast, provided a potentially devastating threat to France's power abroad because of the intensity of their resistance and the involvement of foreign powers on their side. Richelieu was named Chief Minister in 1624 and very quickly had to manage a resurgent Protestant menace in France. His *Mémoires* indicate that the early years of his career were consumed by the Huguenots. Because his struggles with the Huguenots coincided with the naissance of his power, it would be reasonable to believe that the early successes and failures he achieved in this conflict could have had a dramatic impact on his developing philosophy of ruling.

In the final months of his life, Richelieu dedicated part of his time to the task of compiling a guidebook for Louis XIII that would instruct him on "policy-making and the management of [his] realm."⁴¹ Fearful that he would die before his king, Richelieu wanted to leave behind clear instructions on how to rule because Louis XIII was so dependent upon him. He was never able to finish the work, but the careful transcriptions and notes that he left behind after his death in 1642 were later compiled into his *Political Testament*. The authenticity of this work was questioned by many, most loudly by Voltaire, because Richelieu himself had not put the finished product together. In 1880, however, Richelieu's biographer Gabriel Hanotaux

⁴¹ *Testament of Cardinal Richelieu*, trans. Henry Bertram Hill (Madison, WI : The University of Wisconsin Press, 1961), 5.

discovered significant archival documents in the Bibliothèque Nationale that confirmed the “closeness” of Richelieu to the final composition.⁴² The *Political Testament*, like Richelieu’s *Mémoires*, was therefore a posthumous product compiled from the numerous notes and writings left by its true author. The finished work is a reflection of Richelieu’s years of work in the French government and the lessons that he learned during that time.

The *Political Testament* is divided into two parts. The first serves as a sort of history of the early years of Louis XIII’s reign, focusing on the challenges that faced his authority and the actions taken against threats such as the nobility and the clergy. The second part details Richelieu’s vision of ideal public policy. One part Machiavellian, one part avant-garde Enlightenment work, Richelieu examines the nature of power and the government’s duty to act in the interest of the public good, among other topics. Almost all of the second part of the *Political Testament* relates back, intentionally or not, to Richelieu’s experiences with the Huguenots in La Rochelle.

One chapter in particular presents a theme that pervades nearly all of Richelieu’s political beliefs: that “Reason Should Guide the Governing of a State.” Richelieu supports this statement by arguing that God gave man the ability to reason and to ignore this gift would be “contrary to his nature, and by consequence contrary to Him who is its creator.”⁴³ He points to emotion as the enemy of reason. According to Richelieu, therefore, emotion should be left out of all political decisions if a ruler is to make good policy. This belief was at the core of Richelieu’s decisions regarding the Huguenots in the siege and also the Peace of Alais. If he had acted on emotions, they might have led him to destroy all rights of Huguenots based on his personal

⁴² Henry Bertram Hill, introduction to *The Political Testament of Cardinal Richelieu*, by Armand-Jean du Plessis, Cardinal de Richelieu (Madison, WI: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1961), xiii.

⁴³ *Testament of Cardinal Richelieu*, trans. Henry Bertram Hill (Madison, WI : The University of Wisconsin Press, 1961), 71.

dislike of this group and their perceived heresy. Instead, Richelieu allowed reason to guide his decision and acted in the interest of the state by preserving Huguenot rights and avoiding political interference in religious beliefs. The use of reason in politics, embodied in Richelieu's *raison d'état* philosophy, would go on to be a cornerstone throughout his career.

In this chapter, Richelieu also emphasizes the importance of seeing all projects through to their completion. He writes that, "...nothing ought to be allowed to turn us permanently away from a good objective unless some untoward accident makes it entirely unachievable, and we must never fail to do whatever is necessary to bring about the execution of that which we have rightly resolved to accomplish."⁴⁴ The cause at La Rochelle was obviously one that Richelieu believed to be "good" and necessary to the future security of France, a point he emphatically emphasizes countless times in his *Mémoires*. The construction of the dike in La Rochelle's harbor, however, was a costly undertaking, one that required enormous royal sums as well as incredible amounts of physical labor. Richelieu went so far as to donate his own money to the cause when royal funds were outpaced by the costs at hand.⁴⁵ His investment in the siege paid off in the end with a victory by the royal government over the rebellious Rochelais. It is quite possible that Richelieu's decision not to surrender in the face of difficult odds in La Rochelle but to remain persistent in achieving his goals taught him a lesson regarding the importance of perseverance in politics that is reflected in his *Political Testament*.

In addition to this chapter on reason, there are three others in particular that correspond quite closely to the events of 1627-9. In one chapter entitled "Foresight Necessary to Good Government," Richelieu explains the importance of anticipating problems and designing thoughtful policy to avoid them. This chapter encourages rulers to "sleep like the lion, without

⁴⁴ Ibid., 74.

⁴⁵ *Mémoires du Cardinal de Richelieu, Tome Septième [1626]*, 126.

closing one's eyes, so that one may instantly ward off the slightest misfortune that may arise..."⁴⁶ He cautions that these "misfortunes" may indeed arise from "evils which are imperceptible at the time of their origin and of which we are little aware."⁴⁷ These are the most dangerous and consequential problems that a ruler can face. Policy must be introduced to address these issues, but rulers must be cognizant of the long-term effects of such decisions. Therefore, their decisions must be guided by foresight—Richelieu surmises that "nothing is more necessary in governing a state than foresight."⁴⁸

Richelieu exemplified this trait in the decisions he made regarding the Huguenots and La Rochelle. He had a critical understanding of the delicate diplomatic situation in which France found itself in the mid-1620s. He knew that the English posed a great threat to France's internal stability and he needed to act quickly to avoid their involvement. Richelieu therefore reacted in a pragmatic way, blocking England's entrance to France in La Rochelle. His purpose in the siege of La Rochelle was not to force the end of Protestantism in France, but rather, to put an end to any form of foreign intervention in France and to stop the seditious plots of the Huguenots against the royal government. While constructing and defending a dike in La Rochelle's harbor became a costly undertaking, it successfully achieved his goals by repelling the English and squashing Huguenot hopes for resistance without starting yet another brutal and costly civil war in France. This policy allowed France to resolve its internal conflict and set its eyes on the task of limiting Hapsburg control of Europe in the Thirty Years' War. This is not to suggest that the siege of La Rochelle was the only instance in which Richelieu used foresight to govern. In fact, he made a career of it. He was careful to keep his eyes on the future interests of France while at

⁴⁶ *Testament of Cardinal Richelieu*, trans. Henry Bertram Hill (Madison, WI : The University of Wisconsin Press, 1961), 81-2.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 82.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 80.

the same time carefully studying the events in Europe. Richelieu found success using this tactic in La Rochelle and used it throughout his political career.

While foresight is desirable for governing, Richelieu writes in another chapter that the two most powerful tools for a ruler are “The Uses of Punishments and Rewards.”⁴⁹ He writes for several pages about the importance of punishments for any crimes that affect the state. It would be easy to give this passage a cursory look and equate it with the cruel austerity of a Hammurabi. However, Richelieu gives some very important keys to the proper employment of punishment against one’s subjects. While “the rod, which symbolizes justice, ought never to be idle,” he cautions that “...it should not be so rigorously employed as to make the wielder appear to be destitute of all mercy.”⁵⁰ Excessive cruelty in the doling of retributions could have an adverse affect on the public good and thus the state as a whole.

Similar beliefs were behind the peace process following the siege of La Rochelle. The city was punished, but not to excess. While the terms of the peace did not meet the demands of the Rochelais deputies, they did not attempt to destroy the city and its inhabitants for their rebellion. Instead, La Rochelle was stripped of many of its ancient privileges and thus lost its partial independence from the French monarchy. This was no small thing, but the people were spared their lives and were not executed as traitors to the king. Even the leaders of this last revolt were saved a severe punishment. In fact, Richelieu and Louis XIII took some property of Rohan and Soubise, but later extended pardons to both in exchange for their service in the royal army. They would go on to become leaders for France in the Thirty Years’ War. Likewise, Jean Guiton, the mayor of La Rochelle, was pardoned for his part in the revolt and went on to serve in

⁴⁹Ibid., 84.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 87.

the royal navy.⁵¹ Rather than rashly punishing these leaders, Richelieu utilized a rational process that ultimately benefited the state by securing the military abilities of three proven leaders.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, is Richelieu's explanation of "The Reign of God the First Essential." Here, Richelieu is adamant in his belief that "the reign of God is the principle basic to the good government of states" and a good ruler "takes particular care to establish his empire within the boundaries of His kingdom."⁵² It is obvious that a Cardinal who rose to political power would believe in the importance of Christianity within the kingdom. However, Richelieu had decided to allow the continued existence of a religiously divided country with the Peace of Alais. The disconnect between statement and action is duly expressed in the *Political Testament*. In one instance, Richelieu calls for the tolerance of other religions because "prudence does not permit anything so hazardous as to risk uprooting the grain while pulling out the tares," implying that such an action would bring more problems for the state than it was worth.⁵³ Richelieu's preoccupation with the good of the state is again evident. Yet, in the very next line, Richelieu insists that "[princes] should be very thorough in banishing all false imitations of [God's true church]."⁵⁴ How to explain such opposing statements written by the same hand?

Like his chapter on punishments and rewards, it appears that Richelieu was able to write more forcefully than reason permitted him to act. As a ruler, he was not so austere and opinionated as history suggests. Richelieu was an undeniably skilled statesman with an inherent understanding of the nuances that surrounded grey issues. While he did believe that a France unified under "one king, one faith, one law" would undoubtedly be a stronger France, he was

⁵¹ Holt, 194.

⁵² *Testament of Cardinal Richelieu*, trans. Henry Bertram Hill (Madison, WI : The University of Wisconsin Press, 1961), 67, 68.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 69.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 70.

practical enough to understand that the means to create such an end could have disastrous and long term effects on the state as a whole. He therefore considered the task of converting the Huguenots back to Catholicism to be out of the reach of the royal government's jurisdiction. He relied instead on the work of missionaries to bring the Protestants back into the fold of the French Church. His great success in subduing the Huguenot revolt and permanently eliminating the threat of continued resistance on their part without forcing any conversions proved his method to be the appropriate one for that time period. So while the wording in the *Political Testament* may appear to be contradictory, it is also reflective of Richelieu's internal struggle regarding the question of the Huguenots. In the end, he ruled with reason, and not emotion, as a guide in this most important matter.

Perhaps history has drawn an unfair picture of Cardinal Richelieu. He was not a perfect man: he was vengeful, secretive, and harsh. What set him apart from his portrayal as a tyrant popularized in history and literature, however, was his ability to temper these emotions when faced with political decisions. Richelieu truly did allow reason to reign supreme in his decision-making process. His actions before, during and after the siege of La Rochelle verify this point. Richelieu leaned towards leniency and clemency as opposed to severe punishment because he understood the need to put the greater good of the state before his own internal wishes. Richelieu was not fighting a war "to win souls as well as towns" in France during the 1620s. He was reliant upon reason, and not emotion, as a guide in his fight with the Huguenots. He refrained from "winning" souls by forcing conversions, knowing that this could potentially drag the conflict out even longer in spite of his desire to return all Huguenots to the Catholic Church. *Raison d'état* forbade him from overstepping such volatile boundaries. His *Political Testament*, written at the end of his life, draws from lessons learned during his success in the siege and other

experiences to introduce his idealized vision of the necessary skills in ruling. It bears witness to the internal conflicts with which Richelieu struggled and, when analyzed in the context of his career, illustrates just how successfully he was able to balance his personal beliefs with his political convictions.

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