

Calonne, Charles-Alexandre de

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(1734-1802)

French statesman whose efforts to reform the structure of his nation's finance and administration precipitated the governmental crisis that led to the French Revolution of 1789.

The son of a magistrate of Douai, Calonne held various posts in French Flanders and in Artois before becoming intendant of Metz (1768) and of Lille (1774). His financial genius and court connections led to his appointment as controller general of finance in November 1783. At that time the French government was heavily in debt from the aid that it had provided the colonists during the American Revolution (1775-83). Calonne reconstituted a sinking fund (1784) to pay off the debt, and in 1785 he reformed the gold coinage. He soon discovered, however, that major reforms were necessary to save France from bankruptcy. In August 1786 he submitted to King Louis XVI a far-reaching plan of reform that involved increasing the taxation of the privileged noble and clerical orders through a proportional tax on land.

Recognizing that the Parlements (high courts of justice) would reject his proposals, Calonne submitted them instead to a special Assembly of Notables—nobles, clergy, and magistrates—which convened on Feb. 22, 1787. Nevertheless, the intrigues of his political opponents and the antagonism of the higher clergy and magistrates in the assembly thwarted his efforts. His revelation of the annual deficit of more than 100,000,000 livres and the failure of his reform schemes ensured the summons of the Estates-General in August 1788, which in turn led directly to the French Revolution. In April 1787 Louis XVI dismissed Calonne from office, and four months later he withdrew to England.

After the Revolution began, Calonne devoted himself to the cause of counterrevolution. From exile he criticized the National Assembly's efforts to abolish most of France's feudal institutions. He was chief adviser to the émigrés (nobles in exile) from December 1790 until the fall of the monarchy in August 1792. In 1802, during Napoleon Bonaparte's Consulate regime, Calonne returned to France; he died soon thereafter.

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