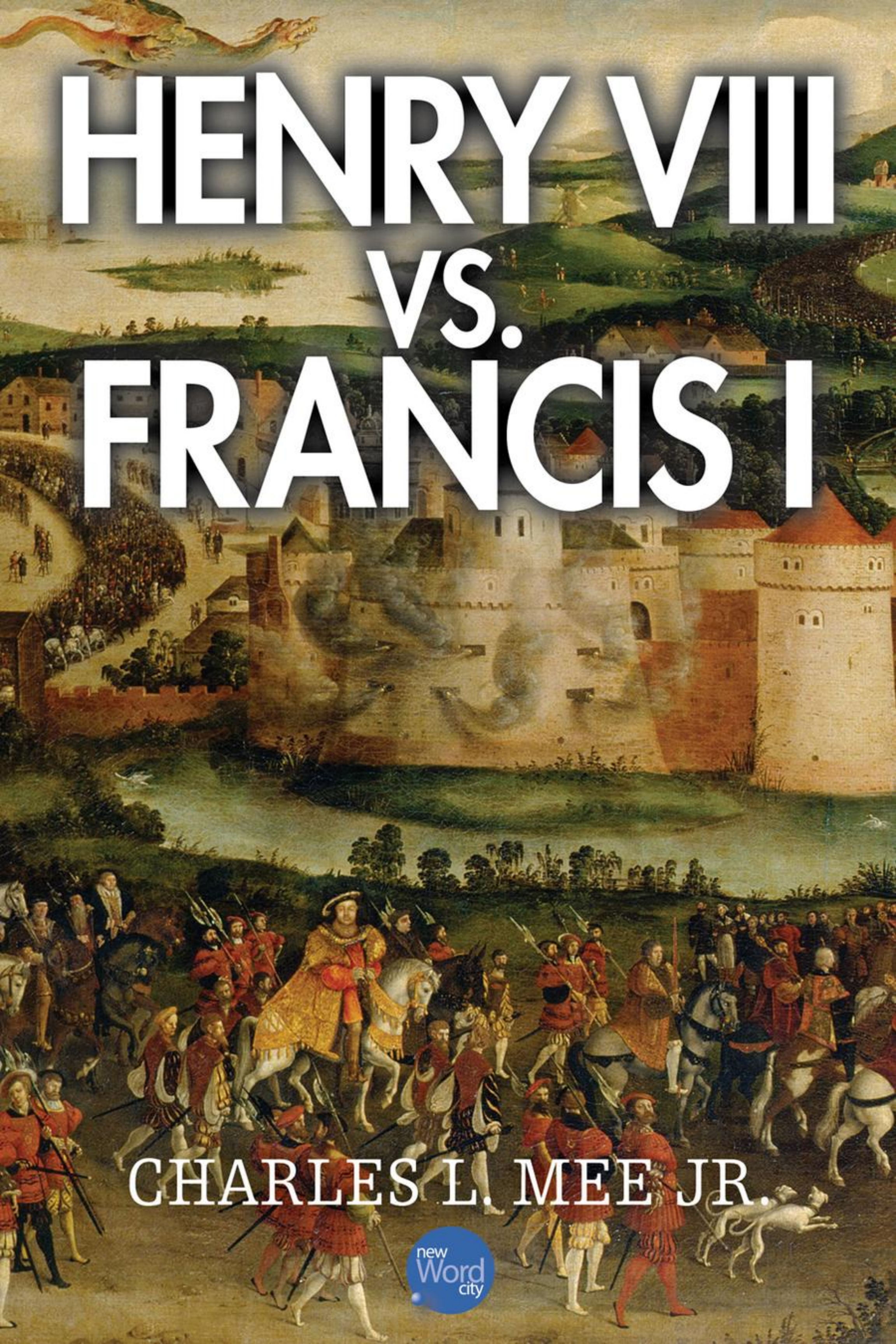

HENRY VIII VS. FRANCIS I

CHARLES L. MEE JR.

new Word city

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As if it were not already difficult enough to know the truth of things, heads of state and diplomats and even honest citizens labor much of the time to add to the confusion by creating good, or even false, impressions.

In the “theater of power,” as it is called by Raymond Cohen, a recent student of the signs and symbols of politics, the skilled politician is not only the performer but also the director and designer of the events in which he participates, and if he can, he contrives a setting for his performance that “removes the performance from the realm of everyday life and transposes it into an artificial universe. . . . Disbelief is suspended; the condensed symbolism of the performance acquires a reality of its own, insulated from the alternative logic of the real world.”

Pope Leo I and Attila the Hun were accomplished at this art of theater. In our own time, Charles de Gaulle was one of the great masters. During World War II, as Cohen has written, photographs of de Gaulle as a leader of the French Resistance were “widely distributed by clandestine means . . . to counteract the cult of Marshal Pétain,” the leader of the collaborationist Vichy government. One of de Gaulle’s most famous wartime portraits, as Cohen wrote, “shows the General in soaking oilskins and holding binoculars, apparently on active naval patrol. The image was of the energetic and resolute man of action, on duty with his forces off the coast of France. Actually he was on a brief and quite danger-free trip off the coast of England.” And, after the war, when de Gaulle became president of France, his press conferences were “set in plush chandeliered elegance . . . [that] proclaimed a lofty dignity and sweeping historical vision.”

De Gaulle’s government, said British Prime Minister Harold Macmillan, resembled “a royal court.” Or as the historian Philip Cerny noted, “The dramatic function of grandeur,” for de Gaulle, “was to provide a viable foundation for the development of a consensus which French society had previously lacked.”

President de Gaulle played both to a domestic and an international audience with his grandeur. He wrote of a visit President Dwight Eisenhower paid him: “Our conversations began at the Élysée and ended at Rambouillet . . . Housed in the medieval tower where so many of our kings had stayed, passing through the apartments once occupied by our Valois, our Bourbons, our emperors, our presidents, deliberating in the ancient hall of marble with the French Head of State and his ministers, admiring the grandeur of the ornamental lakes stretched out before their eyes . . . our guests were made to feel the nobility behind the geniality, the permanence behind the vicissitudes, of the nation which was their host."

If a leader lacks an Élysée palace, a proper stage set can be built - as Mussolini demonstrated in Rome, Hitler in Berlin, and the Chinese Communists with Peking's Great Hall of the People. In the Soviet Union, as Cohen wrote, at the time of World War II, the Russians built Vnukovo Airport near Moscow, which lacked many basic technical facilities but was larger than any American or European airport of the time so that visiting diplomats and other dignitaries would have a suitable impression of the modernity of the Soviet Union. And when the Russians were finally able to build a large airplane, the Tu-104, which came off the production line in 1956, Nikita Khrushchev found occasion to fly to Britain in the new plane, to offer it to delegations visiting Moscow to take them home, and to get the plane seen in Belgrade, Delhi, Rangoon, Jakarta, and Paris to impress the world with the Soviet Union's technological sophistication and military and economic might, which throughout the Cold War years it never possessed to the degree that outsiders thought.

When it comes to conveying an impression of the secure, comfortable possession of power, less boisterous images are often preferred. Thus, President Jimmy Carter appeared on television in a casual setting wearing a cardigan sweater.

Statements that are made by image or gesture are not only useful because they make delightful photographs, or because they communicate policy to illiterate people; they cut through verbal niceties in a literate society, too; they make declarations that are not easily subject to debate, contradiction, or qualification. How does one debate a sweater or a parade or the color of a suit worn on television? They disarm adversaries. They draw in constituencies that might be excluded by a more exact verbal formulation. They blur distinctions. They are even able to declare two or more contradictory policies at the same time. They may build political coalitions. They may be as benign as Roosevelt's fireside chats, or as malignant as Hitler's rallies, but in either case, they may melt differences. They arouse a variety of divergent expectations. And they simplify, which is to say they confound. They encourage us to believe that the spectacle we see is ordained: perfect, eternal, unchangeable, and a comfort to the humble observers.

There are, perhaps, infinite examples of this phenomenon of the persuasive creation of illusions in human history, but the gold standard is the meeting in 1520 between the young King Henry VIII of England and Francis I of France.

In June of 1520, Henry VIII of England set sail across the Channel to meet Francis I of France. Henry sailed aboard the ship *Katherine Pleasaunce* with its newly decorated royal cabin, accompanied by the ship *Christopher of Hyde,* carrying the royal jewels, and the *Great Bark,* the *Lesser Bark,* and the *Mary and John.* They made their way across the water, with a cargo of the king's retinue of two dukes, a marquis, ten earls, five bishops, twenty barons, four Knights of the Garter, four counselors of the "long robe," twelve chaplains, twelve sergeants at arms, 200 of the king's guard, 2,087 horses and 205 grooms - along with the queen's retinue of bishops and barons, knights and chaplains, a duchess, six countesses, sixteen baronesses, eighteen knights' wives - the whole contingent accompanied by 1,175 servants, cooks, heralds, minstrels, butchers, valets, carters, clerks, and others with their own 778 horses as well as cases of armor and garments of damask, velvet, and crimson satin, of cloth of silver, cloth of gold, jeweled collars, gold belts, hats with feathers, doublets covered with gold knots, diamonds, emeralds, rubies, golden chains, pearls, and horse trappings with gold tassels and golden bells the size of eggs.

It was said that England, that June, was stripped of its nobility, its courtiers, its gems, its best cutlery and silver plate and its high-born women - and all of them were hauled across the Channel. Certainly, looking down the lists of those who went or were taken to France, one does have the sense that London must have felt woefully empty to those who were left behind.

The declared reason for transshipping the English royal court to France was the grand opportunity of making a lasting peace with England's long-time enemy, the kingdom of France. The ideal of peace had a strong appeal at that time. Neither the English nor the French had forgotten the Hundred Years' War, in which their two countries had been embroiled in costly hostilities from 1337 to 1453. And in the several decades before 1520, Europe had been unsettled by more than ten years of serious warfare. It was doubtful that any of the European states had won an advantage in these recent wars. And as the diplomatic historian Garrett Mattingly has written, the international conflicts had also created internal tensions in most of the European countries, "and the rumblings of revolt were audible."

International strains had not disappeared. Charles V of Spain controlled the import of wool into the Netherlands, and the English economy was dependent in significant measure on the export of wool. Francis, for his part, pressed ancient French claims to territories in Italy, which set him, too, in opposition to the interests of Charles. Moreover, in a recent competition among the electors of the Holy Roman Empire over whom should be elected to the office of emperor, Francis had lost to Charles, and so France and Spain seemed set on a collision course. Francis, therefore, needed some support from the English. And the English, as had often been their policy, hoped to balance one continental power against another and use their influence to obtain their own interests.

Settling these disputes by resort to arms was out of the question. The population of France had been decimated by the years of war and accompanying famine and plague. And as Mattingly has written, "the embarrassing fact . . . was that England was in no position to enter a war." The fleet was unprepared. The English had few cannons. Powder supplies were low. Trained gunners were scarce. It was questionable whether a good heavy cavalry could be put together at all.

Added to this was the fact that Henry and Francis were both under considerable domestic political pressure - Henry from some of the leading noble families of England, and Francis from the Parlement of Paris, which had the power to ratify royal legislation, or not. In such circumstances, politicians like to be seen as powerful figures on the world stage to buttress their positions at home.

For the time being, peace, or more precisely a convincing appearance of peace, was the ideal policy.