

Allies in Theory

From the end of the American Revolution to the beginning of the 20th century, the Franco-American relationship underwent many radical changes. The “alliance” between the two nations was often anything but. In this essay, I will trace the history of Franco-American relations during this period, working through decades of regime change in France to plot the path of this remarkable (and remarkably fickle) trans-Atlantic relationship. I will explore when and why this relationship reached its lowest point, and how it ultimately bounced back.

Let’s begin in the immediate aftermath of the American Revolution. First and foremost, one must understand the effects the American colonial uprising had on France’s own revolution. The French Revolution was, in part, a product of the Americans’ own struggle. In addition to the tremendous debt of 1.3 billion livres incurred in aid for the fledgling United States, France was plagued by hordes of returning soldiers, imbued with radical ideals of democracy and revolution against their oppressors. The paradoxical nature of an absolute monarchy supporting a republic’s struggle led many Frenchmen to reflect on whether regime change was necessary at home. These factors, combined with persistent droughts, growing dissatisfaction among the lower classes and an incompetent King threw France over the edge.

Comparing the French and American Revolutions is a tricky task. Some would say that they were both alike in scope, seeking to liberate the people of their nations from oppression and tyranny. However, the American revolt was more akin to a disgruntled band of guildsmen demanding more autonomy and lower taxes, not a complete overhaul of government and society.

In fact, at the very first Continental Congress, the final resolution made no mention of independence, but rather was an attempt to ensure American equality under British law. The French, from the very beginning, announced that they would not rest until France adopted a binding Constitution, as stated in the Tennis Court Oath. The French Revolution was also considerably more radical and rooted in fundamental societal upheaval. Suffrage (both male and universal), human rights, women's rights, and abolitionism were among the many causes advanced and advocated for by the revolutionaries.

While a few individual Americans such as Thomas Jefferson and Thomas Paine were aiding France's revolutionary cause at the time, there was no concerted effort by Congress or Washington to provide material or diplomatic aid. The reasons for this were many, including the US' dire post-Revolution financial situation, and disapproving attitudes towards the violent methods of the French revolutionaries. Despite owing their victory and independence in large part to French aid, the Americans were reticent in returning the favour to their allies. This decision to abandon the French in their hour of need is the clear beginning of a marked deterioration in Franco-American relations.

In 1792, when President George Washington declared that the 1778 Treaty of Alliance between France and the United States still stood, he told Congress that it was in the best interests of the United States to act in the spirit of neutrality towards the French Revolutionary government. In 1793, Congress unilaterally suspended loan repayments to the French and in 1794 signed the Jay Treaty, promoting trade with the British. The French, who were in the midst of fighting the British in the War of the First Coalition, took this as a tremendously consequential betrayal. In

response, the First Republic unleashed its privateers on American trading vessels in the Atlantic and Caribbean. Nearly 2,000 American merchant ships were captured and an alleged 20 million USD in trade revenue was lost by the end of the conflict.

It was precisely during the Quasi-War that Franco-American relations reached their lowest point, with open hostilities between the two nations on the high seas. To end the fighting, the French Consulate and the United States under President John Adams agreed to the Convention of 1800, also known as the Treaty of Mortefontaine. Its articles guaranteed “free trade, free goods, [and] freedom of convoy” between France and America, and recognized the maritime neutrality of American ships and sailors. The Convention also annulled the 1778 Treaty of Alliance between the two nations, formally ending their alliance. While the Treaty did not resolve the issue of compensation for American merchants, it did streamline the Spanish handover of Louisiana to France. The territory would play an extremely important role in future Franco-American relations.

The following, and most important, stage of Franco-American relations is the famous Louisiana Purchase. France acquired Louisiana from the Spanish shortly after the Treaty of Mortefontaine. Many interpretations of the Purchase tell how Napoleon, desperate for funds, beseeched Washington to buy the territory. In reality, the sale of Louisiana by Napoleon was a sound strategic decision, not driven by empty coffers. After suffering defeat at the hands of a slave revolt in Saint-Domingue (modern-day Haiti), France no longer had a vested interest in the Americas. French colonial authorities controlled a meagre shred of the territory, and the rest was entirely in the hands of Native American nations. For Napoleon, Louisiana was an administrative headache and had outlived its purpose as the crown jewel of the French colonial empire.

Napoleon's dreams of reviving the New World Empire were long dead, and his plans to invade Britain were taking shape. His administration simply did not have the need nor the resources to defend the territory in the aftermath of the War of the Second Coalition and in the midst of preparations for the next conflict.

For the United States, France's burden was their reward. The territory spanned 830,000 square miles and was bought for 15 million USD, or 434 million USD today. In 2024, the combined GDP of the 13 states whose territory were mostly or entirely part of the Louisiana territory is now 3.24 trillion USD, an almost 750,000% return on the initial investment. The territory also came with control over the majority of the Mississippi Basin's 12,000 miles of navigable waterways and the vital port city of New Orleans.

Upon the signing of the Purchase on April 30th, 1803, Robert Livingston, then US Minister to France, proclaimed: "From this day the United States take their place among the powers of the first rank." The acquisition of Louisiana was a pivotal moment in American expansion, opening a brand new Western frontier. What followed was over a century of subjugation, expulsion and extermination of native inhabitants in the Great Plains.

The Louisiana Purchase was the most important event in Franco-American relations during the Long Nineteenth Century, a deal that served both nations well. Many retellings of the event claim that the French sold their land partly out of respect for the two nations' shared beliefs of liberty and equality. One only needs to look at the events of 1804 and Napoleon's crowning as Emperor to know that that assumption is false.

A long period of inactivity in Franco-American relations began then. Although there were major flashpoints in their shared history, the two states rarely interacted. Despite both fighting against the British in the War of 1812, there was little progress towards renewing the former alliance. As the French installed progressively more liberal governments, such as the July Monarchy and the Second Republic, Americans began to hope that France would finally become a stable democracy. These hopes were in turn crushed by the rise of the authoritarian and interventionist Second Empire.

Additionally, the Americans were preoccupied with the Civil War, and the Union was desperate to cut off Confederate trade routes and deny them international recognition. To the Union's great relief, Napoleon III refused to intervene, surmising that a war with the Confederacy or the Union was not in the best interests of France. However, most French politicians did lean towards supporting the Confederacy, as the French textile industry was dependent on the economic juggernaut of Southern cotton.

Back in France, the fall of the Second Empire in 1870 ushered in the Third Republic, but the US was not entirely ready to cooperate with the French. The uprising of the Paris Commune in 1871 sowed doubts in DC about whether the French were truly ready to adopt the form of a non-revolutionary republic. After the tumultuous first years of the Third Republic, a parliamentary republic emerged, offering male universal suffrage and guaranteeing many of the same freedoms ensured in the US Constitution. Finally, over 80 years after the first hints of a democratic France,

America finally had a partner across the ocean that shared their ideals, values and system of governance.

The greatest symbol of this rapprochement is visible from anywhere lining New York Harbour. The Statue of Liberty, the physical representation of the two nations' shared values, was dedicated on the 28th of October, 1886, ten years after the centennial of American independence. While they still had no military cooperation, France and the United States were finally on the same page in terms of government, rights and ideals. Over the course of the Belle Epoque, the two nations drew closer together, finally fighting as allies against a common enemy in 1917 for the first time since 1783.

Franco-American relations in the 19th century were turbulent and unpredictable, and there are many lessons to be learnt from these events. The most important is the geopolitical relevance of the Long Nineteenth Century in our modern world. The Franco-American alliance was not always an alliance, and the special friendship was not always a friendship. Geopolitical circumstances shaped relations more than shared beliefs or ideals. The lesson to be learnt is that, while aligning views on rights and governance can bring nations together, one cannot disregard realpolitik. Necessity drives diplomacy, and alliances that were valid one day may be void the next. We should be grateful for the current alliance between France and the United States, as it has served to defend democracy since 1917. Yet we must also be aware that no alliance is strong enough to resist the test of conflicting interests or ideology. To paraphrase Lord Palmerston, nations have no permanent allies, only permanent interests. All of these points are as valid and relevant now as they were two centuries ago.

As a resident of France, the events that occurred between the end of the American Revolution to the end of the nineteenth century are extremely important to me. This century of revolution and transformation built the foundations of the French state I live in and love. The matters discussed at negotiating tables centuries ago dictated whether I must live knowing that America is an ally or an enemy. As for my future, I see the special and warm relationship between the United States and France as a great gift and opportunity, be it for my university studies or my summer hiking trips on the East Coast.

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