

The Franco-American Alliance

Waves crashed against the side of the Ville de Paris as General Comte de Grasse commanded his fleet. The French Navy was armed and ready, slicing through the water as it traveled. Soldiers' feet pattered across fields as they marched, General Washington directing the soldiers towards Yorktown. The Great Alliance between France and the Americans would result in the victory of that battle and the war. France's military, financial, and shared Enlightenment ideals rescued the weakening rebellion and aided its eventual victory, demonstrating how the United States of America was built on international cooperation and the pursuit of rights.

France and America did not have an official alliance at the beginning of the revolution. The independence movement had little prior success, with advocacy beginning as early as 1763 after the French and Indian War. The Americans tried boycotts and protests, and the movement peaked in 1774 when diplomatic separation was attempted. Various petitions were sent to England, such as the Declaration of Rights and Grievances in 1774 and the Olive Branch Petition in 1775 (American Revolution Museum at Yorktown, 4). Both documents were rejected by King George III, pushing the colonies and Britain closer to war. With their limited military resources, the Americans fought back by boycotting British goods and preparing colonial militias. They fueled revolutionary fervor, motivated by the pursuit of rights and republicanism. The war officially began in 1775, and the Americans' advantages included knowledge of the landscape, high morale, strategic generals like George Washington, and the use of the new and powerful Continental Army. However, later on, Britain began to take the upper hand. Once the British had

gathered intelligence on the landscape and brought over necessary military supplies and naval forces, they regained the advantage (The American Revolution Institute, 6-9). Before long, the tide had turned. The colonists were losing nearly every battle to Britain. Their revolutionary cause was in peril and required a powerful ally to sustain the fight for independence. This is where imperial France stepped in.

The turning point of the war was the Battle of Saratoga in 1777, where the Americans achieved their first major victory in months and gained control of key parts of the Hudson River Valley (American Battlefield Trust, 2). Following this, France offered its official support, and in 1778, the Treaty of Alliance was signed in Paris. Before Saratoga, France had been secretly supporting the Americans, occasionally sending money and supplies. After the victory, however, France fully committed by providing troops, naval forces, and substantial financial aid. American victory at Saratoga indicated to France that there was a real chance of victory for the freedom fighters and led to their wholehearted support. However, the French had other motivating factors: a desire for revenge against Britain from previous conflicts, and enthusiasm for the intellectual movement that inspired American resistance (Museum of the American Revolution, 6). Enlightenment ideals that inspired the Americans—such as natural rights, social contract, liberty, and republicanism—were popular in France, especially among the nobility. In fact, many French elites saw the Americans as a successful embodiment of those ideals. France also created the Treaty of Amity and Commerce with the Americans, recognizing American independence from Great Britain. The treaty was signed in Paris by American diplomats such as Benjamin Franklin, Silas Deane, and Arthur Lee. This alliance ultimately played a crucial role in the American victory.

Subsequently, the contribution of French naval and ground forces was essential to American victory. Before French aid, America had limited naval ability. Their ships were for transportation and trade, not conflict. After all, the Americans had previously relied on the British Navy for protection against external threats (Naval History and Heritage Command, 1). At the start of the war, there were limited resources and funds to build ships capable of outperforming the powerful British Navy, which was widely regarded as the best in the world at the time. However, France already possessed a strong navy as a result of state-funded rebuilding after its loss against the British in the French and Indian War. Their aid helped the Americans fight the war by land and sea and reduced their disadvantages (Office of the Historian, 7). France also transported weapons on their ships that the Americans did not produce. The American colonies did not specialize in manufacturing at the time and focused mainly on agricultural exports to Great Britain, such as cash crops. France, in contrast, had state-run armories dedicated to producing weapons, such as Charleville muskets, which were shipped to America to aid in the fight against Britain.

The Battle of Yorktown illustrates how substantial French aid was. With their resources, America led one of the largest British surrenders in British military history. A military strategy was devised by American General George Washington and French Generals Marquis de Lafayette and Comte de Rochambeau. The three generals created a plan to surround General Cornwallis, who was an experienced and aggressive general. Rochambeau and Washington marched from Rhode Island and sent fake messages declaring they were headed to New York to make their arrival a surprise. Due to Yorktown being situated on a riverbank, victory required both land and naval forces. Washington's Continental Army and Rochambeau's French troops

secretly marched south and surrounded Yorktown by land, while Admiral de Grasse's French fleet blocked British resupply by sea. Surrounded by enemy forces, General Cornwallis and his troops could not leave, and the siege began. After about three weeks of siege, the British had to surrender due to dwindling supplies. The Franco-American alliance captured around 7,000 British troops, artillery, and ships (Deverell & White, 141–142). After Yorktown, the war with the British largely came to an end, and in Great Britain, political leaders became focused on negotiating peace.

Following this crucial victory, the war entered a stalemate until 1782, when the British Parliament voted to end the war. In 1783, a peace agreement was finally formed, known as the Treaty of Paris. American politicians such as Benjamin Franklin, John Jay, and John Adams signed the treaty in Paris. The French indirectly aided the negotiations by continuing to provide financial support, which allowed the Americans to sustain this war of attrition effort until a settlement was reached. France's aid resulted in political instability and bankruptcy for its own country, but it also brought the satisfaction of seeing Britain weakened (PBS, 2:43–3:02). Under the treaty, the United States gained territory extending north to the border of British Canada and south to the northern boundary of Spanish Florida.

This alliance teaches two major lessons of international cooperation and the pursuit of rights, and creates a global and personal impact. The lesson of support is demonstrated in this conflict through American victory, that was unachievable without France. This alliance exemplifies how in modern times support is needed from others to thrive. Another important lesson that can be learned from this conflict is the importance of the pursuit of rights.

Enlightenment ideals that motivated Americans to revolt against English rule still apply in the

modern world, and struggles for freedom still take place when rights are impeded. Advocacy has taken place for topics like universal suffrage, housing rights, discrimination, and more. The continued advocacy for these modern subjects will spark change, as it did for the Americans. In addition to education on those two themes, the alliance shapes my life on a daily basis. As someone who refuses to be silenced on what happens around me, this alliance was inspirational. A group of citizens in a colony who refused to have their rights infringed upon fought a powerful nation, knowing there was a large chance they would lose. Yet, they continued to fight and persevere. Their example makes me believe that anything is possible, and that no matter what I must fight for respect and my rights. This will likely create more problems for me in life, but I would rather go down trying and fighting like the Americans did.

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