

An Alliance That Built America

Nineteen-year-old Marquis de Lafayette stood on the deck of his ship, staring into the Atlantic Ocean. He was younger than most teenagers who join the military today, yet he was a fugitive from his own government, having bought a ship and fled France against King Louis XVI's direct orders. He wasn't a soldier of fortune; he was a true believer in the American idea of freedom, willing to risk his fortune and his life for it. Lafayette was the human proof of the alliance before the Treaty of Alliance. With Benjamin Franklin's diplomacy and General George Washington's leadership, their partnership showed that France and America needed each other to survive, but stayed together for something greater.

France's decision to help came at a great cost. By 1776, the French were still recovering from the Treaty of Paris of 1763, which ended the French and Indian War and gave their North American territories to their British enemies. Foreign Minister Vergennes saw the American Revolution as a chance for revenge [1]. He essentially argued "the enemy of my enemy is my friend." If France could help America bleed the British Empire, France would regain its status as the world's leading power. Benjamin Franklin charmed Paris and used that anger to win two big agreements: the Treaty of Amity and Commerce and the Treaty of Alliance. France became the first nation to recognize the United States, turning a small war into a global one. Franklin's role went beyond handshakes; he worked behind the scenes, "gathering intelligence, sending out counterintelligence agents to hunt for British spies, moles and using propaganda against England" [2] to keep the alliance safe.

Lafayette was the face of this partnership. He was one of the wealthiest men in France, with a young wife and a strong future at Versailles, yet he chose the mud and cold of the colonies. He developed a legendary bond with Washington—a relationship historian Ron Chernow describes as a surrogate father-son connection [3]. Washington, childless, found a protégé in the orphaned Frenchman, and wrote to Congress that because of Lafayette's "illustrious and important connections" and "attachment... for our cause," [4] it was essential to

treat him with the highest respect. Lafayette wasn't a mascot; he bled at Brandywine and kept soldiers' spirits high during the winter at Valley Forge, PA. He chased the British across Virginia until they were trapped. It is ironic later that Britain survived losing the colonies and succeeded through trade with America while France spent itself into bankruptcy funding the Americans. That debt helped to King Louis XVI's downfall and the French Revolution—a twist the King did not imagine while signing checks to pay for American liberty.

In 1781 the American Revolution climax came at Yorktown. Popular history focuses on the land battle, but what really won it was the French Navy. Washington told the Marquis: "Without a decisive naval force we can do nothing definitive. And with it, everything honorable and glorious" [5]. Admiral de Grasse sailed into the Chesapeake Bay, won the Battle of the Capes, and locked the door by sea. Cornwallis couldn't get reinforcements or escape. Trapped between Washington's army and French sails, the British had to surrender. When France faced its own revolution in 1793 and asked for help, Washington issued a Proclamation of Neutrality. America chose its own survival over its oldest friend, even as Lafayette sat in a dungeon.

The lesson is that alliances built just because of a shared enemy don't last, but ones built on shared beliefs, like freedom and the right to choose your own government, can survive tough times. The 1793 rift proved partnerships built only on a common enemy are fragile. Alliances built on shared values endure. That bond brought French and American soldiers fighting side-by-side again at the Meuse-Argonne in WWI and on the sands of Normandy in WWII. Lafayette himself is the ultimate lesson: one person who believes in an idea and acts on it can change the world. Diplomacy in a Paris drawing room can be just as decisive as a charge on the battlefield.

This history isn't just dates to me; it's personal. It started when I was eight years old and the Broadway musical, "Hamilton" made Lafayette feel like a rockstar, but that spark led me to search for the real hero. I asked for a Lafayette uniform for Christmas wearing it to reenactments near my home in Princeton and Brooklyn. I don't just read about this history; I want to live inside it. This passion led me to the NYC launch of the 200th anniversary of Lafayette's 1824-1825 Farewell Tour in America, where I met actual descendants of Lafayette. Seeing his bloodline in front of me made the 18th century feel like yesterday.

My journey continued with a private viewing of a mural at my mom's high school in upstate NY showing Lafayette meeting Emma Willard during the Troy stop of his Farewell Tour, and a friendship with members of the SAR Brooklyn chapter, who have taught me a lot about the Continental Army. But the most important lesson came during a trip to France a couple of years ago, when my tour guide Ben Canayer shared stories from his great-grandfather in Caen, who reminded me history is often polished by the victors. Lafayette was about only 10 years older than me and believed in an idea that changed the world. That is the kind of American I want to be—someone who acts on his convictions regardless of age.

The Franco-American alliance was complicated, strategic, and imperfect—but decisive. Without it, the United States might have been a footnote in British history. Lafayette crossed an ocean for an ideal; Franklin won a war through wit in a Paris salon; de Grasse's navy finished it on the Chesapeake. Two very different nations were bound by a shared belief that people deserve to be free. That alliance lives on every time a young person fights for something bigger than themselves.

Footnotes

[1] Charles Gravier, Comte de Vergennes, French Foreign Minister, argued this strategic viewpoint in his 1777 diplomatic correspondence regarding the British Empire.

[2] Allen, Thomas B. *George Washington, Spymaster: How the Americans Outspied the British and Won the Revolutionary War*. Washington, D.C.: National Geographic, 2004, p. 64.

[3] Chernow, Ron. *Washington: A Life*. This biography details the close, surrogate father-son relationship between George Washington and the Marquis de Lafayette.

[4] Allen, Thomas B. *George Washington, Spymaster*. Washington, D.C.: National Geographic, 2004, p. 72.

[5] Allen, Thomas B. *George Washington, Spymaster*. Washington, D.C.: National Geographic, 2004, p. 158.