Spring 2013

The Immortal Lafayette

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Recommended Citation

Available at: https://scholarworks.harding.edu/tenor/vol2/iss1/3
“A nation has risen to receive you, grandsire and youth, the matron and her infant—to receive the man who first came to join their troops in the hour of adversity, to share their dangers when they were distressed—who gave clothing, and who furnished arms—to receive the man who came in his morning of life with his virgin sword, his pure heart, and his French valour....” On September 28, 1824, these words welcomed the “Nation’s Guest,” to Philadelphia.1 The Marquis de Lafayette was “the patriot hero,” the “friend of Washington,” “the Champion of Liberty,” whom throngs of Americans flooded the streets of their cities to greet with songs and shouts of jubilee, crying, “Hail him!—hail him!”2 “Freedom’s favorite son” had returned at last to make his “Triumphal Tour,” which lasted from 1824 until 1825.3 The “god-like” “friend of the people” visited all twenty-four states, populated by American citizens he had come fifty years prior to rescue.4

At the age of nineteen, the Marquis de Lafayette evaded the aspirations of his father-in-law, abandoned his pregnant wife, defied the orders of the King, and purchased a ship to come to the aid of a foreign people’s revolution. Throughout the American Revolution, he fought alongside the colonists, shared in their hardships, and fought for their cause of liberty with a commitment worthy of honor and remembrance. Considering the magnitude of his devotion to their cause, it is no surprise that, upon his return in 1824, the name of Lafayette “beat in every grateful heart” and “burst from every tongue.”5 For his military, financial, and diplomatic contributions to the Revolution, the Marquis de Lafayette earned an enduring, immortal place in the hearts of the American people.6

Marie-Joseph-Paul-Yves-Roch-Gilbert du Motier came from a long lineage of military excellence, tracing back to the Crusades and the days of Joan of Arc.7 When he was scarcely two years old, his father, a colonel of the French Grenadiers, was killed at the hands of the English during the Seven Years War,
leaving him heir to an enormous sum of money and the title of Marquis de Lafayette. His wealth facilitated his marriage to Adrienne Noailles in 1774, which propelled him further into France’s exclusive circle of nobility and associated him with royalty such as Louis XVI and Marie Antoinette.

The Marquis de Lafayette first heard of the American Revolution in August of 1775, during a dinner reception honoring the Duke of Gloucester, brother to the King of England, George III. The Duke openly criticized his brother’s adverse policies regarding the colonists and “spoke with admiration of the Americans’ behavior and expressed sympathy for their cause.” Upon hearing the Duke’s convictions, the impressionable marquis decided that he wanted to lend his support to the colonies’ emancipation. He later wrote, “When I first heard of [the colonists’] quarrel, my heart was enlisted, and I thought only of joining my colors to those of the revolutionaries.”

The Americans’ cause certainly captivated the nineteen-year-old nobleman, but what compelled him to exchange his life of privilege and ease for the bloody battlefields of thirteen rebellious, foreign colonies? Louis Gottschalk suggests that, after the death of Lafayette’s father, “To hate the English became a filial as well as a patriotic duty.” In addition to avenging England for claiming the life of his father, by joining the Revolution, Lafayette could simultaneously appease his despondency toward the nobility of Versailles. He “viewed the greatness and the littleness of the court with contempt,” and consequently found himself to be discontent in his extravagant lifestyle among French aristocrats. Instead, he gravitated toward the prospect of aiding the colonists, later writing, “The attraction to the American Revolution drew me suddenly to my proper place…where…I could, at the age of nineteen, take refuge in the alternative of conquering or perishing in the cause to which I had devoted myself.” The Marquis de Lafayette was seeking retribution, independence, and glory, all of which he hoped to attain in the American Revolution.

Having been inspired by his conversation with the Duke, Lafayette sought out the American Commissioner in Paris in order to enlist in the American

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8 Gottschalk, Lafayette Comes to America, 3; David Loth, The People’s General: The Personal Story of Lafayette (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1951), 17.
10 Gottschalk, Lafayette Comes to America, 50.
11 Ibid.
13 Gottschalk, Lafayette Comes to America, 12.
15 Ibid.
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Revolutionary Forces. Commissioner Silas Deane was hesitant to accept Lafayette, or any other French soldier for that matter, as he was “well-nigh harassed to death” by officers wanting to lend their assistance to America’s cause. This, however, did not deter Lafayette because he possessed both a willingness to serve and a distinguished reputation among French nobility. In an effort to combat Deane’s resistance, the marquis “specifically and emphatically rejected the very idea of monetary remuneration,” and, furthermore, pledged to purchase a ship to transport Deane’s volunteer officers across the Atlantic.

The American Commissioner recognized that there was something different about Lafayette. He was not like the Frenchmen who had come demanding reimbursement for their service and expecting grandiose ranks to match or surpass those which they held in France. Gottschalk notes, “His willingness to serve without compensation or pension singled him out among Americans and foreigners alike.” Though not yet nineteen, the Marquis de Lafayette was granted a contract on December 7, 1776, in which Deane clearly detailed the reasons for his acceptance into the Continental army as a major-general. In the end, his social connections, personal wealth, and zeal for the American cause won Lafayette the appointment he desired, bringing him one step closer to joining the revolution in America.

As he had promised Deane, Lafayette purchased a ship, La Victoire, and began making arrangements for his journey to America. His eminent departure caused quite a stir amongst the French government, which attempted to prohibit him from leaving by making it illegal for anyone seeking to aid the colonies in America to leave French ports and specifically ordered for the return of the Marquis de Lafayette. The teenager was, in fact, just about to make his exodus when he heard news that a lettre de cachet had been issued against him by Louis XVI. According to Gottschalk, “With one of these secret orders the king might imprison anyone for any length of time without specifying the reason, and he frequently used them to keep the sons of well-known families from disgracing

16 Holbrook, 15-16.
20 Ibid., 27.
21 Jared Sparks. The Diplomatic Correspondence of the American Revolution (Boston: N. Hale and Gray and Bowen, 1829), 1:98-99. Deane proposed his “high birth, his alliances, the great dignities which his family hold at this court, his considerable estates in this realm, his personal merit, his reputation, his disinterestedness, and, above all, his zeal for liberty of our provinces” as valid grounds for appointing the Marquis de Lafayette the rank of Major-General.
23 Gottschalk, Lafayette Comes to America, 110.
24 Ibid., 101.
themselves.”

Fearing negative consequences, Lafayette returned to France, but, upon his arrival in Bordeaux, he was overcome by a spirit of rebellion. Rather than continue on to Marseilles, as he was commanded to do, Lafayette instead wrote a letter apologizing for disregarding the order. He then proceeded to disguise himself as a courier and fled back to La Victoire in order to make his get-away to America.

When he heard the news of Lafayette’s flight, his father-in-law, the Duc d’Ayen, was “violently angry” and understandably so. After all, he had envisioned that Lafayette would hold a position on the court of Versailles as well as maintain a prosperous military career, one which the Duc had worked diligently to secure for him. Moreover, Lafayette was young and newly married. His wife, Adrienne, was pregnant with their second child, and the thought that his son-in-law would abandon her for a distant conflict in colonies which did not concern him infuriated the Duc d’Ayen. However, Lafayette would not be stopped. Before departing for America, he wrote his father-in-law, expressing his excitement for the adventure which lay ahead of him, saying, “I am filled with joy at having found so good an opportunity to increase my experience and to do something in the world.”

On Friday, June 13, 1777, after nearly eight weeks at sea, La Victoire anchored in a harbor off of North Island, South Carolina. From there, Lafayette then headed north, nine hundred miles, to the capital city of Philadelphia, where he hoped to immediately present his credentials to Congress. Unfortunately, the young man met resistance from James Lovell, chairman of the new Committee on Foreign Applications. Lovell claimed that Silas Deane had “exceeded his authority” by sending him, explaining, “Last year, it is true, we needed officers, but this year we have many, and very experienced ones too.” Lafayette had forfeited his life of opulence in France to come to America’s aid and therefore contested, “After the sacrifices I have made, I have the right to exact two favors: one is to serve at my own expense, and the other is to begin to serve as a volunteer.” Despite initial reservations of accepting another young,

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25 Gottschalk, Lafayette Comes to America, 110.
26 Bernier, 33.
27 Gottschalk, Lafayette Comes to America, 120.
28 Bernier, 31.
29 Perkins, 173; Gottschalk, Lafayette Comes to America, 39.
30 Bernier, 31.
31 Perkins, 179.
32 Gaines, 62.
34 Gottschalk, Lafayette Joins the American Army, 18.
35 Ibid., 19.
inexperienced foreign officer, Congress ultimately consented to the marquis’s request and gave him the rank of major-general on July 31.\textsuperscript{37}

Shortly after having received his commission from Congress, Lafayette made the acquaintance of the Commanding General of the Continental Army, George Washington. Years later, in his memoirs, Lafayette recounted the story of their first meeting. Lafayette claims Washington took him aside “and then told him, that he should be pleased if he would make the quarters of the commander-in-chief his home…and consider himself at all times as one of the family.”\textsuperscript{38} Lafayette felt overjoyed with such a welcome, which he perceived as an invitation by Washington into his personal family.\textsuperscript{39} Gottschalk observes, “He had—almost suddenly—ceased to be merely a companion of French soldiers of fortune seeking for glory in an unknown world and had become the adopted son of a hero.”\textsuperscript{40} Yet, David A. Clary suggests that the French-speaking marquis misunderstood Washington’s comments because, contrary to Lafayette’s interpretation, Washington’s English use of the word “family” was exclusively used for referencing his military staff.\textsuperscript{41} Furthermore, Clary concludes that “Washington invited Lafayette into his military family to keep an eye on him.”\textsuperscript{42} Whether for the purpose of protecting him as a son or merely to lend a watchful eye on the Frenchmen, Washington kept Lafayette close to him during the teenager’s first few weeks with his new “family.”

After having accompanied Washington on several reconnoitering excursions, Lafayette was eager to finally engage in combat and received his first opportunity to do so at the Battle of Brandywine. Upon joining the center division of General John Sullivan’s corps, the teenage major-general gallantly encouraged the retiring troops to charge ahead instead of cowering in retreat, yet they were unwilling to heed the commands of a Frenchman.\textsuperscript{43} When they resisted his orders, Lafayette resorted to the use of force, pushing them forward by their shoulders and nudging them with the flat of his sword.\textsuperscript{44} Amidst the chaos of the battle, Lafayette was wounded in his left calf, but he persisted in

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37 David A. Clary, \textit{Adopted Son} (New York: Bantam Dell, 2007), 93. The decision of Congress to grant Lafayette a commission in the U.S. Army: “Whereas the Marquis de Lafayette, out of his great zeal to the cause of liberty, in which the United states are engaged, has left his family and connexions, and at his own expense come over to offer his services to the United States, without pension or particular allowance, and is anxious to serve our cause: Resolved that his service be accepted and that in consideration of his zeal, illustrious family and connexions, he have the rank and commission of Major General of the Army of the United States.”


39 Clary, 97.


41 Clary, 97.

42 Ibid.


44 Ibid.; Clary, 115.
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fighting, unaware that he had been shot. General Washington insisted that his personal physician tend to Lafayette’s wound and that he be taken care of as if he were his own son.

Having shed his blood alongside the colonists in their struggle for freedom, Lafayette attested his commitment to their revolution and, inadvertently, made himself a hero. His display of bravery and leadership at Brandywine earned Lafayette not only the respect of the soldiers but also the gratitude of Washington. Following the day’s events, the General wrote to Congress, praising Lafayette for contributing to their heightened morale. Concluding his report, Washington wrote, “Notwithstanding the misfortune of the day, I am happy to find the troops in good spirits.” By leading his men, struggling alongside them, shedding his blood for their cause, and ceaselessly encouraging them to carry on, Lafayette had distinguished himself from the other Frenchmen who had served before him. As Olivier Bernier says, “His behavior was different from that of the other French officers, who had shown a marked tendency to avoid actual battles.”

Over the course of the months following Brandywine, Lafayette served in numerous battles, in which he continued to demonstrate his military capabilities and commitment for the colonists’ cause. Yet, because he did not have command over his own division, Lafayette incessantly pestered Washington in hopes of attaining the appointment he wanted. Washington had been against honoring Lafayette with his own division because he felt that American officers “would be disgusted if foreigners were put over their heads.” However, he finally consented to plead the case of his zealous “son,” and wrote to Congress: “…he is sensible, discreet in his manner…and from the disposition he discovered at the battle of Brandywine, possesses a large share of bravery and military ardor.” Although previously apprehensive due to past problems with foreign officers, Congress ultimately deemed the young Frenchman to be worthy of commanding his own division based upon his demonstration of leadership and devotion to the cause as well as Washington’s recommendation.

Lafayette had been in the colonies for just over five months when he was given command over a division, and it was evident that he was quickly becoming an “idol of the congress, the army, and the people of America.”

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45 Gottschalk, Lafayette Joins the American Army, 45.
47 Clary, 120.
49 Ibid.
50 Bernier, 50.
51 Sparks, 4:328.
52 Gottschalk, Lafayette Joins the American Army, 73.
53 Ibid., 85.
54 Marquis de Lafayette, Memoirs, vol. 1, 239.
Lafayette’s popularity among Americans would later contribute significantly to the revolutionary efforts by helping him gain assistance from France. Only weeks after having received the division which he had so eagerly anticipated, Lafayette led his men to Valley Forge in order to establish camp for the winter. During the harsh winter, he continued to demonstrate his devotion to the American military effort by endeavoring to purchase a ship for the navy’s use and attending to the personal needs of his men. In addition to petitioning Congress for relief, the Frenchman also made efforts to obtain warm clothing and other necessities for his men by expending his personal funds.

Joining him at Valley Forge were approximately fifty Iroquois warriors. General Philip Schuyler had called upon Lafayette to assist in negotiations with the Six Nations tribes in Johnstown, as Schuyler thought the French major-general could be useful in persuading the Native Americans to abandon their British loyalties by utilizing those which had once been established by the French. The Native Americans genuinely liked Lafayette and bestowed upon him the name Kayeheanla. Besides serving as a mediator between them and the colonists while in Johnstown, Lafayette also prevented a mutiny amongst the soldiers, who were upset for having not received their wages. The major-general compensated their earnings from his own funds, and then appealed to Congress about the situation, saying, “We want money, sir, and money will be spoken by me till I will be enabled to pay our poor soldiers.” Whether for the regimentals or the Native Americans, Lafayette was a valuable asset to the army for his ability to intercede, negotiate, and provide.

In the fall of 1778, having verified his abilities to contribute to the war effort militarily, Lafayette requested permission from Congress to return to France so that he might assist the American cause diplomatically. Upon his arrival in France, he wrote to the President of Congress, declaring,

The affairs of America I shall ever look upon as my first business whilst I am in Europe. Any confidence from the king and ministers, any popularity I may have among my own countrymen, any means in my power, shall be, to the best of my skill, and till the end of my life, exerted in behalf of an interest I have so much at heart.

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55 Loth, 99.
57 Ibid.
58 Clary, 174.
59 Ibid., 162. Also known as the Iroquois Confederacy, the Six Nations tribes included the Cayuga, Mohawks, Onandaga, Oneida, Seneca, and Tuscarora.
60 Gaines, 203.
61 Clary, 163.
62 Ibid.
63 Ibid., 225.
Almost immediately, Lafayette took to attending after the affairs of America by contacting the Comte de Vergennes and Prime Minister Maurepas to apply for additional assistance. Thanks to months of relentless negotiations, Lafayette successfully persuaded France to further support the American Revolution. James Breck Perkins says Lafayette’s diplomacy was “of inestimable value to the American cause” because he served as “a connecting link between the Americans and the French government.”

After a year’s work in France, Lafayette returned to America bearing news that Louis XVI intended to supply six warships and six thousand men for the Americans. Perkins says that, “The decision of the French government to send not only a fleet, but a considerable force of soldiers, to cooperate with the American army was in large degree due to La Fayette,” and Gottschalk asserts that the marquis influenced the decision “more than any one other person.” Despite his persuasive authority in gaining the endorsement of the French government to provide and dispatch a naval fleet, Lafayette was not granted charge over the expeditionary force. Instead, command was given to the Comte de Rochambeau, with Admiral Ternay in control of the fleet. Though disappointed, Lafayette accepted Rochambeau’s appointment because he understood that, as a twenty-year-old major-general, he was rather young to lead such a command. What is more, as Perkins observes, Lafayette’s resolve of contentment is testimony that “he was more interested in obtaining an army for his allies than in obtaining for himself the position of its commander.”

With confirmation that France was sending support in the form of a naval fleet, hope was rekindled in the hearts of the American soldiers. Upon his return to the colonies, “the ringing of bells and the blare of bands…cheers, fireworks, and bonfires” welcomed Lafayette back to the shores of America. General Washington was equally delighted to hear of the marquis’s return. In response to compliments made about Lafayette by the secretary to French ambassador La Luzerne, Washington is claimed to have “blushed like a fond father whose child is being praised.” The secretary said, “Tears fell from his eyes, he clasped my hand, and could hardly utter the words: ‘I do not know a nobler, finer soul, and I love him as my own son.’”

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65 Gaines, 136.
66 Perkins, 189.
67 Ibid., 297.
68 Ibid., 289.
70 Gottschalk, Close of the American Revolution, 65, 70.
71 Ibid., 66.
72 Perkins, 296.
73 Gottschalk, Close of the American Revolution, 77.
74 Clary, 245.
75 Ibid.
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With the return of his “son,” and then the arrival of the French fleet months later, Washington made use of Lafayette as an interpreter during strategic exchanges with Rochambeau and Ternay. The General intended to use the naval advantage provided by the French to organize a decisive ending to the war, culminating in a siege of Yorktown. Perkins argues that such “could not have been attempted without the cooperation of a fleet,” and, as the Americans did not have their own fleet, the assistance from the French was vital to secure the victory and the conclusion of the war. Largely because of the strength of the French fleet, obtained chiefly by Lafayette’s efforts, American forces seized Yorktown, defeated Cornwallis, and subsequently won the war for the emancipation of the American colonies from Britain.

From the moment he first heard of the colonists’ struggle in the summer of 1775, Lafayette devoted himself to the fight for liberty. As an ambitious nineteen-year-old, motivated by his discontentment with his life at Versailles and a vengeance against England, he pledged to enlist without pay. Once in America, Lafayette quickly gained favor in the eyes of the Americans by first earning the paternal love and friendship of George Washington. He proved himself worthy of the soldiers’ respect by struggling alongside them, bleeding for their cause, and interceding for them when they were in need of provisions. Lafayette then utilized his connections to the French court to solicit for additional assistance. By his influence, France agreed to send a naval fleet which ultimately helped to secure the end of the war. For his contributions to the American Revolution, the Marquis de Lafayette is honored immortally across America today, as he was in Philadelphia on September 28, 1824:

You have seen in foreign regions the gorgeous pomp, and the splendid triumphs of monarchs, and of conquerors; but none has ever before seen the generous emotions and the willing homage of eleven millions of free citizens at the sight of a man endeared to them by services long since rendered, and who proclaim to the wide earth and the high heavens with the thunder of canon and crash of arms, in one deep and loud and tremendous shout, that they never have forgotten, that they never will forget, Lafayette, their early friend—the friend of the Father of their Country—the friend whom the Country delights to honor.

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76 Gottschalk, *Close of the American Revolution*, 133.
77 Perkins, 10-11.
78 Brandon, 75.