

A Beloved Headache: Lafayette and his Reputation

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Marie-Joseph-Paul-Yves-Roch-Gilbert-DuMotier Lafayette, better known to history as the Marquis de Lafayette, gained lasting fame for himself as a proponent of freedom throughout the world. He personally took part in republican revolutions in two countries – his home nation of France and his adopted home thousands of miles away in America. Strangely, this international hero has become more universally praised and honored in New York and Washington than in Paris and Marseilles. This is true not only in modern scholarship and remembrance, but also – and more substantially – during Lafayette’s own lifetime. While a young Lafayette found an adoptive father in George Washington and a family in the Founding Brothers of the United States, his contemporaries in the leadership of France came to scorn and despise him during their own revolution. This study will examine the personal and professional relationships which General Lafayette established and maintained throughout his revolutionary career on two continents. For the purpose of providing a general overview which will demonstrate the evolution of Lafayette’s position and reputation, these individuals will primarily be the most popular historical figures of the era such as Washington and Thomas Jefferson in America, Maximilien Robespierre and Napoleon Bonaparte in Europe.

The Motier family, to which the general belonged, could trace its title of nobility in France as far back as the year 1250. Yet Louis XIV, in an attempt to move himself toward absolutism, had “withdrawn power from the old Sword families and had given them patronage instead.” The Motier family was one of these Sword families that had gained nobility titles through military service to a mon-

arch. Later, Louis XVI took away *both* power and patronage from these old Sword families, infuriating the nobility and thereby encouraging anti-royal sentiments in the Second Estate.¹

The revolutionary career of the young Marquis de Lafayette began over a decade prior to any French action against the power of the Bourbon royal family. Orphaned at a young age, when his father was killed in combat against the British and his mother perished of disease, Lafayette grew up as an incredibly rich and prominent youth in the Court of Versailles; but upon his development into adolescence and the advancement of his education, he began to grow apart from the social class from which he came. Along with his brother-in-law the Vicomte de Noailles and another young friend the Comte de Segur, Lafayette adopted the principles of the Enlightenment and of the French reformer Abbé Guillaume Raynal. They “disdained the aristocracy, colonialism, and the Church” and “rejected the decadent lifestyle of their parents and embraced the American Revolution as the struggle for human dignity.”² Each had received a military education at the Académie de Versailles, and was anxious for adventure.

Fortunately for them, a friend was available in Paris: American Congressman Silas Deane. Deane had been passing out commissions to many French officers, and by the time the young Lafayette and his friends arrived at Deane’s doorstep, he was feeling pressure to stop this unauthorized elevation of foreigners.³ However, Deane was inspired by the youth and enthusiasm of these new volunteers, and “allowed himself to imagine that these three might inspire a generation and ensure France’s continued support for the American struggle.”⁴ This was a gross miscalculation by Deane, who despite the great services he provided the American cause, was prone to gross miscalculation. Rather than strengthen Franco-American relations, the recruitment of these extremely prominent young French-

men created a chaotic situation for French diplomats and could have unraveled the nascent bond between the two countries. The British (along with the young aristocrats' families) charged that France was collaborating with the American rebels, and matters were made worse by the fact that Noailles's uncle had just become the French ambassador to England. French Minister of Foreign Affairs the Comte de Vergennes "feared that Britain would view the enlistment of these three famous aristocrats as a declaration of war. He prohibited any ships carrying French officers or arms to America from leaving port and ordered the arrest of the three young officers...Unsatisfied by French actions, the British blockaded the French coast and threatened to cut off trade."⁵ Lafayette and his companions would not be deterred, however. At his own expense, Lafayette outfitted a warship and set sail with Noailles and Segur, "leaving behind a diplomatic brouhaha: a pregnant sixteen-year-old wife and a two-year-old daughter, an enraged father-in-law, an anxious General Broglie, and a bellicose British ambassador."⁶

Acting on their own beliefs, Lafayette and his friends had set off a political firestorm for their home nation – in an unfortunate portent of what was to come in Lafayette's life. In what would become a pattern in his long and eventful life, his actions were tremendously appreciated by the American on the scene, but deplored by many of his own compatriots due to unleashing unintended trouble for France. It can be accurately said that Lafayette possessed a great many talents in his life, but political sense and foresight were not among them. He was an idealist, and he genuinely believed that if he acted toward achieving his goals others would come along and the world would be bettered. Unfortunately for him, his life was played out on a stage with other actors, and the best of intentions do not sway the minds of all.

Despite Silas Deane's enthusiasm about the prospects of the

young French aristocrats, Lafayette's arrival in America was far from filled with fanfare. After trouble finding a landing spot, he and his friends made their way to Philadelphia where a frustrated Congress dismissed them and forwarded them to Washington's army. The Congressmen had had enough of dealing with Deane's foreign officers, many of whom were terribly unqualified. However, influenced by letters from Deane and other sources of information (including Ben Franklin), Congress gave qualifying instructions to Washington about the young marquis. They stated that his rank as a major general was only honorary, that he was not to be placed in a position superior to any American generals, and that he essentially was to be baby-sat and kept out of trouble – even given an allowance due to worries about his wisdom with finances. Washington had an available space on his staff for an aide, and decided that it suited the young man he was forced to safeguard. Members of Congress made sure Washington was well-aware that there were very prominent people in France “who interest themselves in the welfare of that amiable young nobleman.”⁷

Lafayette was severely disappointed by this appointment, and pestered Washington and Congress for command of a division as befitted his rank. However, he could take pleasure in the fact that he was recognized and accepted at all; frustrated by the influx of French officers, and having no place for many of them, his two companions were forced to return home (which Lafayette again paid for personally). This is when the crucial moment in Lafayette's life occurred: a deeply personal conversation with George Washington stemming from one of Lafayette's appeals and Washington's awareness of his own duty in regard to the young marquis. Assuring Washington, “I have come here to learn, *mon general*, not to teach,”⁸ Lafayette charmed the American commander, as he did just about every American he came across. There was an undeniable allure of

this energetic teenaged nobleman of republican convictions. Washington explained his position to the young man, and requested his support. The Virginian concluded with his hope that Lafayette would have his confidence as a “friend and father.” For the rest of his life, Lafayette would refer to this as the “great conversation.”⁹ As one biographer put it, “The orphan of Auvergne, exiled, timid behind his swagger, found what he had missed all his life. He set out to be a dutiful son...He fell completely under Washington’s influence, seeking his approval, wanting to do things as his hero would do them.”¹⁰ It is easy to imagine that the teenaged marquis who had only faint memories and stories of his father the soldier would be immeasurably impressed by the tall, stately, martial-looking Washington. Others would be quick to take note of their inseparability for the rest of Lafayette’s tenure of service under Washington’s command.

Lafayette would prove to be both a blessing and a curse for Washington, and as was typical of Lafayette, it typically depended on the presence or absence of fellow prominent Frenchmen. Among his prominent actions were his first battle at Brandywine, his appeals to France for aid, Washington’s first meeting with the French general the Comte de Rochambeau, and the Virginia campaign which saw the war on the American continent come to an end.

As General Sir William Howe drove toward Philadelphia, Washington’s army was forced to respond in a major battle south of the city at Germantown. Lafayette was wounded in the leg in this, his first battle, and although it was not a life-threatening wound, the commander-in-chief worried terribly, especially due to the admonishments to keep the marquis safe. Lafayette never should have been on the front line at Brandywine. “As Washington had been ordering Greene to move to Sullivan’s support, the marquis asked if

he could ride up to observe the situation. Distracted, the commander in chief agreed.”¹¹ Washington arrived at his side in the medical tent, and ordered the surgeons and other officers there to “Take care of him as if he were my son...for I love him the same.”¹² Their relationship was clear, and on top of the satisfaction of finding a father, Lafayette could now take pleasure in the acclaim he began to receive from the American public as a wounded hero of the cause. He continued to charm Americans by joking in the hospital. When officers came to check on him, he said he worried about their hungry appearance, and begged them not to eat him as he lay on the table.¹³

Lafayette spent his recovery time attempting to further aid the American cause. He had been appalled by the state of the American army when he had first arrived in camp, and was determined to see them better equipped. To this end, he sent ceaseless appeals to Vergennes and directly to the royal family – the privilege of a life spent at court. For their part, the French government officials were receptive to these appeals, along with those from American commissioners such as Ben Franklin. Like John Adams in his dealings in Versailles, Lafayette had little patience for temporizing and the delicacies of diplomacy. He wanted immediate and dramatic action. On several occasions, Vergennes, who was less amused by the young aristocrat than the royal family was, complained bitterly that Lafayette seemed to wish to bankrupt the French coffers. Washington, on the other hand, “approved these side-channel communications, exploiting the young general’s popularity as a way to raise people and goods for his army, and it worked.”¹⁴

When relations with France finally resulted in a full military alliance and French entry into the war, Lafayette was ecstatic. Never one to shy away from praise, he undoubtedly gave himself a good deal of credit for this development. “Lafayette wrote letters describ-

ing the American uniforms so that French officers could tell one rank from another. He sent out periodic updates on the military situation for Rochambeau to receive when he arrived. And he revived his dream of invading Canada.”¹⁵ Unable to leave camp himself at the time of Rochambeau’s arrival in Rhode Island, Washington sent Lafayette to deal with the French general. This was a miscalculation by Washington, who believed that Lafayette’s stature in French society would do him good here as it had in appeals for material aid. But Lafayette was not made for diplomacy. He immediately endangered future Franco-American cooperation by his abrasiveness and by seemingly issuing orders to the French generals and admiral present. The French officers were well aware of the fact that Lafayette was only a captain in their own army, and largely resented his haughtiness. Even Rochambeau, who “was famous for not getting angry about anything,” was sent into a furor by Lafayette’s tone.¹⁶ He began a private correspondence with Washington which resulted in an alleviation of the situation, but Washington was embarrassed by his mistake. Rochambeau wrote to the French ambassador that he would ignore all messages from then on from “some young and ardent persons” who were close to the American commander.¹⁷ In his embarrassment, and anxiety over the future of the alliance, Washington forced Lafayette to pen an apology to Rochambeau. “The marquis turned on his boyish charm in a private note.” His conclusion was bizarre but effective enough: “My error was in writing officially with passion what you would have excused to my youth had I written it as a friend to you alone.”¹⁸ Lafayette certainly respected the old French general; his primary objections were with the admiral who accompanied him. He made two assurances to the French ambassador, La Luzerne. He swore his shame for having embarrassed Washington, admitting presciently that “I am considered too American,” and he promised, “I shall not meddle in politics anymore.”¹⁹

His life may have played out much more happily if he kept that second promise after his return to France.²⁰

The tact of Generals Rochambeau and Washington smoothed relations between the two nations. Rochambeau accepted Lafayette's apologies, as he was "too big a personality to nurse a grievance." Rochambeau biographer Arnold Whitridge put it poetically: "In Greek mythology the goddesses had eagerly seized on the apple of discord, but luckily mortal men do not always behave as gods."²¹ For him, the matter was closed; the goal was to defeat the British, and there were larger matters at hand than the impetuosity of a young officer. He certainly could have insisted on the dismissal of Lafayette or some other punishment. But his personality was not a vindictive one, and this was fortunate for all. The end result of the fracas was simply that "Washington had learned that there were limits to the duties he could hand even to Lafayette. The war continued, and he would need him for things the young general did have talent for."²²

One thing Lafayette possessed tremendous talent for was commanding light infantry. When Rochambeau convinced Washington that there was little hope of achieving the American's dream of recapturing New York City, another course of action was needed. Attention was turned to the south, not only to Lord Charles Cornwallis's campaign in the Carolinas, but also to a new threat that arose: a British force that was rampaging through Virginia. Washington needed a general to command the detachment that would oppose this new threat while his main army kept Clinton's army in check in the north. Partly in recognition of the young marquis's talents and partly to be relieved of his constant irking of the French officers, he selected Lafayette.²³

Lafayette set about his task with enthusiasm, stemming from both his natural *élan* and from personal issues. Among the personal

issues which fueled Lafayette in this campaign were the identities of the two British commanders in Virginia: William Phillips and Benedict Arnold. It had been troops under the command of Phillips who had killed Lafayette's father. As an adolescent, Lafayette had written a tribute to his father, describing that when his father assumed command from his wounded superior, he "was at once carried off by a ball from an English battery, commanded by a certain General Phillips."²⁴ Lafayette was thrilled at the chance to avenge his father, and in his memoirs claimed credit for killing Phillips with his artillery. This was untrue; Phillips died of disease during the campaign in Virginia, but that minor detail did not concern Lafayette in his quest for revenge and honor. His determination to kill Phillips was equaled by his fervor for catching Benedict Arnold, the man who had betrayed his adopted father, Washington. He never succeeded at this task, as Arnold left Virginia shortly after Lafayette's arrival to return to New York. However, he had pushed his troops hard in his pursuit of this goal, and was now in position to threaten British operations in the South.²⁵

Lord Cornwallis, frustrated in his operations in the Carolinas, pushed north to reinforce Phillips. He was quite dismissive of Lafayette as an opponent, boasting that "The boy cannot escape me."²⁶ He referred repeatedly to Lafayette simply as "the boy." This disrespectful dismissal of his rank and stature may have actually satisfied Lafayette, as it was similar to the British refusal to call Washington by his rank. Anything that connected Lafayette to Washington, or made them similar in any way, was pleasing to the young aristocrat. Cornwallis, despite his boasts, failed to "bag the boy." Notably, despite his great desire to lead troops, Lafayette expressed a wish during this time to leave his detachment to return to Washington's side in the north. "I am homesick and if I can't go to head quarters wish at least to hear from there."²⁷ An element of this was an honest fear

the marquis had of Cornwallis. "I would rather be rid of Lord Cornwallis than of a third of his army," he admitted to the French ambassador.²⁸ Despite this anxiety, he performed exceptionally well, falling back toward Fredericksburg until he could be reinforced by General Anthony Wayne, and then slowly following and harassing Cornwallis's army as it withdrew to a new base at Yorktown, Virginia, trapping the British in that coastal city.

Lafayette's ability to force Cornwallis back into Yorktown set the stage for the war's final act on the American continent. Showing the boldness which Lafayette had impetuously insisted upon since his arrival, Rochambeau moved his army down from Rhode Island along with Washington's army from New York and New Jersey. Due in large part to the cautiousness of General Sir Henry Clinton, and to a rare naval victory by a French fleet under Comte De Grasse, Cornwallis's army was doomed. After Cornwallis was forced to surrender, Lafayette was surprised by one final scene of the drama. Cornwallis paid a visit to the marquis at his headquarters. "The marquis had always admired Cornwallis, and found him polite, even charming," and was pleased that the British general "showed honest respect for the balding redhead he had...dismissed as 'the boy.'" As always with diplomatic matters, however, the event was not without a problem. Lafayette rebuked the British for holding Henry Laurens as a prisoner in the Tower of London. Cornwallis, a gentleman, agreed to be exchanged for Laurens himself.²⁹

Lafayette returned home to France to a hero's reception. Being among the first to arrive with news of Cornwallis's surrender, he was not shy about promoting his own achievements. His greatest pride, however, came from recognition being heaped upon him not only as a military hero, but also as a "friend of Washington."³⁰ Never letting his adoptive home drift far from the front of his mind, he shared lasting friendships with two Americans of high station in

particular long after his return to France at the conclusion of America's war with England: George Washington and Thomas Jefferson.³¹

Lafayette was a companion of Washington in the fight for independence, served as one of his lieutenants, and commanded a wing of the southern forces which – along with Washington and Rochambeau – trapped the British army of Lord Cornwallis at Yorktown. When the war was concluded, Lafayette traveled with General Washington to Mount Vernon and other locations, and endeared himself to the rest of Washington's family – as he did to nearly every American he met. Their last meeting was on December 1, 1784, and shortly after Washington wrote to Lafayette, "In the moment of our separation upon the road as I travelled [sic], and every hour since, I felt all that love, respect and attachment for you, with which length of years, close connexion [sic] and your merits have inspired me."³² Lafayette responded that it was "with an unexpressible [sic] pain that I feel I am going to be severed from you by the Atlantick [sic]."³³ Lafayette named his son George Washington after his revolutionary idol, and later sent this son to America to live with General Washington during the chaos in France. However, Washington was forced to keep a distance from the younger Lafayette due to the condition of American foreign relations with France – then ruled by the Jacobins – and with Prussia and Austria – both of whom imprisoned General Lafayette after his attempt to flee to America himself. Lafayette still planned to travel to America after his release from prison, but the poor health of his wife forced him to remain in France.³⁴ Washington did make efforts to secure the release of Lafayette from incarceration, but was careful to always point out that his entreaties were simply of friendship, not official statements by the government. General Lafayette was released from prison after Napoleon's vic-

tories, but the “Austrian chancellor took pains to make it clear that the emperor had consented to the release...largely because of the ‘particular interest which the United States appears to attach to it.’”³⁵ Yet correspondence between Lafayette and Washington never resumed following Lafayette’s imprisonment due to the Quasi-War between their two countries. George Washington died in 1799.³⁶

Whereas the relationship between Washington and Lafayette has always been described as similar to that between a father and a son, Lafayette’s connection with Thomas Jefferson was much like one between two brothers or classmates. They met during the American Revolution when Lafayette received his commission from Congress, and again when Jefferson was stationed in Paris as an American diplomat. For the remainder of Jefferson’s life they exchanged congenial letters debating political and philosophical topics, but neither one ever professed in any way to be the superior or inferior of the other. They were kindred spirits dedicated to liberty and order. Lafayette’s final letter to Jefferson was written on February 25, 1826, and discussed a topic which had become of great interest of Lafayette: his desire for the “Gradual Emancipation of Slavery” throughout the world.³⁷ It closed with affectionate words: “Adieu, My dear friend, I don’t force you to write knowing it fatigues you, But Mrs. Randolph³⁸ and My Young friends will Be very kind to give me every particulars concerning you and them. Remember me most Affectionately to Mr. and Mrs. Madison.”³⁹ On July 4 of that year, Thomas Jefferson passed away.

In sharp contrast to his American friends, unfortunately for General Lafayette, his relations with those who came to lead the French Revolution were far from affectionate. Lafayette was thoroughly opposed to the radical Jacobins led by Maximilian Robespierre in the period which led to the Great Terror. Due to Lafayette’s persistent advocacy of a constitutional monarchy, Robes-

pierre and his followers branded Lafayette as an anti-revolutionary and a traitor,⁴⁰ which led to the general fleeing France in an attempt to escape to the land of his great celebrity: the United States. Lafayette was unsurprised by the ability of Robespierre to rally the mob in order to dominate the country. He credited this to the fact that France was under attack from all around. As Lafayette wrote:

In time of peace, this society, as at first instituted, may be very useful in pointing out any encroachments of government upon the liberties of the people. But when the country is at war with foreign nations...artful emissaries find little difficulty in converting weak men, into instruments, affecting to admire them for excellencies, which the hyperborean nature of the soil could never produce, they wind up their vanity, and take possession of the heart, by astonishing them with the new discovery of their importance. Rendered thus far ductile, the evil genius, holds up the *ignis fatuus* of suspicion to their ignorance, tempts them along, until it thinks proper to act upon the nitrous portion in their composition, and securely level destructive thunders, at the devoted object, and it is not difficult to foresee what characters are likely to be sacrificed.⁴¹

Those likely to be sacrificed were those dedicated to maintaining a bourgeois sense of law and order. The leader of this group was Lafayette himself. He considered the words of the Jacobins to be nothing but “idiotic phlegm” which would lead to “so dangerous a monster, that its destruction becomes necessary to the honour, and safety of its own former species.”⁴² Lafayette viewed Robespierre’s government as having “broke loose from the chains applied by reason...furiously overturning all things that bore any appearance of resistance, and marked its horrid career with blood, and destruction.”⁴³

General Lafayette clearly recognized that he placed his own rep-

utation and safety at risk by so vehemently opposing Robespierre and the Jacobins, yet his dedication to law and public order would not tolerate the chaos brought on by their elevation to the top of the government. While “The legislative body, terrified..., suffered itself to be dictated into measures, which the necessity of the moment only, could justify, or rather apologize for,”⁴⁴ Lafayette fought his final battle of the First Republic of France. As he recalled:

It was my misfortune to oppose the progress of such violence, with the utmost spirit I was master of, and my overthrow was the consequence of the contest. Reduced to the necessity of yielding my neck to the murderer’s knife, or of availing myself of the alternative...I preferred a submission to any law, rather than to the blind vengeance of a fury, which was governed by no law.⁴⁵

It was at this time that Lafayette decided to flee from France. He speculated later that his political enemies were more than happy to allow him to escape the borders of the country. He was certain that Robespierre used his escape to give the government’s “persecution the important appearance of vigilance, and also gave their unjust, or pretended suspicions, an apparent justification.”⁴⁶ All of this was possible only because the mob was distracted by the presence of France’s foreign enemies all around, and these enemies had tightened their noose enough to prevent Lafayette from abandoning Europe. General Lafayette received his wish to live in “submission to any law” rather than under the turmoil of the Jacobins. He would spend the next several years of his life in prisons of first Prussia and then Austria.

Lafayette had a terribly complex relationship with Napoleon Bonaparte upon Napoleon’s ascension to power. In the old days,

one of those who counted Lafayette as a political opponent was the Vicomte de Barras, who had – at the same time – been the political sponsor and advocate of General Bonaparte. Bonaparte and his brothers had been associated with Robespierre – specifically to Maximilian Robespierre’s brother – and this could potentially serve as yet another wedge between France’s military hero of the 1780s and the new national military hero of the 1790s and 1800s.

Napoleon’s effort to become Emperor of the French appalled the old revolutionary and constitutional monarchist, Lafayette. As the *Rhode Island American* recounted, “The Marquis de Lafayette strenuously and steadily resisted the change – he saw all securities as to freedom about to be annihilated.”⁴⁷ Lafayette, like several other men who actively opposed the emperorship of Napoleon and voted against it, was forced into retirement from public life. Lafayette held strong doubts that Emperor Napoleon I of the French would uphold the oath he had taken as First Consul to the “inviolable fidelity to the sovereignty of the people; to the French Republick [sic] one and indivisible, to Equality, to Liberty and to the Representative system.”⁴⁸ Bonaparte was content to allow Lafayette to live in peace at his estate. However, he never forgave the perceived treachery of Lafayette’s vote against his life-long rule. Before he died in exile on Saint Helena in 1821, Bonaparte wrote in his will that he had “been defeated by the treachery of Marmont, Augereau, Talleyrand, and Lafayette.”⁴⁹

The basis of Napoleon’s personal disdain for Lafayette was probably not found in Bonaparte’s connection to Robespierre and Barras in the earlier days of the French Republic, but rather in the fact that Napoleon believed he was owed loyalty from Lafayette due to his securing the old hero’s release from the prisons of the Austria-Prussia alliance after Bonaparte’s victories in Italy. Even an obituary of Bonaparte which was published in numerous American news-

papers contained a paragraph on Lafayette which stated that he was driven from France “when the places of justice and power were usurped by assassins,” and was imprisoned in Germany, “where he remained and would have remained, had not the increasing power of Napoleon rescued him from those who held him prisoner.”⁵⁰ However, he never made any sort of pledge of loyalty to Bonaparte. “Lafayette never bowed down to the splendid idol. When the world went wild with adoration, aloof and in retirement, the republican General, unawed, unflattered, and unintimidated, preserved his consistency and his principles.”⁵¹ The Emperor relied on his own understanding of the methodology of human gratitude, and believed that the grateful feeling Lafayette would hold for escaping his prison cell would compel the old general to abandon his political convictions. But Lafayette would not be halted in his crusade for the constitutional state he envisioned. His most powerful belief was that “the professors of the common law, are a great blessing in every country; they are guardians to a good Constitution; and if a bad one affords but one good spark, they will not fail to improve it to the utmost advantage.”⁵² An emperorship reeked of absolutism in Lafayette’s mind, and he recognized in Napoleon the ambition and avarice which had plagued earlier revolutionary leaders who had turned away from republican ideals. “When Bonaparte became invested with the imperial dignity, he wished to employ La Fayette, who thinking he could not, with the liberal principles he possessed, enter into all the views of the Emperor, declined his overtures, and retired altogether to his Chateau.”⁵³

Napoleon was disappointed by Lafayette’s refusal to submit to his power, but held some level of respect for the old general’s character. Lafayette was “protected in his civil rights, and respected by Napoleon as an honest man.”⁵⁴ He said Lafayette “would make a good country Justice of the Peace.”⁵⁵ Perhaps this job would have

been fitting for General Lafayette, for it would give him a chance to devote himself to maintaining the law and order which he desperately desired in all aspects of French society and life. A return to his military life seemed clearly out of the realm of possibility, as Napoleon was deeply suspicious of any subordinate whose popularity could rival his own.⁵⁶ Lafayette remained in his quiet retirement until Napoleon's first abdication.

During the period of the Second Bourbon Restoration following Napoleon's defeat at Waterloo and banishment to Saint Helena, Lafayette took the opportunity to finally travel again to America, touring the nation from July 1824 to September 1825. American newspapers rejoiced at the "probability of a visit from this early and chivalric champion of American freedom."⁵⁷ They had worked to keep track of the nation's favorite Frenchman over the years, including publishing numerous calls for his release from prison during those dark days of the 1790s. The Quasi-War between the United States and France was over by the time Lafayette felt healthy enough to make the trip for his farewell tour to the United States – though Americans would have surely greeted Lafayette as no less of a hero simply due to the complicated relations between the two nations during that time. At the invitation of James Monroe, a fellow veteran of the American Revolution, "Lafayette's American tour everywhere had attracted immense crowds grateful for his service, nostalgic for the virtue of an earlier time, and eager to venerate a disappearing cohort of aging veterans."⁵⁸ America had been divided in recent years by issues such as the slavery question and internal improvements, and people yearned for reminders of civic virtue. "Lafayette, himself aged and infirm, nonetheless remained a vibrant symbol of the Revolution's idealism, a reminder of the long odds and improbable triumph of a motley people over the world's most powerful empire."⁵⁹ He visited all of the original thirteen states,

each of which was eager to name cities for him. He was also honored by Congress with \$200,000 and a 24,000-acre township from public lands. Lafayette was the last of the great heroes of the Revolution, and the American people and government would not forget it.⁶⁰

Lafayette would remain a greater hero to his contemporaries in America than to those in France. His opposition to popular leaders at different stages of the French Revolution – and the impression that his early actions were responsible for setting off the powder-keg – guaranteed that many in that nation would deny him the rank of a “great man.” Americans of the time had a very different perspective. What is it that makes a great man? Several American newspapers printed an opinion piece examining this question only a few years before Lafayette’s death:

Are military courage and conduct the test of greatness? Lafayette was trusted by Washington with all kinds of service...Are the willingness to meet tremendous responsibility, and the cool and brave administration of gigantic-power, proofs of greatness? Lafayette commanded in chief the national guard of France, three million of bayonets. Is the fortitude, required to resist the urgency of a multitude pressing onward their leader to crime, a trait of true greatness? Behold Lafayette, when he might have been the chief, becoming the fugative [sic] of the French Revolution. Is the solitary and unaided opposition of a good citizen to the pretensions of an absolute ruler, whose power was as boundless as his ambition, an effort of greatness? Read the letter of Lafayette to Napoleon Bonaparte, refusing to vote for him as consul for life.⁶¹ Is a voluntary return, in advancing years, to the direction of affairs, at a moment like that when the ponderous machinery of the French empire was flying asunder, stunning, rending, crushing, annihilating thousands on every side, a mark of

greatness?...And add to all this the dignity, the propriety, the cheerfulness, the matchless discretion of his conduct, in the strange new position, in which he was placed in this country. Those who deny such a man the meed of greatness, may award it, if they please, to their Alexanders and Caesars, their Frederics and their Wellingtons.⁶²

Lafayette's place in American history and legacy was set. Only his status in French memory remained in question.

In the year this tribute was published, Lafayette returned to the forefront one final time in his home country of France, the land which denied him the "meed of greatness."⁶³ In the Revolution of 1830, it was Lafayette, once again commanding the National Guard of Paris just as he had in 1789, who introduced to the people the new king of France, Louis-Philippe. Lafayette himself wrote to an American friend describing the events: "We have just accomplished, my dear fellow soldier, a wonderful revolution... 'the Royal family had ceased to reign!'"⁶⁴ Lafayette continued his letter with a collection of statements about this 1830 revolution which must have brought great joy and pride to him personally: "The Parisians manifested a degree of courage, intelligence, disinterestedness, and generosity, supassing [sic] all that [one] can conceive ... The regiments of the line submitted successively to the public will...We came to the conclusion that it would be proper to rally all opinions...under the safe guard of a constitutional throne, with popular institutions. We have chosen the Duke of Orleans, who I esteem more and more as I know him better."⁶⁵ Lafayette had his constitutional monarchy at last, and it had been gained in a revolt which he himself described as orderly and without insult. In his introduction of Louis-Philippe, Lafayette said to the Tribune, "I am not yielding to a momentary impulsion, nor am I courting popularity, which I never preferred to my duty. The republican principles, which I have professed

throughout my life, and under all governments, do not prevent me from being the defender of a Constitutional Throne raised by the people. The same sentiments animate me under the present circumstances.”⁶⁶ He proclaimed that he would remain in command of the National Guard of France.⁶⁷ The old general was back in uniform, and his fame – which had been lost or tarnished for so long – had been returned to him.

In 1834, two sides of the Atlantic Ocean joined together in mourning. It was the “death of the last surviving General of the glorious army of the American Revolution – the immortal LAFAYETTE!”⁶⁸ The Americans, who even then were fully aware that they held the great Frenchman in higher regard than his own countrymen, noted in obituaries that “the French papers unite in bearing testimony to the eminent political qualities and private virtues of the departed patriot.”⁶⁹ Lafayette had filled “the highest and the proudest station in public opinion, that was perhaps ever occupied by a mortal.”⁷⁰ He had been “the morning star of one revolution, and the guiding light of another – he lived to see his principles triumphant and his glory complete – by saving his country at the most tremendous crisis of its whole history.”⁷¹ This was perhaps the essential key to his reputation in France. He would always be a hero to the United States, but in France, it was necessary for him to survive. The “idiotic phlegm” of Robespierre passed at the end of his Reign of Terror, the unacceptable ambition of Napoleon was banished and he passed away over a decade prior to Lafayette. But the man who sought liberty, law, and public order at all times in his life had persevered through it all with dignity and determination. This secured for him in the minds of the younger and yet unborn French people a reputation which was denied to him by those who partook in the events of the period around him. His famous friends and admirers in America are still held in esteem by the people of the United

States, whereas the most powerful enemy of Lafayette in Paris, Robespierre, is remembered for a terrible period in French history. Even Napoleon, who was disappointed by Lafayette, respected his character, and these two men share similar mixed reputations in the memory of Frenchmen. The relationships of Lafayette with revolutionary leaders were complicated and diverse, but in the end, he had made friends and enemies out of the right people to guarantee himself “an honor, a celebrity, and a purity of reputation rarely if ever before attained by any public character.”⁷²

Notes

¹ Daniel L. Wick, “The Court of Nobility and the French Revolution: the Example of the Society of Thirty,” *Eighteenth Century Studies* 13, no. 3 (Spring 1980): 283.

² Joel Richard Paul, *Unlikely Allies: How a Merchant, a Playwright, and a Spy Saved the American Revolution* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2009), 204.

³ *Ibid.* The situation in the Continental Army resulting from Deane’s overzealousness was similar to that of Napoleon upon his return from Elba, when he has been credited in popular stories with sending King Louis XVIII a mocking message asking him to please send him no more generals; he had enough – as so many who had been sent to stop him had instead re-joined him in his quest to regain the throne.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ *Ibid.* 205.

⁶ *Ibid.* Of course, his enraged father-in-law was also the father of his companion, Noailles. General Broglie, mentioned here, was a French general who volunteered as a major general for American service; the Comte de Vergennes was urging the Continental Congress, through a reluctant Silas Deane, to replace George Washington with Broglie. When France officially entered the war, Broglie was designated to command France’s forces on the European continent to oppose England.

⁷ David A. Clary, *Adopted Son: Washington, Lafayette, and the Friendship that Saved the Revolution* (New York: Bantam Books, 2007), 97-98.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 98.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 99.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 99-100. Clary also tells stories of Lafayette curling up to sleep at the foot of Washington’s bed, in the way a young child may do.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 115.

¹² *Ibid.*, 117.

¹³ *Ibid.* James Monroe, the future president who would invite Lafayette for his final celebrity tour of America, used the opportunity to console the marquis and try out some of his own limited French. Monroe had been wounded at the Battle of Trenton.

¹⁴ Ibid, 263-264.

¹⁵ Ibid, 265. This dream of invading Canada stuck with Lafayette throughout the war, and was evidence of his over-enthusiasm for American arms. He also shared Washington's obsession throughout the war with re-taking New York City by force.

¹⁶ Ibid, 271.

¹⁷ Ibid, 272.

¹⁸ Ibid, 273.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Rochambeau, like Washington, spoke to Lafayette in familial terms. Accepting Lafayette's apologies, he wrote, "This is still the old father Rochambeau speaking to his dear son Lafayette, whom he loves and will continue to love and esteem to his last breath" (275). This was a popular opinion of Rochambeau among young French officers, among them the future Napoleonic Marshal Berthier, who served on the general's staff in America and considered him "like the father of a family," according to Arnold Whitridge, *Rochambeau: America's Neglected Founding Father* (New York: Collier Books, 1974), 141.

²¹ Arnold Whitridge, *Rochambeau: America's Neglected Founding Father* (New York: Collier Books, 1974), 124.

²² Clary, 275.

²³ Arnold Whitridge explains in detail the discussions between Rochambeau and Washington concerning strategy, with Washington typically deferring to the experience and wisdom of his French counterpart, who had to coddle Washington and his aggressiveness in a manner similar to Washington's own soothing of Lafayette. When Lafayette came into trouble as Cornwallis moved into Virginia, Rochambeau insisted on concentration of force in the Chesapeake area, forcing Washington to finally give up his obsession (167).

²⁴ Clary, 10.

²⁵ Dave R. Palmer, *George Washington and Benedict Arnold: a Tale of Two Patriots* (Washington: Regnery, 2006), 378-379.

²⁶ Palmer, 379.

²⁷ Clary, 318.

²⁸ Clary, 323.

²⁹ Clary, 340.

³⁰ Clary, 345.

³¹ James Madison may be added to this group if one prefers, but letters between Lafayette and Madison were unavailable at the time this research was conducted.

³² Louis Gottschalk and Shirley A. Bill, ed., *The Letters of Lafayette to Washington, 1777-1799* (Philadelphia: American Philosophical Society, 1976), xix.

³³ Gottschalk and Bill, xx.

³⁴ Gottschalk and Bill, xxii-xxiii. In a truly romantic story of history, Madame de Lafayette and her daughters traveled to the prison where the General was being held and asked to see him, in order to bring him certain necessities and emotional comfort. The Austrians offered them a choice: they could turn away and go back to France without meeting with the prisoner, or they could be allowed to meet with him very briefly, but then be incarcerated themselves in a separate cell

for an indeterminate length of time. The Lafayette women were determined to see their husband/father, and as a result they all remained imprisoned for several years.

³⁵ Gottschalk and Bill, xxiii.

³⁶ Gottschalk and Bill, xxiv.

³⁷ Gilbert Chinard, ed., *Letters of Lafayette and Jefferson* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1929), 436-438.

³⁸ The wife of Thomas Jefferson Randolph, Thomas Jefferson's grandson.

³⁹ Chinard, 438.

⁴⁰ The other French hero of the American Revolution, Comte de Rochambeau, had also been in charge of one of France's revolutionary armies before falling into disfavor with the Jacobins and being removed from command, just as Lafayette was.

⁴¹ La Fayette, Marquis de. *The Marquis de La Fayette's Statement of His Own Conduct and Principles* (London: Whig Club, 1793), 20-21.

⁴² La Fayette, *Statement*, 21-22.

⁴³ La Fayette, *Statement*, 22.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶ La Fayette, *Statement*, 22-23.

⁴⁷ "From the National Gazette. Political History," *Rhode Island American*, October 16, 1821.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

⁴⁹ A.G. MacDonell, *Napoleon and His Marshals* (London: Prion, 1996), 287. Marmont and Augereau were two of Napoleon's marshals and oldest friends who he believed had betrayed him during the 1814 battle for Paris. Talleyrand was France's leading diplomat and had served as Napoleon's Foreign Minister.

⁵⁰ "Napoleon Bonaparte," *Essex Register*, October 13, 1821.

⁵¹ "Very Late and Important, From the *New York Commercial Advertiser of Thursday*," *Essex Gazette*, June 28, 1834.

⁵² La Fayette, *Statement*, 60.

⁵³ "From the *National Intelligence*, Oct. 23," *City Gazette and Daily Advertiser*, October 30, 1821.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵⁵ "From the National Gazette. Political History," *Rhode Island American*, October 16, 1821.

⁵⁶ John Gallaher, "Davout and Napoleon: A Study of Their Personal Relationship," *The Journal of the International Napoleonic Society* 1, no. 1 (April 1997): http://www.napoleonicsociety.com/english/scholarship97/c_davout.html (accessed October 12, 2012).

⁵⁷ "La Fayette," *Boston Patriot*, July 31, 1824.

⁵⁸ David S. Heidler and Jeanne T. Heidler, *Henry Clay: the Essential American* (New York: Random House, 2010), 176.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 177.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 177. The eminent Clay, himself a friend of Lafayette's from Clay's time as a diplomat in Europe, despised this generous grant to Lafayette, believing

federal funds and land would be much more useful in building internal improvements, but he realized that to oppose the popular measure would be useless.

⁶¹ Unfortunately this letter could not be found in the preparation of this paper.

⁶² "Lafayette," *Christian Register*, February 27, 1830.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ "Gen. Lafayette," *Newport Mercury*, September 25, 1830.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ "Foreign News. New-York, Sept. 20. Important from France," *Newport Mercury*, September 25, 1830.

⁶⁷ "Gen. Lafayette," *Newport Mercury*, September 25, 1830.

⁶⁸ "Death of Lafayette," *Essex Gazette*, June 28, 1834.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Ibid.

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