

## Indispensable Allies: The French at Yorktown

Two hundred years ago this October, America's freedom was secured at the Battle of Yorktown. It is seldom remembered that this victory—and perhaps America's independence—could not have been achieved without the aid of France. The army that Louis XVI sent to the New World in 1780 revived the faltering rebel cause and provided George Washington with the military superiority needed to engage Britain's Lord Cornwallis in decisive battle. This fall, 1,200 French and American citizens will re-enact the French army's journey from New England to the battleground near the Chesapeake and join 3,000 others in commemorating the Yorktown bicentennial. Here, historian Stanley J. Idzerda describes the alliance and the reactions of the French as they encountered America and its people for the first time.

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*by Stanley J. Idzerda*

In early 1778, midway between the beginning of the American Revolution at Lexington and Concord and its military climax at the Battle of Yorktown, the American struggle was faltering. "Our affairs," wrote General George Washington, "are in a more distressed, ruinous, and deplorable condition than they have been since the commencement of the war. . . . The common interests of America are mouldering and sinking into irretrievable ruin if a remedy is not soon applied."

The remedy was on its way. As early as 1776, the French had been secretly supplying more than 90 percent of the young American rebel army's gunpowder and many of its muskets, cannon, uniforms, and tents.

Without this help, it is doubtful that the Americans could have beaten the British general, "Gentleman Johnny" Burgoyne, at Saratoga, New York, capturing him, his sizable personal baggage train, and all of his 6,000 troops.

*The French arrival at Newport in 1780, as depicted in an 18th-century German engraving. Rochambeau's officers were later greeted by their American counterparts, who had added the French cockade color, black, to their own white cockades in a gesture of unity.*



*Landung einer Französischen Hülf-  
Armee in America, zu Rhode Island.  
am 11<sup>ten</sup> Julius, 1780.*

Courtesy Kenneth M. Newman,  
Old Print Shop, New York City.

This impressive victory in October 1777 convinced Louis XVI's government that the Americans would make a worthy ally against his old enemies, the British.

Benjamin Franklin, the American minister to France, had exploited his great popularity as a scientist to prepare the way with diplomacy. In February 1778, Louis XVI's ministers finally signed a formal treaty of alliance with the Americans. The French promised "not to lay down their arms until the Independence of the United States shall have been formally or tacitly assured."

Even earlier, dozens of idealistic French noblemen, including the Marquis de Lafayette (his given name was Marie-Joseph-Paul-Yves-

Roch-Gilbert du Motier), had sailed off on their own to join the fight. Aboard ship en route to America, Lafayette wrote to his wife Adrienne that "the welfare of America is intimately connected with the happiness of all mankind; she will become the respectable and safe asylum of virtue, integrity, tolerance, equality, and a peaceful liberty."

Lafayette's irate father-in-law had persuaded the French government to issue an order for Lafayette's arrest before he left, convinced that his son-in-law's adventure was foolhardy and politically risky for France. Lafayette's escape only excited popular support for the American cause. The French, particularly the aristocracy, had been enthusiastic supporters

from the beginning—and not only out of enmity for Britain. France was caught up in the heady spirit of the Enlightenment, and the rebellious English colonies seemed to have become a laboratory for testing the new political theories of Rousseau, Montesquieu, Voltaire, and the other *philosophes*.

### First Failures

Montesquieu's grandson joined the French expeditionary force that finally went to America. So did dozens of other young aristocrats. "The Americans are the hope of the human race, they will become its model," wrote the French Finance Minister, Turgot. Turgot raised an awesome \$50 million to meet the French commitment to America, even though he personally opposed the alliance because of the expense.

Of course, the American Revolution attracted not only idealists but scoundrels and adventurers as well. Silas Deane, an American diplomat in Paris, was besieged by "dukes, marquesses, and even bishops, counts and chevaliers without number, all of whom are jealous, being out of employ here or having friends they wish to advance in the cause of liberty." He signed up so many French nobles for American service that Henry Laurens, the president of the Continental Congress, sighed, "Silas Deane can't resist anyone who calls himself a chevalier."

The new alliance ripened very slowly. Two months after the treaty was signed, the Comte d'Estaing left

France with 16 warships and 4,000 troops, intending to join in General John Sullivan's attack on the British base at Newport, Rhode Island. But the French had no sooner encountered the British fleet in the waters off the town than a hurricane scattered both fleets. D'Estaing sailed off to Boston to refit his storm-battered squadron, then made for the French West Indies, leaving his American allies stranded and exposed on Newport Island. A year later, he came north to assist an American assault on Savannah. That adventure, too, ended in failure.

### Elegance vs. Rusticity

The Americans began to wonder if the French truly meant business. General Sullivan wrote that the French "desertion" had raised "every voice against the French nation, revived all those ancient prejudices against the faith and sincerity of that people, and inclined them most heartily to curse the new alliance."

D'Estaing was no less disillusioned. He reported to Paris that in America "one must fawn, to the height of insipidity, over every little republican who regards flattery as his sovereign right . . . hold command over captains who are not good enough company to be permitted to eat with their general officers, and have some colonels who are innkeepers at the same time."

Finally, in April 1780, more than two years after the signing of the treaty, word came from Paris that 10

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*The French lionized Benjamin Franklin in paintings and busts, and even on snuffbox covers. "These," he wrote to his daughter in America, "have made your father's face as well known as that of the moon."*

The Metropolitan Museum of Art.  
Gift of William H. Huntington, 1882.

ships of the line and 30 transports bearing some 6,000 French soldiers would arrive under the command of a veteran of many European campaigns, the Comte de Rochambeau.

The most striking news was that, unlike d'Estaing's fleet, Rochambeau's forces would be placed under the direct command of George Washington and were committed to stay in America indefinitely. The King also designated his troops "auxiliaries." According to the military protocol of the day, this meant that they must yield in all honors of battle to the Americans. Louis XVI's only desire, Rochambeau's instructions read, was that his general "shall cooperate effectively to deliver them [the Americans] for all time from the yoke and tyranny of the English."

Both sides were nervous—this would be the first sustained contact

between French troops and the Americans. Before the expeditionary force left France, Gérard de Rayneval, first secretary of the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs, predicted in a memorandum that "the *galanterie* [elegance] and the *légèreté* [levity] of the French soldiers, in contrast with the rusticity and the austerity of the colonists, would end in bloody conflicts."

For their part, the Americans were concerned that their allies would be put off by the rebels' lack of refinement and by their weak, bedraggled army. When Washington dispatched General William Heath to greet the French, Lafayette, who had been in America for three years and had become Washington's confidant, sent Heath his own epaulets to make a "proper" uniform and advised him to show the French only the best-

dressed Continental troops.

"In the fighting way they shall see that we are equal to any thing," Lafayette wrote, "but for what concerns dress, appearance & c. we must cheat a little." No wonder he was worried: The French would arrive wearing white uniforms with colorful facings. Their cavalry unit, Lauzun's Legion, boasted tall fur hats and tiger-skin saddlecloths.

The French arrived at Newport, now abandoned by the British, on July 11. They found a nearly deserted town and received a guarded reception. "A coldness and reserve appear to me to be characteristic of the American nation. . . . They seem little suited to inspire enthusiasm in others," a French officer wrote. It was an inauspicious beginning.

#### **Birthday Dancing**

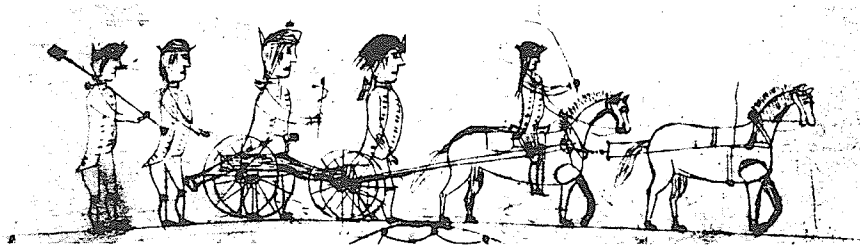
But the atmosphere changed quickly when the inhabitants witnessed the behavior of the troops. Unlike the British (who simply took what supplies they needed) or the unruly American troops (who paid in unreliable Continental paper currency when they paid at all), the French purchased their provisions with gold and silver. The rank and file was tightly disciplined and quartered outside the town. Most of the

French officers were lodged as paying—and charming—guests in Newport homes. They sealed their popularity by constantly entertaining, even throwing a ball to celebrate Washington's birthday.

#### **Enemies, not Friends?**

The French remained in Newport for almost a year, at first recovering from their two-month sea voyage, then waiting out the New England winter. Finally, in a May 1781 conference at Wethersfield, Connecticut, Washington and Rochambeau decided to join forces and attack the British stronghold at New York City. It was held by 10,000 troops under Sir Henry Clinton, the British commander for all of North America. They also hoped to persuade the Comte de Grasse, who had replaced d'Estaing as commander of the French fleet in the West Indies, to sail north to help.

On June 10, the French set out to join Washington's troops at New Rochelle, New York. They marched about 15 miles each day, their engineers going before them filling potholes in the roads to permit passage of their long baggage trains and preparing the bakeries that were built for every bivouac. With 60-pound packs, full uniform, powdered



*Collection of the late Harold L. Peterson.*

*An American soldier made this etching on his powderhorn of his Revolutionary War comrades bringing a horse-drawn artillery piece to the battlefield.*



*Courtesy U.S. Department of the Interior.*

*The Marquis de Lafayette was named a general in the American army at age 19.*

hair, and bands playing, the proud Soissonais, Saintonge, Royal Deux-Ponts, and Bourbonnais regiments astonished the New Englanders along the route. "A finer body of men was never in arms," a Hartford newspaper commented.

Among the French, Comte Axel Fersen noted that the admiring civilians not only sold supplies to the British foe but also "overcharge us mercilessly; in their business dealing with us we are treated like enemies, not friends. Their greed is unequalled; money is their God." However, the idealism of the French usually led them to overlook such behavior.

The two armies finally met at New Rochelle on July 5. There was little fraternization then or later. Rochambeau always kept his enlisted men apart from the American army to

avoid disputes and to reduce opportunities for desertion. While officers did exchange visits between the two camps, the language barrier was impassable for all but a few.

#### **A Small Lie**

Several differences did stand out immediately. The French were appalled by the Americans' cuisine, as they would be throughout their stay in America. "Their cooking gives them little trouble," wrote Abbé Robin, a chaplain in Rochambeau's army. "They are satisfied to broil their meat and cook their corn-cake in the ashes." But the Abbé also noted that the Americans often wore comfortable linen breeches and fringed hunting shirts, which he termed "very satisfactory." The French commanders, he commented, had "forgotten that troops are intended for action and not for show."

There were other surprises. "These people are at the end of their resources," Rochambeau wrote de Grasse. "Washington does not have the troops he counted on; I believe, though he is hiding it, that he has not 6,000 men." Comte Deux-Ponts said it more plainly: "They told us at Newport that the American army had 10,000 men. It has only 2,500 or 3,000, but that is not a very big lie for the Americans." His estimate was about right. Yet the French generally admired the Americans even if their number was small. Comte de Bourg found it "incredible that troops almost naked and poorly paid . . . should behave so well on the march and under fire."

Neither army had the chance to show its mettle in New York City, however. The allies did not have enough troops to undertake a siege, and the French were wary of Washington's untraditional, opportunistic

tactics. When an exploratory thrust at the northern end of Manhattan island failed, Washington and Rochambeau agreed to march to Virginia to confront the other British army in the colonies, a smaller force campaigning in the South under Lord Cornwallis.

Lafayette was already in Virginia with a small force of Continentals, "not strong enough even to get beaten," as he wrote to Washington. He tailed Cornwallis through the Virginia Tidewater, hoping to make it appear to the dispirited local citizenry that the British were retreating. Finally, on Clinton's orders, Cornwallis moved to Yorktown, an old Virginia tobacco port on a peninsula flanked by the York and James rivers. Washington told Lafayette to do his best to keep the British force from leaving.\* The French fleet under de Grasse was already on its way to block off Chesapeake Bay.

#### **No Money, No Clothes**

The combined armies started south, the 2,500 American veterans gazing at the well-dressed and well-fed French troops, usually finding a good deal to praise in what they saw. Joseph Rouse wrote home to Connecticut: "We have six thousand french join Genl Washington . . . & as good looking soldiers as can be. They look much better than our lousey army who have Neither money nor close, God Bless the State of Connecticut, you noes what I mean." When they came to fords, the Americans just pushed across the stream

\* Why Cornwallis stayed put is something of a mystery. For years afterward, Clinton and Cornwallis rehashed the Yorktown campaign in the press, trying to establish the facts and the blame. Clinton eventually sank into obscurity; Cornwallis redeemed his reputation when he helped pacify India and later put down a French-backed Irish uprising in 1798.

pell-mell, while the French drew up in ranks and first removed their shoes and stockings.

#### **Skirmish at Sea**

Both armies were proud of themselves, but when the Americans came to Philadelphia in August, they slogged through town in clouds of dust, with no ceremony. The French stopped outside the city, changed into dress uniform, and marched in with their bands playing. An American soldier commented, "They stepped as though on edge. They are a dreadful proud nation."

On September 5, a full week before the allied troops began to pour into the Yorktown region, the British Admiral Thomas Graves suddenly appeared at the mouth of the Chesapeake with 19 warships. It was a serious threat: If Graves could drive the French fleet away, Cornwallis could escape from the peninsula by sea or across the York River, and the possibility of a major allied victory would be lost.

The 24 French ships under de Grasse slipped their cables and sailed out from their Chesapeake moorings to meet the British. After four hours of fierce cannon fire and intricate maneuvering for position, the cautious Graves broke off the engagement. The fleets stayed within sight of each other for five days, but Graves eventually withdrew and sailed for New York. Each side had lost several hundred men.

The Battle of the Capes, as it was called, was only a skirmish by the standards of the day—Washington called it "a partial engagement"—but it may have been the most decisive naval battle in American history. The British Navy's withdrawal sealed Cornwallis's fate.

Ten days later, French engineers,

along with the French-born General Louis Duportail's American engineers (whose motto, *Essayons*, is still on the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers' escutcheon) began the preparations for the siege. Drawn directly from Sébastien de Vauban's 17th-century texts on military engineering, the plan called for digging long "parallel" trenches, the first 800 yards from the enemy, the second 550 yards closer with, finally, a third only 100 yards from the British lines. From here, the assault on Yorktown would be launched.

#### Cannonade

Reinforced by fresh troops from the French fleet and by numerous American militia units picked up along their route south, the allied armies now numbered 9,500 Americans and 7,800 French. Cornwallis had only 6,000 British troops and Hessian mercenaries.

Thousands of men on the allied side were set to digging each night, and armed troops occupied the trenches during the day. On October 9, the Franco-American bombardment began; ultimately, 150 pieces of artillery came to be trained on the British positions. On October 13 alone, 3,600 rounds were fired into Yorktown, a fortified space about 500 yards deep and 1,200 yards long. Red-hot shot from the cannon set Cornwallis's few ships in the York River on fire, and cannon balls shattered Yorktown's houses. Even the French were awe-stricken.

The British later remembered only a constant earthquake, the deafening noise, and "men lying everywhere who were mortally wounded and whose heads, arms, and legs had been shot off."

On the allied side, the honor of the French and American officers was at

#### THE FRENCH ROAD TO YORKTOWN



Source: Lee Kennett, *The French Forces in America, 1780-1783*, Greenwood, 1977.

*The French marched from Newport to New York, then moved south with General Washington, traveling more than 600 miles along the Eastern seaboard in the course of three months.*

stake in this, their first major engagement together. Usually, an enlisted man was posted in the trench to "call the shots": When he shouted "shell!" everyone ducked for cover. The British artillery lobbed "fused bombs" over the lines, which sprayed hundreds of small iron balls when they exploded and could cause heavy casualties.

Most American officers made a point of not budging when artillery fire rained down on their positions. Colonel Alexander Hamilton even objected to Henry Knox that calling





Courtesy William L. Clements Library, University of Michigan.

*The allies concentrated their efforts on the southeast edge of Yorktown, where the flat terrain gave Cornwallis few natural defenses. The Americans occupied the position of honor on the right side of the allied line; the British lines on the day of the surrender are outlined in red.*

the shots was "unsoldierly." On one occasion, nevertheless, a shell came over, and Hamilton jumped behind Knox for cover. "Now," said General Knox, "what do you think about crying 'shell,' Mr. Hamilton? And don't try to make a breastwork out of me again!"

Under cover of almost a week of bombardment, the allies had nearly finished the second parallel. But they had to take Redoubts 9 and 10 shielding the British lines. These outposts were well built, with stout palisades and ramparts protected by deep ditches and sharpened staves. They dominated the allied approach trenches.

The allied commanders decided to attack at night. Only bayonets would be used—in the dark, the attackers

might sacrifice surprise by firing prematurely and might even shoot one another. When it was suggested that the experienced French troops do this dangerous work, Lafayette was outraged. "With my [American] riflemen we are accustomed to taking all positions with the bayonet alone!" he lied to the Comte Villebresme. Finally, it was decided that the Americans would attack one of the outposts, the French the other.

The allied officers vied for the honor of leading the "forlorn hope," the 40 assault troops who would be the first to go into the ditch and over the top of the rampart. Lafayette wanted to give the American command to his aide, Colonel Gimat, but Alexander Hamilton insisted that he had seniority and Washington agreed.

On the French side, the command went to Comte Deux-Ponts. At the last minute, officers and soldiers who had volunteered for the mission and been turned down rushed up to join the assault anyway.

At seven o'clock on the evening of October 14, a signal gun fired and the attack began. Within a few minutes, the Americans had swarmed over Redoubt 10 and captured it. The French were staging a formal assault, which took a bit longer. The troops lined up in battle formation as sappers pushed ahead to breach the British defenses with explosives. Lafayette sent a taunting message to his French confrères, "I am in my redoubt. Where are you?" Soon, the French were in their redoubt, too.

The taking of the two outposts was the only major action of the siege, but it left 24 killed and wounded on the American side and 92 on the French. If one stands before the rebuilt fortifications today and imagines attacking them at night with only a musket in hand, one realizes what courage the assault required.

#### **A Day of Humiliation**

The capture of the redoubts was the last straw for Cornwallis. He had lost 600 men; 1,500 others in his swampy, fever-ridden camp were not fit for duty. There was little hope of escape or timely reinforcement. The French fleet barred the way by sea. Clinton had promised to relieve Cornwallis from New York but was slow in making preparations. (He didn't sail until five days later, the day of the formal surrender.)

On the morning of October 17 a redcoated boy stood on top of the British parapet and beat "a parley" on his drum. The guns fell still; in the eerie silence, a British officer came across the field with a message from

Cornwallis, asking for terms of surrender. He proposed that all of the nearly 6,000 British troops at Yorktown be sent back to Europe on their word to stay there.

The Americans were not ready to be so generous. One British frigate was permitted to sail off to New York with a small group of American loyalists and British officers who swore not to take up arms against America again. The rest of the garrison was to march out with colors cased and arms reversed, a humiliating condition by the standards of the day but one the Americans insisted upon: General Lincoln had suffered the same disgrace when he surrendered Charleston to the British in 1780.

#### **It Was All Over**

On October 19, the British garrison's band played "The World Turned Upside Down" as the redcoated soldiers filed between the mile-long lines of French and American troops. The British ignored the tattered Americans, wanting to believe that it was only the French who had beaten them. General Charles O'Hara, filling in for a suddenly "ill" Cornwallis, galloped up to Rochambeau and offered him Cornwallis's sword. But the French commander nodded gravely in the direction of General Washington as the proper recipient, and the British were forced to surrender to the Americans. To drive the point home, Lafayette ordered the American band to strike up "Yankee Doodle."

When Lord North, George III's Prime Minister, heard about the fate of Cornwallis months later, he staggered as if mortally struck by a musket ball, waving his arms and moaning again and again, "Oh God! It's all over!" Indeed, the King finally allowed North to resign, as he



John Trumbull, *Surrender of Lord Cornwallis*. © Yale University Art Gallery.

*At Yorktown on October 19, 1781, General Washington, shown on the far right, with Rochambeau backed by the French officers on the left, awaited the formal British surrender. General Benjamin Lincoln is shown on horseback, at center.*

had long requested, as a result of the Yorktown fiasco. North was a leader of the weakening war faction in Parliament. To the battle's victors, however, its significance was not immediately clear. Washington and Rochambeau began planning another campaign the day after the surrender.

A peace treaty was nearly two years away, but Lord North was right. The Yorktown campaign proved decisive. There was no significant battle or campaign in America after that date. In March 1782, the British Parliament agreed to cease hostilities. Nearly all of the French troops sailed home from Boston 10 months later, on Christmas Eve. Their efforts had tipped the balance; a peace treaty acknowledging the independence of America was guaranteed. When the Treaty of Versailles was finally signed in September

1783, Lafayette wrote to his wife, "Humanity has won its battle, Liberty now has a country."

Americans have always remembered Lafayette and returned his admiration. They have named over 100 cities and towns in his honor.\* But America's gratitude to the French evaporated when the two nations had a few minor naval battles in the late 1790s. France was again at war with Britain and tried to prevent America from trading with the former mother country. The experience left many Americans soured on their former allies.

The French, by contrast, retained their fondness for America. Indeed,

\*When General John J. "Black Jack" Pershing came to France's aid with the American Expeditionary Force during World War I, it was the Marquis alone whom he invoked as he stepped on French soil: "Lafayette, we are here."

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the idealism that drove Lafayette and other young aristocrats to volunteer for American service was undiminished, moving many of them to support the Revolution that broke out in their own country. By casting their votes with the revolutionaries on August 4, 1789, to abolish feudal privileges, Lafayette and his followers in the National Assembly helped to bury the *ancien régime*.

Later, they were appalled by the bloody excesses of the radicals. Some lost their heads on the guillotine during the Terror. Lafayette, a widely revered elder statesman, held a number of military posts until Louis XVI was deposed in 1793. The radicals then moved to arrest him, and he fled to Austria, not returning home until seven years later.

Some of the French aristocrats who had fought in America opposed their own country's revolution from the beginning. Comte Axel Fersen was dragged from his horse and nearly trampled to death as he tried to protect Queen Marie-Antoinette from the mob that captured her as she attempted to escape from France. But almost all of the veter-

ans, whatever they felt about events in their own country, were proud of their service in America.

When these officers had their portraits painted after the war, if they wore any decoration it was the Order of the Cincinnati. This was the sign of membership in a society of French and American officers formed at the close of the Revolution. It depicts the figure of Renown offering the Roman citizen-soldier Cincinnatus a laurel, the reward earned by those who have risked everything for the republic; below is the American eagle.

In 1801, after winning every possible honor as Napoleon's Chief of Staff, Marshall Berthier acknowledged that of all the decorations he had received, he had been "most flattered at getting the little eagle of the Order of the Cincinnati." He had played an important part in America's war for independence as an aide to Rochambeau, and, like most men of his time, he was concerned about the opinion of posterity.

He knew that as instruments of liberty for a young republic on the shores of North America, the French had changed the fate of mankind.

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