

BOOKS

WHY DON'T THE FRENCH CELEBRATE LAFAYETTE?

He fought for freedom both here and in France, but his own countrymen are blasé about his legacy.

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A revolutionary hero abroad, Lafayette resisted an absolutist monarchy at home. Illustration by Seb Agresti



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Lafayette, like Betsy Ross and Johnny Appleseed, is so neatly fixed in the American imagination that it is hard to see him as a human being. Betsy sews stars, Johnny plants trees, Lafayette brings French élan to the American Revolution. He is, in the collective imagination, little more than a wooden soldier with a white plume on his cocked hat. In the original production of “Hamilton,” Daveed Diggs portrayed him affectionately, with a comically heavy French accent and an amorous manner—a hero, yes, but of the cartoon kind, a near relation of *Pépé le Pew*.

In France, where Lafayette played an even larger historic role, he has come to be a more contentious figure. He is a kind of transposed Jerry Lewis, someone whose high reputation in one country is baffling in the land of his birth. So, while a pleasingly informal new biography by the American podcast host Mike Duncan, “Hero of Two Worlds” (PublicAffairs), shows the officer as a hero *tout court*, the recent French biography “Lafayette” (Fayard), by Laurent Zecchini, a longtime *Le Monde* journalist, makes it clear that he has been quarantined as a largely *American* hero. This is in part, Zecchini explains, because Lafayette, despite having played a central role in two revolutions, was too non-ideological to attract much analysis. Unlike Tocqueville, Zecchini notes, Lafayette “never theorized his experience”—a terrible thing to say about a Frenchman. It has been

suggested that he never earned a reputation in France equal to his reputation in America because he never wrote a proper book. Not long ago, his statue, put up by American subscription, was moved out of the Louvre and into the nearby wooded Cours-la-Reine, where it is nearly invisible among the trees.

Yet both books show Lafayette to be a man of action, without the philosopher's luxury of judgment at a distance—one of those rare people who, having taken on the weight of the world, almost never put a foot wrong. In the crazy turnings of his time, he fought—physically fought, not merely protested with strong tweets or, anyway, with pamphlets—against absolutist monarchy, Colonial bondage, left-wing revolutionary terror, right-wing Bonapartist militarism, incipient imperialism, and then renewed Royalist reaction. He loved American freedom and came to hate American slavery. This had less to do with ideology than with amiability and instinct. He liked good people, and good people liked him. Where, among his closest friends, Hamilton had the quickest pen in the West, Benjamin Constant philosophized subtly, and Washington held to an ideal of Roman republican virtue, Lafayette himself ran on an emotional motor. “Excited and excitable,” Duncan calls him. Lafayette sorted good people from bad people by how they struck him on first encounter. The odd thing is that he so often got it right.

Duncan's biography is written in a loose, colloquial style that sometimes startles with its informality but more often delights with its directness—a quarrel between Hamilton and Washington is likened to a marriage dissolving “over an unwashed stack of dirty dishes piled high on a mountain of accumulated resentment.” Zecchini's book, on the other hand, has the tense, disabused, elegant style of good French journalism. Read

together, they remind us that the United States and France have very different accounts of the American Revolution. In America, it is a local struggle in which the British are interchangeable redcoats and the French, like Fortinbras's army at the end of "Hamlet," appear merely to tidy up. In France, the Americans are referred to as "insurgents," in a way that recalls the proxy battles of the Cold War, and the insurgency is simply an episode in a larger eighteenth-century contest between France and England. It surely occurred to some people within the government of Louis XVI that offering French support for a revolution against absolutist monarchy might encourage French support for a revolution against absolutist monarchy closer to home—but it didn't occur to them enough. The urgencies of a confrontation between great powers were irresistible.

Gilbert du Motier, the Marquis de Lafayette, was only eighteen and of no particular military distinction when, in 1776, he began lobbying the French government for an American commission. Tall, handsome, and innocent, he was the scion of an ancient but not very wealthy family, and had already been married off for money. (He was sixteen, his bride, Adrienne de Noailles, only fourteen; the affectionate marriage was a success.) He was known in his circle for his enthusiastic manner and for his desire for glory. He cast himself, throughout his life, as an Enlightenment idealist who had set out on a New World adventure after hearing tales of the revolution.

Yet, given that the French were playing a long game against a rival superpower in which the Americans were merely pawns, it has been suggested that the entire Lafayette expedition was an elaborate scheme—right out of "The Bureau," the television series about the blundering subtleties of French intelligence—in which Lafayette was being used by an

officially defunct but apparently still quite active spy service, Le Secret du Roi. In this scenario, the Comte de Broglie, the ex-head of Le Secret, planned to exploit Lafayette's expedition to pave the way for his own arrival, as a sort of generalissimo of the American armies, which lacked battle-tested leaders.

Apparently, the Comte de Broglie really did have such ambitions, though there is no evidence that the young Lafayette was aware of them, and, either way, it's hard to imagine John Adams or the rest of the New England hard core standing for them. Though both Duncan and Zecchini outline the Broglie intrigue, Duncan does so in a paragraph, and Zecchini at length; predictably, the American chronicler regards it as ridiculous, and the French one as plausible. Why *wouldn't* the Americans have welcomed help from a pro? Two hundred years later, when we had the Empire, the C.I.A. parachuted advisers into foreign countries in the same spirit, never doubting its importance, whatever the evidence to the contrary.

If it was, instead, Enlightenment idealism that sent Lafayette to America, we may wonder how he was converted to it. He was well-educated but not particularly well-read—his time in Paris had been spent mostly with the kinds of aristocrats who prefer carousing to cerebrating—and Zecchini suspects that many of his ideas came from his secret membership in the Freemasons. Lafayette caroused, but carousing can carry a credo.

Freemasonry remains a source of both suspicion and glamour in France (the Vichy regime was devoted to weeding out Jews and Freemasons), but it was a crucial vessel for Enlightenment thought. Masonic ideals stressed fraternity, liberty, and, above all, the centrality of merit, represented by artisans and artists more than by aristocrats. Historians are understandably reluctant to touch too much on the Masonic influence on revolutions, for

fear of indulging conspiratorial “National Treasure”-style thinking, but a movement that took in everyone from Mozart to Franklin obviously had an impact; more important, its clubby, fraternal side would probably have had a greater effect on a young soldier than would a long session reading the *Encyclopédie*. Although Lafayette claimed that the affiliation began after his arrival in America, there is evidence that he was a Freemason when he left France, and that at least some part of his enthusiastic reception in America was arranged by the secret brotherhood.

It is easy to underestimate, too, how much the Enlightenment was a matter not only of shared reading but of shared experience. New rituals inspire revolutions more surely than new reasoning ever can. Just as a youth in 1968 did not have to read Marcuse or Mao to catch the counterculture’s anti-authoritarian vibe, you could catch the spirit of the Enlightenment through communal means. Absolute monarchies are not absolutist in the suppression of thought, and Paris at the time was a kind of roving Woodstock of the mind.

The great reactionary writer Chateaubriand later wrote, half mockingly, that Lafayette, unfortunately, had only one idea in his head; his good fortune was that it was the dominant idea of his age. The idea was Liberty. Freedom of speech, religious tolerance, an embrace of science, erotic curiosity—all were part of that idea. The revolt against the spiritual authority of the Church was even more urgent than the resistance to the absolutist state. Lafayette was, Zecchini tells us, a disciple and a patient of Franz Mesmer, a hypnotist who extravagantly entertained Paris, and from whom we get the word “mesmerized.” Mesmer’s daily demonstrations were, in their way, as vital a rebellion against a neatly regimented view of the mind as was anything in Voltaire. Lafayette referred to himself as an

élève enthousiaste, and Mesmer gave him a sort of posthypnotic suggestion for preventing mal de mer during his long voyage to America, which involved clutching the mast of the ship (a plan stymied when the mast turned out to be covered with tar).

But, when it came to the government intriguers, Lafayette was surely manipulating as much as being manipulated: he wanted the mission. The forces that impelled Lafayette were various—cynical great-power calculation, personal plotting on the part of Broglie and others in *Le Secret*, a genuine wave of generational common feeling, and, not least, that “wind that scatters young men through the world to seek their fortunes”—a proto-Byronic force that made him think that, if revolutions and great wars were happening on the other side of the world, then the other side of the world was the place to be.

Lafayette arrived in America in the summer of 1777. After a brief visit to the Continental Congress, in Philadelphia, where he got himself awarded a commission as a major general—the Americans clearly saw an advantage in ingratiating themselves with someone close to the French court—Lafayette made his way to Washington’s quarters. In Valley Forge, he and the Prussian drillmaster Baron de Steuben managed to revivify Washington’s demoralized armies while, at least in a good scene for the miniseries, correcting each other’s broken English. Lafayette, plunging himself right into the heart of the action, quickly managed to lose a battle. Throughout the war, he was always proposing actions with little strategic point. (Let’s take the West Indies! Fight the British in Rhode Island! Launch a raid on Ireland and Northern England!) What Washington on the whole grasped, but Lafayette did not, is that, in a national war of liberation, the trick is to wait out the invader, which requires the ability to

sustain a certain casualty rate without losing your army.

The other trick—and here Lafayette's role was critical—is to have the assistance of a foreign power. The truth, neatly concealed in most elementary American textbooks, is that, though the Americans did the fighting, the French war engine won the battles. At Saratoga, it was the French artillery that made the difference; at Yorktown, the French fleet, which Lafayette's circle had helped cajole into joining the struggle, proved decisive in the end.

There is a long-term historical irony here. The American Revolution was essentially a French triumph, which the American imagination turned into an American victory, albeit with some gallant support from the French. Two centuries later, the liberation of France was turned, by the French imagination, into a French victory, albeit with some gallant support from the Americans. Each myth has become essential to the national ideal. We beat the British; they expelled the Germans. And the heroism, if not the victory, in both cases *was* indigenous: the French came, conquered, and left; it was the Americans who suffered in the cold. The American Army in the Second World War, though badly mauled in the Ardennes Forest, was largely intact, while the French Resistance was martyred.

The crucial question is what led Admiral de Grasse, the commander of a French fleet based in the West Indies, to bring his forces up the coast to the Chesapeake, armed and ready to fight. Certainly, the French decision to support the Americans was ambivalent, and the first ships and troops they sent were inadequate. De Grasse set sail with forty vessels—not, it seems, because he had a special enthusiasm for the American cause but because he was actually something rare in the French Navy until that time, an efficient officer who followed orders. And the French orders were, in

turn, the culmination of relentless lobbying by Lafayette and his confrères. Once de Grasse's battleships arrived at the Chesapeake, victory was assured; without them, it would not have been.

Lafayette, on his return to France in 1779, was a hero with all the glamour of revolution clinging to his cockade, as charismatic as Che Guevara in the sixties, but with a better character. When the French Revolution began, in 1789, it was inevitable that he would be the popular choice to lead it. Shortly after the storming of the Bastille, he was made commander of the Paris militia, which soon became the National Guard, cunningly positioned as neither royal nor republican. (He also designed its uniforms, combining the red and blue colors of Paris with the white of the Bourbon kings—signifying a potential marriage of popular sentiment and royal lineage, and providing what are still the colors of the French flag.)

That summer, Lafayette could easily have tried to seize power for himself, and some people expected him to do so. But, of all the lessons that Lafayette had learned in America, perhaps the most important came from George Washington, whose love for the exercise of authority came with no particular appetite for power. When Washington was in charge, he was in charge, but he had no desire to be in charge for good, and, once someone else was in charge, he had no difficulty accepting that the charge had passed. (Until recently, this remained the American way.) There were classical models for this approach—Cincinnatus, the Roman dictator who went back to his farm after leading his people, was the most familiar—but since then the idea of refusing political power after the successful pursuit of battle was almost unheard of. Had Oliver Cromwell been capable of it, British history would be very different.

One reason that Lafayette remains a controversial figure in France is that,

despite praising “the Constitution of the United States as the most perfect system that has ever existed,” he thought it was impractical to implant such pure republicanism in France. His basic insight was not very different from de Gaulle’s in founding the Fifth Republic around an exceptionally powerful Presidency: France, an ancient, highly centralized country with a strong taste for ritual, seems to require a visible symbol of order at its center. Lafayette’s dedication to the practical ideal of a constitutional monarchy for France met with repeated failure, however, partly because the republicans could never entirely accept the necessity of a figurehead king, and partly because the kings he tried to counsel could never really accept being figureheads. This put him in an awkward and, at times, a near-fatal position. A radical to the Royalists, a Royalist to the radicals, he was simply a realist in his relations with both.

The most disastrous of Lafayette’s attempts to make a monarch act like a mensch was his first. As the head of the National Guard, Lafayette was responsible for the security of the royal family. It is often forgotten that, for most of the early years after the 1789 Revolution, the republican consensus favored a constitutional monarchy, however uneasily fixed, with the mob at Versailles placing a Phrygian cap—the cap of the classical free man—on the King’s head. He let it stay there, for a time, declaring his loyalty to the new republic and even to “The Rights of Man,” the revolutionary document whose first draft Lafayette had penned with the help of Jefferson, then resident in Paris. But, in June, 1791, Louis XVI and his family sneaked out of Paris in an effort to reconnect with Royalist forces and reverse the revolution. “Lafayette must be feeling quite embarrassed,” the ungrateful monarch gloated, the morning after the escape. It ended badly, of course, with the royal family’s quick recapture, but Lafayette took the blame. Georges Danton, one of the leaders of the Jacobin radicals,

wrote, of him, “The commander-general promised on his head that the King would not leave; we need the person of the King or the head of the commander-general.” Having retaken the person of the King, they were still greedy for the head of the commander general.

It was the flight of the King, for which Lafayette was wrongly held responsible, that, through a series of falling dominoes, unleashed the Reign of Terror. The Jacobins did what radical purists in power always do: first, they killed their enemies, then their friends, then one another. (Danton himself lost his head to his rival, Robespierre.) There was, as is often pointed out, plenty of violence on all sides. What was new about the Jacobins was a deliberate, gloating sadism that is still shocking to read about. In this spirit, the Marchioness de Lafayette’s sister, mother, and grandmother were killed on the same evening, and made to watch from the tumbrils as the others were decapitated. It was this form of terror that the Jacobins passed on to their successors; Stalin, as one Soviet historian has written, admired and expanded Robespierre’s practice of persecuting “enemies of the revolution,” ideological enemies guilty simply because they existed. (Bukharin, Stalin’s own Danton, was forced to sit and watch while sixteen of his colleagues were murdered, before, at last, he himself was killed, in high Jacobin fashion.)

For Lafayette, the choice was never between radical purists and reactionary Royalists. The choice was always, as Thomas Paine put it, in his speech against executing the King, between humanity and cruelty. But it was clear that Lafayette would have to flee France, and, in August of 1792, he did. Expecting to be given sanctuary in the Austrian Netherlands, he was instead arrested; offered his freedom in exchange for French Army secrets, which he was not about to reveal; and then locked up in Magdeburg, at

one of several prisons he would know in the next five years. The conditions of his imprisonment were, against the usual rules of aristocratic detainment, extremely harsh, including months kept away from books, sunlight, and friends. Lafayette said later that solitary confinement could lead only to madness, adding dryly that he “had not found it to be the means of reformation, since he was imprisoned for wishing to revolutionize the people against despotism and aristocracy, and passed his solitude in thinking upon it, without coming out corrected.”

It was, bizarrely, the ascension of Napoleon that finally freed Lafayette. Having badly beaten the Austrian Army at the battle of Rivoli, in 1797, Napoleon demanded the return of all French prisoners as a matter of honor, though he seems also to have imagined that he could lure Lafayette back into his service. Lafayette, refusing to take any political role in Napoleon’s empire, retired, in Washingtonian fashion, to his wife’s family estate. Napoleon was oddly phlegmatic about this; blood was something he drank in big draughts, in the suffering and the horror of total war. He wasn’t personally vindictive, and if one stayed away from intrigue, as Lafayette did, he wouldn’t pursue you. For the Jacobins, with their totalitarian imagination, noncompliance equated to resistance; for Napoleon, a classic authoritarian, submission was best but silence was fine. Lafayette, though noncompliant, withdrew from the public realm until the dictator fell.

The stories of public figures have a way of ending tragically. If you aren’t killed by your times, you invariably outlive them, and the values you fought for come to seem tarnished. But Lafayette, even after his years of imprisonment, and then his resistance to Napoleon, and then to the Bourbon restoration that followed, ended well. He was offered the

governorship of the Louisiana Territory by Jefferson after the American President bought it—shades of Broglie’s scheme!—and during a tour of America, in 1824, he was greeted like a rock star, from New Orleans to Boston.

There is evidence that Lafayette briefly owned a slave in 1777—a fact that he never referred to afterward, seemingly out of shame—but by the time of his 1824 trip, he was resolutely antislavery and egalitarian, meeting with a representative of Haiti and vigorously making the argument for abolition with his Virginia friends. His travelling companion Auguste Levasseur wrote that Lafayette “never missed an opportunity to defend the right which *all men without exception have to liberty*.” Both Frenchmen went away convinced, as many were at that moment, that slavery, under the pressure of public opinion, would not survive long. They were wrong, in part because of another development Lafayette witnessed on his tour—the political rise of Andrew Jackson, and of a populist pro-slavery movement. Fanny Wright, a Scottish reformer and Lafayette’s likely lover, who accompanied him throughout the tour (his wife died in 1807), got so fed up with American hypocrisy that she left the Marquis to found a utopian community.

At one point, Lafayette and Levasseur encountered a group of Jacksonian diehards who had threatened violence after John Quincy Adams squeaked in as President. When the Frenchmen asked, “How soon do you lay siege to the capital?,” the Jacksonians explained that they had no plans to do so: “Now that it is settled all we have to do is obey. . . . The consequences of a bad election are quickly obviated.” The intensity of social life in America is one of the keenest of Levasseur’s observations. Political parties, he intuited, are made up of people who are used to playing with others. Mobs are made

up of isolated people suddenly thrust together: their meet and greet becomes a riot.

The Marquis's story was not quite over. As the revolution of 1830 against the restored reactionary monarchy of Charles X began—that's the one that produced Delacroix's "Liberty Leading the People" and repopularized "The Marseillaise," still the French national anthem—Lafayette, though by now an old man, was called on as the only person capable of leading the republican forces. Once again, he was urged to take power himself, and once again he declined, hoping against hope (and against all reason, many of his exasperated chroniclers have believed) that a new king from another dynasty—in this case, from the supposedly populist Orleans family—might function as a national symbol while expanding popular sovereignty. And once again he failed. In the years before his death, in 1834, Lafayette, while serving both in the chamber of deputies and as mayor of his local commune, denounced the new king for recanting on his promises of reform. It would take another revolution, in 1848, to rid France of its monarchical illusions, and then yet one more, in 1871, to establish something like the foundation of a resilient republic.

Despite the failure of the 1830 revolution, Lafayette was seen as a leader of the incipient liberal revolutions in Spain, Portugal, Belgium, and, above all, Poland, which became a kind of second America in his imagination. This universalist vision is now viewed with skepticism in France. The "duty to intervene," which Lafayette certainly believed in and in some ways pioneered, now looks a little dubious. So where Duncan, the American biographer, ends his book on a note of exultation, quoting Samuel (Telegraph) Morse's tribute to Lafayette as a constant beacon of freedom—"a tower amid the waters, his foundation upon a rock, he moves not with

the ebb and flow of the stream”—Zecchini, the French biographer, ends on a drier note, querying Lafayette’s cosmopolitan embrace as an “elitist vision, not to say one vaguely imperialistic.”

Yet what perhaps fascinates us most in reading Lafayette’s story today is the extraordinary force of his moral instincts. He was not, in fact, a fixed tower, with a firm foundation of nameable beliefs but a flexible improviser of possibilities, picking up his sword in the most wildly different circumstances to fight for a nebulous but essential ideal of human liberty. Routinely castigated as self-centered and naïve, he was right, again and again, in the essentials of his judgment; he somehow always kept himself safe from the allure of perpetual excuses for cruelty, the “despite the unfortunate excesses” style of rationalization that sooner or later lames us all. He refused, in every sense, to lose his head to the absolutists of any party.

Temperament alone is not everything in politics. Alexander Hamilton, perhaps Lafayette’s closest friend, wrote down principles of government in such a crisp and classical style that we read them still. Yet the less coherent romantic imagination, of which Lafayette is an early and ideal example, can sometimes accomplish by empathy and affection and warmth what ideology cannot. History shows us no more lovable a man than Lafayette. He didn’t create a utopian state, or start a reign of terror, or conquer another country, or take power in his own country and lay down the law. But nobody did more to help secure French liberty, rather than merely imagine it, and nobody did more for the best side of the American democratic ideal. Lafayette didn’t write a philosophical book or think up a system, or even win a big battle. He was just a terrific friend to all good causes. We were lucky to have known the guy. ♦