

2020

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Recommended Citation

Blowitski, Rebecca (2020) "Revolutionary Hero to Scapegoat," *The Histories*: Vol. 16 : Iss. 1 , Article 4.
Available at: https://digitalcommons.lasalle.edu/the_histories/vol16/iss1/4

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Revolutionary Hero to Scapegoat

By Rebecca Blowitski

Although Marquis de Lafayette was recognized as a hero in the American revolution, he quickly became insignificant during the beginning stages of the French Revolution. Leading from the American Revolution to the French Revolution, Lafayette aspired to work as the mediator between conflicting parties. He believed that, through his experience in the American Revolution, he would be able to assuage the crowds in the French Revolution. His heavy reliance on his accomplishments allowed him to briefly appear as a hero in the early stages of the French Revolution; however, by the time the French Revolution had started, many lost their faith towards his ideals.

Lafayette's contributions during the American Revolution showed promise towards the beginning stages of the French Revolution. During the American Revolution, Lafayette served as a mediator between France and the United States and successfully brought both sides into agreement. A bust was made in his honor by French Sculptor Jean-Antoine Houdon who had also made one for George Washington. Jean-Antoine specialized in making sculptures for members of the Enlightenment, which started before the time of the French Revolution. His contributions to the war effort were revered by Americans and more pieces of art were made in his honor such as a statue held in Philadelphia. He was beloved by the Americans for volunteering to "[throw himself] into the cause of emancipating the colonies from the yoke of British tyranny."¹ With his noble reputation and experience, it was only natural that he was

¹ Raul Josset, "Marquis de Lafayette", 1947, Association for Public Art.

appointed by the King to serve as general in the beginning stages of the French Revolution. He thought that his efforts and ideals would take root in France.

During the first years of the French Revolution, Lafayette was vital in creating order in a country demanding blood. Lafayette was popular with the French people and was trusted by the king of France. “He already has an army at his command, in addition he was rapidly becoming the most popular man in France, the king alone a possible rival.”² In order to keep peace within the nation, he once again rose to his position as mediator and strove to control the crowds rioting against the king. The French citizens saw the king as unfit to rule and unease was quickly spreading throughout the nation. His work began as “both captain of the National Guard of Paris and confidant of the king... and on behalf of the thousands of representatives of all France.”³ With his popularity, he was trusted by both the people and the king as the famed mediator from the American Revolution. Both he and the people of France believed that he would be the key to creating a quick resolution to the arising disagreements.

Lafayette was necessary in creating a form of organization in the disarrayed nation. In the beginning, he wrote the “Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen” which he modeled off the American “Declaration of Independence.” Like the American document, it created a set of standards for citizens in order to give them what was considered by Lafayette to be natural rights. “Lafayette’s personal agenda for this new Assembly related mainly to his plan for introducing the ‘Declaration of Rights,’ which he had been drafting in cooperation with Jefferson since January.”⁴ He worked together with the man that was responsible for writing the American

² Stewart, John Hall. “Louis Gottschalk and Lafayette.” *The Journal of Modern History* 42, no. 4 (1970), 645.

³ Wang, Shan-Ching. “Kingship and Rituals in the French Revolution (1789–1793): The Guillotining of Louis XVI.” Order No. 3537418, St. John's University (New York), 2013, 102.

⁴ Kramer, Lloyd S. 1996. *Lafayette in Two Worlds : Public Cultures and Personal Identities in an Age of Revolutions*. Chapel Hill, N.C.: The University of North Carolina Press, 35.

document that stated America's independence. He hoped that with rising tensions in France, the people would rally towards a shared goal, much like citizens had in the American Revolution. "Lafayette thus showed more interest in stating fundamental rights (life, liberty, property, speech, religion, etc.) than in working out the specific provisions of a constitution...he assumed that the precise mechanisms of government could always be changed or amended as long as the basic, natural rights were respected..."⁵ He planned on creating a new France based off the government in the United States of America. His downfall most likely began when he kept attempting to convert the French government into a copy of the American government. The French estates were divided in their views of how France should be governed, and Lafayette's organization of the government slowly began to crumble. He was too fixated on mimicking the actions and solutions found in America.

Lafayette was important during the beginning stages of the National Assembly. "Elected to the Estates-General in 1789, Lafayette soon became a powerful figure in the French Revolution as commander of the Paris National Guard and a general in the French army."⁶ With his status and position, the French people looked to him for guidance during the struggle. He was set up as one of the heads of the National Assembly so that an experienced leader would watch over the proceedings. From years of experience from the American and French armies, he was vital in motivating the people to work towards a shared goal in the beginning. He was even close to the royal family, with the king trusting General Lafayette's advice. He was on familiar ground in a nation looking for political reform. He "[developed] the National Guard, which was to become one of the military mainstays of the Revolution. The headaches, conflicts, confusion, and suspicion to which the marquis was exposed before the Guard was finally established on a

⁵ Kramer, "Lafayette in Two Worlds", 39.

⁶ Kramer, Lloyd S. "Lafayette and the Historians: Changing Symbol, Changing Needs, 1834-1984." *Historical Reflections / Réflexions Historiques* 11, no. 3 (1984), 375.

broad base are elaborately presented...”⁷ He seemed invincible and powerful as he peacefully dispersed conflicts and set up a concrete layout for France. Naturally, the citizens of France looked towards him for guidance when relations between the estates became strained. He appeared as if he would be able to solve any conflict handed to him.

Lafayette was beloved by the American people, and he held onto this past glory. The American people revered this man and he even had an oil painting made of him by Thomas Sully. The American painter made many portraits of American heroes in his lifetime, which included Lafayette for his contributions to the American Revolution. “Marquis de Lafayette was consistently identified with revolutions and incitement to revolution between 1776 and 1834. He never denied the charge; rather, he encouraged it and seemed to glory in the identification.”⁸ His accomplishments in America became meaningless when it came to his attempts at appeasing the French people. He quickly started to see that ideals that were desired by Americans were not mimicked by the French people. The French people were split in how they wanted to be governed. Some wanted everyone to have rights, others argued for only the nobility to be in control. Some wanted the monarchy to be overthrown, while others wanted the crown to stay in power. Lafayette was unable to mediate between groups that each had their own extreme set of values.

He set up several improvised ways of pleasing the crowd, but his actions tended to backfire on him. “Lafayette’s statements as Guard commander thus emphasized from the beginning that Parisians must respect the law and listen to the authorities of their new government...in order to assure themselves of liberty. But when a large crowd of hungry

⁷ Stewart, *Louis Gottschalk and Lafayette*, 645.

⁸ Slavin, Morris, Agnes M. Smith, and John Hall Stewart. 1981. *Bourgeois, Sans-Culottes and Other Frenchmen : Essays on the French Revolution in Honor of John Hall Stewart*. DesLibris. Waterloo, Ont: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 7.

Parisians marched off...in defiance of Lafayette's earlier objections, he found himself telling the king and queen that they should listen to their people."⁹ People began to become upset with his compromises as each side of the argument held ideals too extreme to create a middle ground. He became conflicted on how to create compromise between people who would not accept anything other than their desired outcome. Later, people would call his contributions in the revolution a failure. "...if he did not betray the King during the French Revolution, at the least he failed to seize the opportunity to save the royal family in 1792."¹⁰ Despite his great contributions in the beginning stages of the revolution, he was resented by the very people he served in the end.

A gap began to grow between Lafayette and the citizens of France. He was quickly able to discern the fact that they did not desire the same results as the American people. While the American people strove towards freedom and natural rights, the French estates were divided on how the country should be led in the future. Some estates wished for the king to remain in power while others desired the king's death. Some wanted the government to be changed completely, while others only wanted small reforms in the government. The country was far too divided in the opinions of the peasants and the nobility. There was no trust to be found between estates which made Lafayette's compromises near impossible to set up. Each group had their own set of extremes that they were unwilling to give up. Lafayette was thrown into a situation where he had to create peace between groups that wanted nothing to do with the other. Despite all of the drawbacks presented to him, he believed that peace could be attained between the groups.

As tensions increased, Lafayette saw that the will of the French people was not the same as the will of the American people. The majority of Lafayette's attempts at compromise were either promptly ignored or thwarted by the people of the estates. The American people were

⁹ Kramer, *Lafayette in Two Worlds*, 40-41.

¹⁰ Slavin, Morris, Smith, and Stewart, *Bourgeois, Sans-Culottes and Other Frenchmen*, 23.

focused on “a commitment to their own liberty and an opposition to real or imagined tyranny [which] was part of a common classical heritage of the European nobility and part of their historical memory.”¹¹ Since the tradition of overthrowing a higher power was prominent in European history, Lafayette believed that it would be the cause that would bring all of the groups together. His plan failed when neither of the estates were looking to compromise and instead rioted and rallied for their own cause. He wrote to Washington, saying, “he was ‘constantly attacked on both sides by the Aristocratic and the factious party,’ and that his insistence on legality was costing him ‘some of [his] favor with the mob.’ Unfortunately, the “popular” party had divided between the Jacobins and the moderate opponents.”¹² The man who was famous for creating compromises between opposing forces was unable to create any compromises in his own nation. His status and position deteriorated with each failed attempt at assuaging the opposing sides. He had no power over the decisions or actions of the radical factions and problems kept growing between them.

Lafayette lost all his influence near the closing stages of the French Revolution. The radical groups sought ways to get rid of Lafayette as he constantly caused hindrances to their plans. “Lafayette came to realize mediation in France could never bring the unity or agreements of other times and places.”¹³ The people no longer agreed with his ideas of governance and he lost the public’s respect. He could barely keep control of the rioting people and was unable to stop the royal family’s escape from France. The people would continuously hold his failures over his head, despite all that he had contributed in the beginning of the revolution. Although he had pledged “to live united with all the French through the indissoluble bounds of fraternity” the

¹¹ Slavin, Morris, Smith, and Stewart, *Bourgeois, Sans-Culottes and Other Frenchmen*, 17.

¹² Kramer, *Lafayette in Two Worlds*, 41.

¹³ Kramer, *Lafayette in Two Worlds*, 42-43.

people of France did not want him.¹⁴ He received blame for the people's problems and could only contribute meager advice to unwilling groups. Lafayette was exiled by the very people he sought to protect. All of his past glory and his accomplishments from his time in America were ignored and mocked. He was no longer of use to the French civilians and they created their own future without his interference.

Although Lafayette was an influential and trusted figure in the American Revolution, he made meager contributions to the result of the French Revolution. The American people were more willing to fight under a shared cause than the people of France. The estates along with their radical groups were unwilling to compromise on any subjects and constantly fought Lafayette's opinions. Despite all that he had done to reinforce the nation, such as setting up the National Guard, the people did not want his interference in the new government. He was not considered the voice of the people anymore and his reputation as master mediator was crushed into the dirt. The people lost their faith towards his ideals and he was not considered important towards the later stages of the revolution.

¹⁴ Wang, *Kingship and Rituals in the French Revolution*, 102.

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