Devoted to the Cause: An Examination of the Formation and Evolution of the Marquis de Lafayette’s Republican Ideals

by

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Abstract:

The Marquis de Lafayette’s role as simply a myth and military hero of the American Revolution must be re-examined, to allow for his role as Enlightenment thinker. As is made clear from examining his education and participation in the American Revolution, as well as his co-authorship of the Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen with Thomas Jefferson, an ideology built on French and American republican principles influenced his decisions and contributions to, the early stages of the French Revolution. Lafayette failed to bring the American model to France, due to political inexperience concerning practical application of his ideological principles, maintenance of a moderate position, and the rise of radical revolutionaries. Despite Lafayette’s tenuous position in the later stages of the French Revolution, his importance must not be understated, as perhaps no other person so aptly personifies an ideological bridge between the American and French Revolutions.
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In 2015, a collection of essays entitled, *Lafayette in Transnational Context: Identity, Travel, and Nationalism in the Revolutionary Atlantic World*, was published. The most recent work concerning the life of the Marquis de Lafayette, (b. 1757 - d. 1834), this book attempts to place the Marquis into a context free from cynical or reverential interpretations. Under these circumstances, the Marquis de Lafayette, revolutionary war hero and proponent of liberal rights, may be viewed not only as a symbol of American freedom but as a man, capable of complex thought. Lafayette seems to have made a conscious effort, based upon his experience in both the American Revolution, and in his home country of France, to respond to the ideas around him. In this way, Lafayette became a proponent for human rights, and has continued to stand out amongst his contemporaries. As Lloyd Kramer states, while Lafayette may be considered a “political theorist” who “carried out his ideas directly into military and political action” he was not a politician.\(^1\) This crucial distinction helps to explain the differing interpretations of Lafayette, which when detailing his military exploits in the American Revolution, are often much more favourable than those concerning his political action in the French Revolution. Nevertheless, Lafayette’s active advocacy of the American principles of liberty and freedom upon his return to France, serves to set him apart from other well-known Frenchmen who fought in the Revolution, such as Rochambeau. In essence, the Marquis de Lafayette is fascinating in the way in which he transformed ideas into action, fighting both on American battlefields and in the National Assembly in France.

It could be argued that this translation of values into action provides the basis of the Marquis’ sustained popularity. For, whether historians are critical or more positive concerning the Marquis’ intentions and actions, he remains a figure who has been extensively researched. Recent publications concerning the life of the Marquis de Lafayette vary in their interpretations although the dichotomy of reverence or condemnation is no longer as readily apparent. Recent scholarship has given way to a balanced yet critical critique of the Marquis, allowing for a break in tradition. As Sanja Perovic states, taking an objective stance regarding revolutionary figures is a challenging task due to “the tendency of the revolutionaries towards self-dramatization and the consequent inability to distinguish the biographical self from his or her heroic persona.” In many recent publications historians have succeeded in this regard, often leading to a more critical interpretation of the Marquis devoid of reverence. For example, Stuart Leibiger, focuses on Lafayette’s connection to George Washington, as one of his protégés, leading to the portrayal of Lafayette as an idealist whose affections were not necessarily reciprocated. Other historians, such as Laura Auricchio, focuses on the arrival of the Marquis in America in order to assess his character. In her article, Auricchio lends credence to the interpretation of Lafayette as naïve when she describes the Marquis as having a “sunny attitude” and seeing America through “rose-coloured glasses.”2 Given her attention to detail and use of contemporary sources however, this negative critique of his character is a sound assessment. From the primary documents she cites, it becomes clear that the Marquis’ was highly idealistic regarding his view of America, holding it and the American cause in incredibly high regard. This sense of idealism, regarding his republican principles, would become a defining feature of the Marquis, and thus is often present

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in biographies concerning him. Marc Leepson, in his recent biography, takes note of the Marquis speaking in the “loftiest of idealistic tones about the reasons he had decided to join the fight.”

While Leepson concludes this book with information regarding the Marquis’ participation in the French Revolution as an extension of his republican ideals, emphasis is still placed on the Marquis as a “military man.” In this way, despite some scholarship the Marquis’ republican ideals, little information is given concerning specific instances in which he developed such ideas. This lack of precise details regarding the way in which the Marquis de Lafayette’s ideals developed is also evident in contemporary sources.

In one of the earliest biographies concerning the life of the Marquis de Lafayette, John Quincy Adams, a close friend of the Marquis’ attests to his character. Buried amongst explanations for the beginning of the American Revolution, and references to Lafayette’s childhood, one key statement encapsulates what beliefs and values the Marquis had. While describing the “self-devotion of Lafayette,” John Quincy Adams highlights the importance with which Lafayette viewed “the consecrated standard of human rights.” This pivotal phrase is a concise statement of Lafayette’s ideals, and yet many historians choose not to focus on this subject. Instead, most historians have extensively researched other aspects of Lafayette’s life including his friendship with George Washington, his military prowess as well as his victory tour of America in 1825. Significant evidence of Lafayette as a humanitarian and Enlightenment thinker resides in “hundreds of thousands of pages”, which help to shed light on the Marquis

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intellectual and philosophical ideas. Most prominent among these primary documents is the abundance of correspondence between Lafayette and important historical figures, as well as his many memoirs. Taken as a whole, one begins to see Lafayette not simply as a symbol or a warrior, but as a complex figure who embraced republican ideals and continued to advocate for human rights until his death in 1834. Showcasing the Marquis de Lafayette as an Enlightenment thinker is not a new concept; however, in many works concerning Lafayette, it is one that is often pushed to the background. Between Lafayette’s philosophy and his career as a soldier, many historians choose to focus on the latter, thereby failing to utilize this important historical figure as a lens through which to view the transfer of Enlightenment ideals which occurred during the so-called age of revolution. This thesis seeks to bring Lafayette’s republican ideals and humanitarian efforts to the forefront, and to trace their foundation and evolution through to the French Revolution of 1789.

The Marquis de Lafayette is most often associated with the American Revolution, but it was in France, as a child, that he was first acquainted with causes of liberty and glory. According to Lafayette himself, there was “no time in [his] life when [he] did not love stories of glorious deeds, or have dreams of travelling the world in search of fame.” Family members and his tutor told him these stories of his ancestors fallen in battle, and talked of historical figures that represented Old World principles of chivalry and honour. Lafayette heard such stories first from his grandmother, who spoke to him of his ancestors who were “brave knights whose...honour he

7 See Marc Leepson’s *Lafayette: Lessons in Leadership from the Idealistic General* for an example of this.
would have to defend.” Young Gilbert was also influenced by Abbé Fayon, who, as well as imparting knowledge concerning languages and other important subjects, told him tales of famous historical figures. These included Chieftain Vercingetorix’s “guerilla war against Caesar’s Roman legions in Auvergne”. Such tales provided the groundwork for Lafayette’s view of the world and his place in it, by providing him with examples of heroes fighting for the greater good. Unlike his contemporaries however, Gilbert would not grow up to hold the same beliefs as his tutor. For example, whereas Fayon believed that “blacks were an inferior race suitably enslaved,” Lafayette “would spend his entire life in the cause of liberalism and liberty.” This failure to adhere to the views of his contemporaries has a direct connection to both Lafayette’s conceptions of liberty as a young boy and to the evolution of his republican ideals. In his 1779 Memoir, Lafayette recounts that when given the opportunity as a young boy in rhetoric class to “describe the perfect horse…[he] depicted a horse that, on perceiving the whip, threw his rider.” This suggests that at this time Lafayette had even as a boy an abstract awareness of tyranny, in this case, that of the rider over the horse. Furthermore, to punctuate this account, Lafayette states that “republican anecdotes delighted [him].” This suggests that he too understood the connection between his childhood education and the development of his republican ideals.

Lafayette’s ideas concerning liberty were further developed when he was enrolled in the Collège de Plessis in 1768, where he was given not only the education of a young knight but of

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10 Leepson, Idealist General, 8.
an Enlightenment thinker. It was at this school where Lafayette became acquainted with the “works of the philosophes [such as] Newton, Locke, Montesquieu, Voltaire and others…who reinforced Lafayette’s own ideas of justice.” With Lafayette’s early understanding of glory in the form of the stories told to him, and a mind full of philosophe rhetoric espousing liberty, Lafayette was primed to find resonance with the story of the fight of the colonists. For the Marquis de Lafayette, the American cause presented an opportunity for him to distinguish himself and gain a place amongst his chivalric ancestors while also being able to avenge his family’s fallen heroes. As historian Jason Lane states, Lafayette “desire[d] to avenge France’s recent humiliation and his father’s death in the Seven Years’ War against Britain.” Lafayette was not alone in wanting vengeance against the British for the outcome of the Seven Years War, and many young aristocrats upon hearing of the American struggle were aware of its global impact. For many, the American Revolution represented a chance to “tip the global balance of power” and it was surmised that “an American victory over the British…would greatly diminish England’s vast international empire.” While the balance of power was of concern to French aristocrats, ideology also played a large part in the interest paid to the American Revolution.

News of the beginning of the American Revolution reached France, and the Marquis de Lafayette, then eighteen, in 1775, when it was discussed during a dinner party at Metz. It was at this occasion that, as Lafayette recounts in his 1825 Memoirs of General Lafayette, that he was “at once roused from the dreams of courtly honour and was ever after devoted to the cause of

13 Unger, Lafayette, 8.
14 Lane, General and Madame de Lafayette, 18.
15 Leepson, Idealist General, 13.
liberty.” At this meeting “the British Duke of Gloucester, the younger, disaffected brother of King George III” and “the Comte…Broglie, the French Army Commander” among other notable guests, spoke not only of their disdain for the British but of the principles of Freemasonry. As Masonic ideals and the ideals emphasized by leading American revolutionaries, echoed writings of prominent Enlightenment philosophers, the American Revolution soon became a cause that was widely spoken about. First articulated by John Locke, one major Enlightenment principle outlined the individual’s “natural rights” which were understood to include, “a power…to preserve [one’s] property, that is [their] life, liberty and estate.” This idea of natural rights would be further expanded upon by French philosophers, such as Jacques Rousseau, and could be found in the American Declaration of Independence, effectively linking the American cause and Enlightenment thought. This similarity in ideals helps to explain the growing prominence discussions surrounding the American Revolution in “France’s Masonic Lodges” where “the American Revolution represented a struggle by Freemasons like Washington and Franklin for Masonic principles and man’s right to life, liberty and property.” These were the very philosophies that Lafayette had been learning in the Collège de Plessis and as such the American Revolution reinforced Lafayette’s existing ideals. This introduction to “Masonic ideas of equality and the rights of man” would be pivotal in the development of Lafayette’s republican beliefs.

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17 Leepson, Idealist General, 13.
20 Unger, Lafayette, 15.
21 Leepson, Idealist General, 13.
While the American Revolution was being discussed as an ideological struggle in France, American colonists were facing a dire military situation against the power of Britain.

From the beginning of the American Revolution it was very clear to revolutionaries that they would need foreign support, like that of the French, to be successful. This is evident in the Declaration of Independence which, while dictating the terms and reasons for the separation of Americans from British tyranny, was also intended for a foreign audience. As Rakove states in his annotations concerning the Declaration, this document was “designed to…encourage other nations – principally France – to provide the recognition and support the former colonies would require to assure the political independence the document proclaimed.”22 By 1776 this need for foreign aid became even more pronounced as it appeared as though the Continental army might fall under the might of British forces. The Continental Army did not have the means of successfully fighting a professional British army and the very state of it caused General George Washington great exasperation. As Harlow Unger states, in Manhattan, “as British and Hessian troops stormed ashore,…within hours, 6000 of the Connecticut troops had fled, causing Washington to “cry out ‘are these the men with which I am to defend America?’”23 The circumstances of American revolutionaries was further aggravated as Congress did not have “the authority to raise taxes, buy arms, or levy troops” and consequently “fled the national capital at Philadelphia and debated capitulation as it reached a temporary safe haven in Baltimore.”24 Under these circumstances it soon became clear that American revolutionaries would not be able to

24 Unger, Improbable Patriot, 2.
sustain their resistance in their current situation. As many historians agree, aiding American revolutionaries aligned with French interests due to events surrounding the outcome of the Seven Years War, and terms outlined in the Treaty of Paris of 1763. As Unger states, “the war not only bankrupted France, however, it humiliated her” as it “stripped her of all her territories around the world, save a few malaria-infested islands in the Caribbean.”

Placed in this framework, the aiding American revolutionaries in gaining their independence presented an opportunity for France to reassert its dominance as an imperial power, and exact vengeance against Britain. Despite the consequences of the Seven Years’ War, France still maintained enough power to provide support to the Americans. Aid came first in unofficial support, the most notable of which was orchestrated by “Pierre Augustin Caron de Beaumarchais, who “warned the king,…‘we must help the Americans.’” He did so, with Vergennes, the Foreign Minister’s support, by sending arms to America. This was crucial following events such as “the slaughter on Long Island”, which had precipitated the events which transpired in Manhattan, and had caused the American army to lose morale. While this sending of arms was crucial in bolstering the war effort, it soon became clear that it was not enough to turn the tide of war. With not enough men to use the arms that were sent, and a lack of professional training, the Continental Army was still in danger of losing against the British. Under these circumstances, Americans looked to foreign soldiers, such as the Marquis de Lafayette, as a way to gain an advantage.

Historian Eric Spall’s recent article, “Foreigners in the Highest Trust” provides insight into the perceptions of American revolutionaries concerning foreign soldiers, including the

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Marquis de Lafayette. Spall argues that rather than forgo the use of foreign soldiers to fight for the American cause, some American colonists were willing to accept them provided they were not mercenaries. This issue of using foreign forces was one of the grievances that Americans held against the British as “proof of the king’s despotism.”\textsuperscript{28} Despite this assessment, “Continental Congress accepted many [foreigners] into the army, despite concerns about the extent to which these outsiders could be trusted.”\textsuperscript{29} This paradox may be explained by the way in which Revolutionary leaders differentiated mercenaries from the foreign volunteers they needed to fight the British. The key factor was “self-interest” as “being motivated by selfishness and not a shared connection to a cause…characterize[d] the mercenary.”\textsuperscript{30} As Spall indicates, in this way “American Revolutionary leaders simply cloaked their mercenaries in the guise of the ‘disinterested and heroic’ volunteer.”\textsuperscript{31} The Marquis de Lafayette fit this description, and thus was able to gain a favourable position amongst the American revolutionaries.

One key piece of evidence which showcases the importance of this model of volunteer rather than mercenary is exemplified by the Marquis de Lafayette’s Agreement with Silas Deane. In this written commitment, which grants the Marquis the honorary title of Major General, many of his favourable qualities are listed including his standing in France as a member of nobility. The two most striking attributes however, which display how Continental Congress viewed the Marquis, concern “his disinterestedness and above all his zeal for the liberty of [the American] provinces.”\textsuperscript{32} The emphasis placed on these qualities suggests that Congress was aware of how

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{29} Spall, “Highest Trust,” 339.
\item \textsuperscript{30} Spall, “Highest Trust,” 342.
\item \textsuperscript{31} Spall, “Highest Trust,” 365.
\item \textsuperscript{32} Agreement with Deane, December 7, 1776, \textit{American Revolution}, ed. Idzerda et al., 1:17.
\end{itemize}
the Marquis’ arrival in America would be perceived and the Marquis’ perception concerning
why he was given such a rank. As Kramer states, this emphasis on disinterestedness directly
translated into recognizing the Marquis’ “genuine enthusiasm for the cause itself, irrespective of
any personal reward.”33 Thus this reference to disinterestedness can be seen as going hand in
hand with the Marquis’ zeal for liberty, although the former was used to distinguish him from a
mercenary and the latter was a quality that the Marquis held in high esteem. Three months prior
to arriving in Philadelphia, the Marquis proclaimed that “[his] zeal for their cause and [his]
sincerity ha[d] won their confidence.”34 This qualified him as a foreigner engaged in the
American cause for the right reasons, removing the negative connotations that would have
denoted him a mercenary. Under these circumstances, the Marquis may be seen not only a
voyager sailing to the American colonies for the sake of liberty, but also far more than a
mercenary. While Spall’s article sheds light on the way in which American colonists viewed
foreign soldiers coming to their aid, it also provides a lens through which to view the Marquis de
Lafayette. Due to the Marquis’ expression of his written commitment to republican ideals and
apparent disinterestedness he was able to fit their ideal. This commitment, simply written at this
time, would be tested over the course of the American Revolution.

Chapter I | Principles of Liberty Confirmed and Strengthened

In the Marquis de Lafayette’s 1825 Memoir, he attests to the extent to which the
American Revolution influenced the development of his republican ideals. As he states, his

33 Lloyd S. Kramer, *Lafayette in Two Worlds: Public Cultures and Personal Identities in an Age of Revolutions*
“principles were no doubt confirmed and strengthened by his association with Washington, and by witnessing scenes of desolation through which the Americans triumphed over despotism.”35 Examining the Marquis de Lafayette’s participation in the American Revolution as a key factor in the development of his republican ideals presents a challenge. This is primarily due to the context surrounding the documents available that, due to the nature of events, contain primarily war correspondence. Given that the Marquis voyaged to America to become a soldier in the Continental Army, little time is spent contemplating principles such as liberty and freedom. Statements are made however, which suggest the Marquis was actively participating not only in military engagements but intellectual pursuits. As Lafayette states in 1777, in his letter to the Duc d’Ayen, “I read, I study, I examine, I listen, I think, and out of all that I try to form an opinion into which I cram as much common sense possible.”36 This statement, while referring to Lafayette’s involvement in military discussions, provides evidence that he was taking in the ideas presented to him. Furthermore, in a letter sent to his wife before arriving in America, in order to “set [his wife’s] mind at ease”, he states that “it is more as a philosopher than as a soldier that I shall visit all of [America].”37 By referring to himself in this manner, even in terms of comforting his wife, it becomes clear that he did not go to America simply to be a soldier but also to contribute to the republican principles of liberty and glory from an ideological standpoint. More specific instances regarding the honing of the Marquis’ republican ideals, however, are difficult to pinpoint. This helps to explain the number of biographies that focus primarily on his childhood and his transfer of republican ideals to France in 1789, in analyzing his ideals. The key factor in charting the continuation of the Marquis’ republican ideals then, involves sifting

35 Lafayette, Memoirs of General Lafayette, 332.
37 Lafayette to Adrienne de Noailles de Lafayette, April 19, 1777, American Revolution, ed. Idzerda et al., 1:49.
through the evidence and attempting to find specific examples that display a change in the Marquis’ way of thinking. This is most evident when one examines the naïve optimism with which the Marquis viewed the American cause in 1777 as contrasted with his more pragmatic Memoir of 1779.

At just twenty years of age, the Marquis de Lafayette set sail for America, to fight for freedom and to find glory. This journey, and the furthering of the Marquis’ republican ideals, may not have occurred had his military pursuits in France come to fruition. Far from realizing the full potential of his liberal ideology, prior to his demotion in 1776, Lafayette had an “ambition to become a career military officer in the French army.” The fulfillment of this goal was impeded not only by his demotion, but by the fact that “France was not at war, and it did not appear there were any conflicts brewing on the horizon.”38 This lack of opportunity, as well as Lafayette’s burgeoning republican ideals, made participating in the American Revolution the best course of action for attaining the glory the Marquis sought. Therefore, having made an agreement to serve in the Continental Army the previous year, the Marquis purchased La Victoire, the ship that would take him to the New World. While on board, Lafayette had a conversation with the Vicomte de Mauroy that underscores his optimistic attitude regarding the American colonies and its people.

The Vicomte de Mauroy’s memoir concerning his arrival in America provides a baseline for the Marquis’ intellectual development as it underscores his optimism and naivety. For example, while the Vicomte attempted to prepare the Marquis for “the disappointments he would

38 Leepson, Idealist General, 14.
perhaps experience”, Lafayette referred to Americans as “united by the love of virtue and liberty” as well as “simple, good, hospitable people who prefer beneficence to all our vain pleasures, and death to slavery.” Such optimistic remarks, while perhaps not entirely accurate, were no doubt bolstered by what he had heard of the American Revolution while still in France. Lloyd Kramer, in recounting Lafayette’s arrival in America, refers to this difference between perception and reality in terms of a “‘mirage’” that was not in line with the “political realities of Revolution.” This included the reception of foreign soldiers by American revolutionaries. While there was no doubt that these soldiers were needed in order to continue the war effort, they were not always well received. This was certainly true of the Marquis’ arrival as it was marred by those who had come before him, as they were self-interested or “soldiers of fortune”, and showed no respect to their American hosts. As Laura Auricchio states, “during his first few weeks in America, Lafayette seems to have remained blissfully ignorant of the hostility routinely directed toward French officers in general.” This apparent ignorance may be seen as a testament to the positive way in which he viewed the American Revolution. In recognizing that there was an “affinity between [the Americans’] way of thinking and [his] own, and [his] love for glory and liberty,” the Marquis highlighted the ideological aspect of this conflict. This is further accentuated in a letter to his wife Adrienne that states that he viewed America as “becom[ing] the respectable and safe asylum of virtue, integrity, tolerance, equality, and a peaceful liberty.” Written just days before his arrival in America, such statements underscore the way in which his optimism attests to the faith he had in a cause mirrored his own ideals. Such

39 Excerpt from Memoir by the Vicomte de Mauroy, American Revolution, ed. Idzerda et al., 1:55.
40 Kramer, Two Worlds, 24.
41 Lane, General and Madame de Lafayette, 30.
43 Lafayette to Adrienne de Noailles de Lafayette, June 19, 1777, American Revolution, ed. Idzerda et al., 1:63.
44 Lafayette to Adrienne de Noailles de Lafayette, June 7, 1777, American Revolution, ed. Idzerda et al., 1:59.
statements, written out of the public eye, attest to the Marquis’ commitment and recognition that his ideals aligned with those of American revolutionaries. These ideals would continue to be developed, but as specific instances of such development are difficult to find in immediate sources, one may look to his 1779 Memoir for more conclusive evidence.

In his 1779 Memoir, Lafayette’s enthusiasm is included alongside a much more sombre view of the war, which suggests an absorption of the political realities surrounding the American Revolution. This is evident in the Marquis’ explanation for the precursors of the Revolution, which echo American sentiments. Lafayette stresses “the obstinacy of the king, the rage of the ministers, and the arrogance of the English people” as “forc[ing] thirteen of their colonies to declare themselves independent.” This explanation for the American Revolution closely resembles discourse found in American newspaper articles of 1776, such as those cited in Pauline Maier’s seminal work on this subject. In her example of “An Independent Whig” found in the New York Journal of 1776, Maier states that this individual believed “responsibility lay not only in the malevolence of the King, ministers and Parliament, but now, too, in the ‘supineness of the [English] nation’ which… thereby ‘obliged the colonies to go into a mode of self defence beyond what they ever intended’, namely independence. The similarity between these two interpretations display the extent to which Lafayette was absorbing the attitudes and beliefs of those around him. Furthermore, Lafayette’s view of the American Revolution as “b[earing] the characteristics of a civil war” displays a recognition of its political realities.

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45 Excerpt from Memoir of 1779, American Revolution, ed. Idzerda et al., 1:7.
47 Excerpt from Memoir of 1779, in American Revolution, ed. Idzerda et al., 1:96.
description of this division, Lafayette states that the “the names Whig and Tory distinguished the republicans and the royalists” and “violence of party spirit divided provinces, cities, and families.” It is at this time that Lafayette displays his ability to become accustomed to his surroundings despite the extent to which they differ from his previous assumptions. As Kramer states, instances such as these attest to the Marquis’ ability to “adopt the attitudes of a republican revolution.” This is not to say however, that the Old World did not continue to have an impact on the development of his republican ideals.

Following his account of American political divisions, Lafayette discussed his time spent recovering after being wounded in the battle of Brandywine. Marc Leepson suggests that while recovering from this wound, Lafayette continued his philosophical studies. This included “the works of…French and French-influenced philosophes…who propounded modern political and religious ideas.” The prominence Lafayette placed on such philosophical texts as he was recovering from a battle wound, attest to the importance he placed on the ideas being presented to him. Furthermore, this occurrence coinciding with American influence suggests an integrated approach to the development of the Marquis’ ideals. This is most evident when one examines Lafayette’s views on slavery, that were supported by Lafayette’s interpretation of teachings of the French philosophes and phrases found within Declaration of Independence.

The Marquis de Lafayette’s blossoming commitment to human rights can be found in his position as a staunch antislavery advocate. As historian Bradley Pollock states, due to the

48 Excerpt from Memoir of 1779, in American Revolution, ed. Idzerda et al., 1:96.
49 Kramer, Two Worlds, 21.
50 Leepson, Idealist General, 38.
Marquis being “raised and trained in a white supremacist milieu…his stand against slavery highlights his own integrity.”51 Rather than absorbing the racist rhetoric of the day, the Marquis advocated against it, showcasing his ability to transfer what he had learned in both America and France into a new context. This was in sharp contrast to “friends of Lafayette’s”, such as “George Washington [who] would continue to claim devotion to natural rights and yet maintain their own slave ownership and support of slavery.”52 As Rakove states in his annotations of the Declaration of Independence, revolutionaries did not see natural rights, such as those listed in this document, as pertaining to everyone. It was “the collective right of revolution and self-government that the Declaration was written to justify – not a visionary or even utopian notion of equality within American society itself.”53 While American revolutionaries underscored the importance of freedom from the tyranny of Britain, human rights activists, such as Lafayette, were acutely aware of the possibility of translating these ideals into the context of the debate on slavery. In this way while it is clear that the Marquis “believed in the ideology of the Declaration of Independence,” the way in which he interpreted it differed greatly from that of American revolutionaries.54 This may be seen as a result of his studies concerning French philosophes that began to stress extending natural rights to slaves. By examining Lafayette’s correspondence with one such philosophe it soon becomes evident that both France and the American colonies continued to influence his thoughts on this matter.

52 Pollock, “Integrity V. Hypocrisy,” 127.
The view of oppression and tyranny being words that could be associated with a different kind of revolution was shared by fellow Frenchman and abolitionist, the Marquis de Condorcet. In an abolitionist pamphlet, he stated, “it follows from our principles that the inflexible justice to which kings and nations are subject to requires the destruction of slavery.” Furthermore, he stated that “nothing [was] more common than the maxims of humanity and justice.”\(^{55}\) This directly coincided with the Marquis’ beliefs, something Condorcet was conscious of. In a letter to Lafayette, Condorcet expressed his view that Lafayette was someone who had the opportunity to enact real change, suggesting that “the glory of overthrowing the slavery that [they] ha[d] imposed on the unfortunate Africans [was] demanded of [him].” Furthermore, if Lafayette were to aid in this cause, “[he] would be the liberator of two of the four parts of the world.”\(^{56}\) This obligation to aid in the freeing of enslaved Africans was something Lafayette firmly believed in and which he took steps to ensure, showcasing the extent to which his interpretation of republican thought differed from that of revolutionaries such as George Washington.

The friendship between George Washington and the Marquis de Lafayette has taken on a mythology of its own as both figures have grown in historical prominence. As historian Stuart Leibiger asserts, this relationship has been “romanticized” over the years.\(^{57}\) Nevertheless, their friendship remains an important aspect in examining the Marquis’ life, as it highlights the fact that he viewed natural rights in terms of freedom for all, not just the select few. This conviction led the Marquis to write Washington in February of 1783, of a scheme that would aid in


\(^{57}\) Leibiger, “George Washington and Lafayette,” 228.
abolishing slavery in the West Indies. He wrote that he wished to “unite” with Washington “in purchasing a small estate where [they] may try the experiment to free the negroes, and use them only as tenants.” Lafayette sincerely hoped that such a plan would eventually succeed in America, and perhaps sensing Washington would be apprehensive added “if it be a wild scheme, I had rather be mad that way, than to be thought wise on the other tack.”

Lafayette’s apprehensiveness was shown to not be misplaced, as is evident from Washington’s reply. While he praised the Marquis, taking note of “the benevolence of [his] heart”, there was little reassurance that he would aid the Marquis in “the scheme.”

A year later, the Marquis enacted his “scheme” and was once more lauded by Washington, who appeared to remain ignorant concerning the part he could play in aiding in abolition. In his letter to the Marquis in May of 1786, he wrote,

The benevolence of your heart, my dear Marquis, is so conspicuous on all occasions, that I never wonder at any fresh proofs of it; but your late purchase of an estate in the colony of Cayenne, with a view of emancipating the slaves on it, is a generous and noble proof of your humanity. Would to God a like spirit diffuse itself generally into the minds of the people of this country.

By effectively distancing himself from the abolitionist movement, Washington displayed a common trait of the Founding Fathers, that of refusing to see the Declaration and republican ideals as extending past the white revolutionaries they were made to support. On the other hand, Lafayette enacted his “scheme”, and in 1785 “[he] sent a young engineer-social scientist to take

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59 George Washington to Lafayette, April 5th 1783, American Revolution, ed. Idzerda et al. 5:121.
charge of La Belle Gabrielle, and…established a program of education and gradual emancipation.‘61 The Marquis’ role as an abolitionist would remain one of his defining features throughout his life. In fact, as historian Melvin D. Kennedy states, “on no subject perhaps did Lafayette reveal the consistence of his adherence to the principle of liberty more staunchly than on that of slavery and its related problems.”62 This display of Lafayette’s republican beliefs and the difference between his views and those of other American revolutionaries, highlights the influence the Old World still had on him. For, although the abolition of slavery followed the tenets of liberty and freedom emphasized by republican ideals, it was also something that was emphasized by Frenchmen such as Condorcet.

While both American rhetoric and French philosophy would continue to have an impact on Lafayette, the American Revolution would also provide an example for revolutionaries in France. During the American Revolution, many French citizens became acquainted with revolutionary “vocabulary”. This included the word freedom, “and in wishing it for the Americans, the French began to contemplate it for themselves.”63 There is no doubt that the Marquis, considering his first-hand experience with republicanism and the American Revolution, shared in this contemplation. Furthermore, by transferring his republican tenets into the abolitionist movement, Lafayette proved that he could take what he had learned into a new context. This would once again occur when Lafayette brought his revolutionary republican ideology back to France.

61 Unger, Lafayette, 216.
The transference of Lafayette’s strengthened republican ideas from the United States to France coincided with a larger movement of revolutionary thought from the New World to the Old, known as the age of revolutions. When placed in this framework, Lafayette loses a measure of the exceptionality which has been afforded to him by biographers who place his revolutionary participation in context wherein Lafayette earns his title of Hero of Two Worlds. While the Marquis’ participation in the American Revolution may be placed in a positive light, placing Lafayette into a French Revolutionary framework allows for a more critical analysis, primarily due to the implementation of the Marquis dual ideology. Such an analysis is not intended to detract from the Marquis’ accomplishments during this period, as Lafayette’s transformation from a revolutionary to a reformer, serves as a lens through which to examine the complex political realities of the French Revolutionary period.

Focusing on natural rights including liberty, many French soldiers who had served in America, such as Lafayette, sought to enact reforms to improve the lives of French citizens. This American rhetoric, emphasizing the benefits of liberty, coincided with ideas of French philosophs, on the benefits of “liberty, equality, and representation” that “penetrated the minds of commoners.” 64 Those interested in reform called into question the divine right of kings and therefore the power exercised by King Louis XVI. This departure from tradition, and a shift in focus to human rights, was hampered by a fundamental difference between the United States and France, as the latter was not a colony in rebellion but an Old World power. In France, unlike

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64 Unger, Lafayette, 220.
America, while there was a definite sense of the importance of natural rights, there was no precedent for their existence in France, and therefore no concept of the violation of such rights. Citizens of “France feared neither license nor tyranny” as they “had lived with and known little else for thirteen centuries and embraced them both.” This major difference provided a distinct disadvantage to revolutionaries who wished to see the American Revolution as a path to changing the political system in France. Moreover, whereas American revolutionaries fought to break away from their mother country of Britain and establish new institutions, French radicals faced a much greater challenge. As Susan Dunn states in her book on the subject, “the goal of French radicals was to reconceive and reorganize the political, legal, and social structure of the nation, to overthrow the nation’s institutions, to break with a thousand years of history.” This major undertaking was further hindered by the complex political realities revolutionaries, such as the Marquis de Lafayette, were confronted with in France. While fighting for liberty against the British, France’s ancient enemy and imperial competitor, was supported by the majority, French politics were far more divisive. Members of the aristocracy, who had supported the war on another continent as it supported their economic interests, were hesitant to see an ideological revolution occur in France. It was during this time that the synthesis of the Marquis’ ideas, including republican rhetoric and French philosophy is most easily seen.

Circumstances in France differed greatly from those in America due to the government institutions that were in place, which created a division unique to France. The stratification of French society into three “Estates” created unrest and may be seen as directly contributing to the French Revolution. The major issue within this system was outlined in a 1789 pamphlet by Abbé

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65 Unger, Lafayette, 269.
66 Dunn, Sister Revolutions, 11-12.
Sieyès, entitled “What is the Third Estate?” This document is highly important in understanding the political situation in France during this time as well as the emergence of what would come to be known as the National Assembly. In this pamphlet, Sieyès described the Third Estate as “everything”, that is, “the collectivity of citizens who belong to the common order.” In doing so, Sieyès explains that “nobles should not be able to represent the Third Estate in the Estates General.” Sieyès’ fervent argument is included alongside a message concerning the inherent “legitima[cy] of “common security, the common liberty, in short, the public good.” In this way, Sieyès displays a common distrust of the aristocracy and articulates the notion that members of nobility did not have the people’s best interests at heart. As asserted by William Doyle, this document may be seen as illustrating the intent of French revolutionaries at the beginning of the revolution in 1789, as at this time anti-monarchical sentiment did not characterize the revolution. According to Doyle, “the original aim of the French Revolution…was not to destroy monarchy, but to change an absolute monarchy into a constitutional one, and “popular antagonism throughout the struggles of 1788 and the first half of 1789 was directed against the nobility and clergy.” Just as in the years before American revolutionaries declared their independence, French citizens did not doubt the beneficence of the King, but rather his ministers. In this way, despite being a noble, Lafayette was a revolutionary, as exemplified by his participation in the “Society of Thirty.”

68 Sieyès, “What is the Third Estate?,” 68.
The “Society of Thirty” provides an interesting glimpse into not only Lafayette’s political position prior to 1789, but the views of other liberal revolutionaries. Historian Harlow Unger provides an in-depth analysis of this “large, albeit informal, political party of progressive social and political thinkers, variously called ‘the Americans’ or ‘Fayettists.’”70 The emergence of the “Society of Thirty” coincided with Lafayette’s acquaintance with a pivotal American document. As Unger states, “in the autumn of 1787, a letter from Washington” to Lafayette” enclosed a copy of the new American Constitution” that added the word “constitution” to his “political rhetoric” and “helped organize” the “Society of Thirty.”71 Limited information exists regarding this group, thus allowing for a comparison of two in-depth accounts of its composition. Unger’s account, which places Lafayette in a central role in this Society, contrasts sharply with Timothy Tackett’s account wherein he is but a member. The difference between these accounts stem from the propensity of Lafayette biographers to accentuate his centrality in revolutionary events. While a central figure in many instances, Tackett’s account makes it clear that his liberal ideas were shared by many other notable revolutionaries. The “Committee of Thirty,” as Tackett refers to it, “began meeting in the home of parlementary magistrate Adrien Duport in November 1788” and included “[his] associates from the Parlement of Paris…the Marquis de Lafayette and his comrades from the American War…the intellectuals Condorcet, La Rochefoucauld…and…the comte de Mirabeau.”72 In this way, while members of the “Committee of Thirty” may also be known as “Fayettists”, this political group was a microcosm of liberal revolutionaries rather than as Lafayette’s own political organization. The different issues which these revolutionaries

70 Unger, Lafayette, 226.
71 Unger, Lafayette, 226.
focused on displays the variance that existed not only among liberal revolutionaries, but revolutionaries in general. In his recent account of the French Revolution, Ian Davidson provides biographical sketches of the influential members of the “Committee of Thirty,” including Duport who led “the more ambitious and more numerous Revolutionaries” in 1789 “and argued against giving any right of veto to the king.” As has been previously mentioned, Condorcet advocated for abolition and increased rights of the Third Estate. The comte de Mirabeau “wrote a number of books, including Des lettres de cachet et des prisons d'État, a violent and sophisticated attack on the arbitrary and unjust penal system operating in France” and “represented himself as a champion of the Third Estate against the privileges of the nobility.” As is clear, members of the Committee advocated for a many of the same principles which the Marquis believed in, and also participated in French politics. Thus while, as Tackett argues, this group “did not initiate the political mobilization of the kingdom” it may be seen as being valuable in terms of showcasing the prominent liberal revolutionaries which Lafayette associated with. While Lafayette may not have had as central of a role in the Committee as has been previously suggested, the Committee did have an American influence as “Jefferson was an active and welcome participant.” This connection, above all others, would allow for Lafayette’s most important contribution to the National Assembly as well as the history of human rights, as Lafayette and Jefferson co-authored the Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen.

The manifestation of Lafayette’s republican ideals as containing both French and American influences is most easily seen in the formation and presentation of the Declaration of

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74 Ian Davidson, The French Revolution, 14.
75 Unger, Lafayette, 227.
the Rights of Man and of the Citizen. This document, written by Lafayette and Jefferson, is historically important as both an early example of a bill of human rights but also as evidence of Lafayette’s American and French ideals. Within this major contribution to a reformation of France, may be seen a clear expression of Lafayette’s “political identity” as the rights outlined in this document “were…rights that first received proper recognition in the American Revolution.”76 This assertion made by Lafayette biographer Lloyd Kramer is echoed by other historians as well, and can be seen in the context surrounding the drafting of this document. The inclusion of Jefferson as a main author underscores the key tenets present in this document and speaks to the similarities between Jefferson and Lafayette. As Bradley Pollock states, “not only were they friends but both were men of letters and considered themselves committed to republican ideals.”77 Despite these similarities, an elucidation of the implementation of such republican rhetoric, displays the stark differences between Lafayette and Jefferson. While “it was Lafayette’s desire to live according to [republican] ideals that motivated and informed his abolition and sustained his integrity…Jefferson’s inability to live up to his ideals undermined his integrity and led him into hypocrisy.”78 As such a statement suggests, Lafayette’s relationship with Jefferson is an example of the inconsistent nature of republican ideals which allowed for a limited proclamation of natural rights. In this way Jefferson’s hope that by “keeping the good model of your neighbouring country before your eyes, you may get on, step by step, towards a good constitution,” may be seen as an insistence that such a limited interpretation should be viewed as exemplary.79 Lafayette’s wish to co-author a declaration of rights for France with

76 Kramer, Two Worlds, 35.
77 Pollock, “Integrity V. Hypocrisy,” 130.
78 Pollock, “Integrity V. Hypocrisy,” 130.
Jefferson, therefore, may be seen as a recognition that while Lafayette and Jefferson did not interpret republican ideals in the same manner, they did have a good relationship. Furthermore, as he was attempting to use the American Revolution and its associated republican documents to frame a declaration of rights for France, it is understandable that he would turn to perhaps one of the most influential Founding Fathers to enact this change.

In attempting to enact positive measures for the French people, the combined ideals of Lafayette and Jefferson would be important in drafting a declaration of rights. Evidence of the importance of Jefferson’s direct involvement in drafting this document can be found in a letter sent from Jefferson to Lafayette in June of 1789, wherein he “ventured to sketch a charter” entitled “A Charter of Rights, solemnly established by the King and Nation.”\(^80\) The reference to the king, as a party in a charter which would serve as a precursor to the Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen, displays a realization that a departure from the American model would need to be taken for human rights and governmental reforms to be successful. As is evident in correspondence between Jefferson and Lafayette, hesitancy on the former’s part may have led to the decision to not assert France’s status as a republic. As Gilbert Chinard states, “whatever may have been his sympathies for the theories of the [républicains], in his opinion France was not ready for a complete transformation of her system of government.”\(^81\) In this way it becomes clear that although Lafayette and Jefferson were in favour of reform, Jefferson’s shrewd evaluation of French politics led him to the conclusion that at least this one major aspect of the American model could not be used. The Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen does retain critical similarities with the American Declaration however, allowing the

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inclusion of a constitutional monarchy to not supersede the main tenets of republican ideology present in the document. Lafayette’s involvement in this multi-faceted document put him in a tenuous political position but did not prevent him from being highly influential.

The Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen was highly debated in the National Assembly, with Lafayette’s defence of this document echoing that of Thomas Jefferson. In a speech given on July 11, 1789, Lafayette spoke of “inalienable and imprescriptible rights” including “the pursuit of well-being and resistance to oppression.”82 By comparing the language Lafayette used during this debate with that of the Declaration of Independence, the impact that American rhetoric had on his political vision for his country becomes clear. This is most clearly shown by comparing one of the most famous lines of the Declaration of Independence, that of “certain unalienable rights…life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.”83 In this way, the Marquis’ vision for France is easily distilled into these key tenets based on natural rights. Further evidence may be found that speaks not only to Lafayette’s commitment to republican ideology but the differing nature of governmental institutions between France and America. As is stated in the Declaration of Independence, it is “the Right of the People to…institute new Government…as to them shall seem most likely to effect their Safety and Happiness.”84 For American revolutionaries, this constituted a call for independence, whereas in France, due to differing political realities, the powers of the king were called into question. In terms of Lafayette, despite his firm belief in republican rhetoric, he was calling for rights within limits,

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that is, as part of a constitutional monarchy. This put him in direct confrontation with opposing factions, and affected the final draft of the Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen.

The formation of the National Assembly in June of 1789, allowed Lafayette an opportunity to formally present a French declaration of rights that utilized ideals he had learned both in America and France, but it also presented challenges. The Assembly was unique as its formation marked a change in France and a move away from absolute power towards a possible republic. As Lane states, the terms “‘nation’ and ‘national’ were new concepts for France” as they constituted “a commonwealth of all the people, rather than the king’s realm.” In this way, the transformation which was occurring in France, and which was merely alluded to in the language of many philosophes, was accentuated to the extent to which the king’s power was called into question. As is evident from Lafayette’s time in the National Assembly, however, he did not view a complete break from history as necessary, nor did he view the French political atmosphere as completely different from that of America. It appears that in embracing American republican ideology to inform his political activities in France, Lafayette displayed his propensity to use the American Revolution as his exemplar. This is made clear in his 1825 Memoir, when, upon looking back at this tumultuous time, he states that “under the monarchies of France, freedom was unknown…nor were the principles of constitutional liberty at all understood.”85 This statement contrasts sharply with the rhetoric of the philosophes who merely spoke of such republican principles, and attests to Lafayette’s idealization of American political institutions and the principles he put into practice, as it echoes a statement made by Thomas Jefferson, following Lafayette’s presentation of the Declaration. In August of 1789, Jefferson

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85 Lafayette, Memoirs of General Lafayette, 332.
noted that with the formation of the National Assembly, “the nation ha[d] made a total resumption of rights, which they had certainly never before ventured to think of” and it “appear[ed] probable” that “the Assembly [would discuss]...a declaration of rights.” 86 Such discourse surrounding rights for the French people, highlights the major transformation which was occurring in France during this time, including a re-evaluation of the king’s power. Both Jefferson’s and Lafayette’s optimism was unfounded, however, as the National Assembly was not analogous its American counterpart, and thus did not meet the Marquis’ expectations.

Despite criticism of the nobility, Lafayette’s experiences in the Revolution, may have led him to believe that the nobler class would once again lead a revolution. Although ostensibly rebelling colonies did not have an aristocratic class, leading revolutionaries, and proponents of natural rights, were wealthy land owners and slaveholders who exercised considerable power, both during and after the American Revolution, and thus may be considered American aristocracy. While Lafayette “envisioned the National Assembly as a French equivalent for the American Continental Congress” there were many crucial differences.87 One major difference centered on the makeup of this group. As this political body was constituted primarily of members of the Third Estate, that is the common people, as well as “liberal-leaning nobles” it was surmised by Lafayette that the National Assembly could mirror the Continental Congress as he hoped.88 Factional politics as well as personal interests, however, prevented this parallel from being realized. In fact, “apart from Lafayette, there were but a handful of Freemasons dedicated

to social reform, and...French notables did not gather in Versailles to pledge their lives, fortunes, and sacred honour, but to preserve the first and enhance the second." This opposition between the natural rights advocated for by Lafayette and the privileges of the elite, did not deter him from being vocal concerning the reforms he saw as necessary. As Leepson states, “Lafayette spoke out strongly in the Assembly for religious freedom for Protestants, for criminal law reforms, and against those in the upper classes who had accumulated wealth by exploiting the lower classes.”90 This emphasis on preventing further exploitation of lower classes by members of the nobility put him into direct opposition with members of his own class. It was Lafayette’s failure to judge the French political landscape, however, which would directly lead to negative consequences. While many historians have focused on the changes which the Declaration of the Rights of the Man and of the Citizen underwent as radical revolutionaries began to direct the course of the revolution, one pivotal phrase in this document must be closely examined. As Michael Alpaugh argues, Lafayette through his failure to fully define “resistance to oppression” in his declaration, introduced a phrase which would directly contribute to the increased radicalization of the revolution.

Michael Alpaugh, in his recent article underscores the disparity between Lafayette’s intentions and the consequences of introducing the phrase “resistance to oppression” into his Declaration. While Lafayette believed in the importance of such a provision, his failure to provide operational definitions for ‘resistance’ and ‘oppression, during such a tumultuous time directly influenced the increasingly radical course of the revolution. Such an oversight occurred as a result of Lafayette’s failure to gauge the political climate of France, as well as his

89 Unger, Lafayette, 218.
90 Leepson, Idealist General, 128.
presentation of his declaration “when the exigencies of mid-July 1789,” such as the fall of the Bastille, “likely pushed Lafayette’s rhetoric to more radical ends.” 91 It may be argued that Lafayette could not have known the consequences which would stem from the inclusion of this provision, however, his experience in the American Revolution provided sufficient evidence that phrases from the republican lexicon were directly translatable into action. The inclusion of the importance of this phrase must be viewed in context of the period and Lafayette’s continued adherence to republican ideals despite the political climate. As Aplaugh argues, “the exceptionalness of Lafayette’s proposal can be seen when comparing his declaration with the drafts of his contemporaries,” as “few…ventured beyond rights of individual liberty and representative government to grant freedoms to petition or assemble.” 92 In this way, Lafayette’s position as an Enlightenment thinker rather than politician is underscored, as though he sought to enact positive, his adherence to American principles did not allow for an evaluation of how such ideology would be received by French citizens and revolutionaries, or how they would be put into practice. This is best displayed in a pamphlet which Aplaugh cites, in which “an anonymous [author] protested that ‘in all political associations men are forced to renounce part of their natural rights’ so ‘particular rights can cede to the general will.’” 93 The ‘general will’ was a term in the French lexicon which directly conflicted with American ideals regarding individual liberty. Lafayette’s negligence in introducing a phrase which had no place in the French lexicon in the form of “Article II” of the ratified Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen” did not have the positive consequences which Lafayette expected from his experiences in the

92 Alpaugh, “Resistance to Oppression,” 579.
American Revolution. As Aplaugh argues, this phrase as interpreted by the French populace “not only justified past uprisings but also delineated a potential future for revolutionary popular action. This interpretation, provided by Aplaugh, serves as a reminder that while Lafayette may have been considered a reformer by 1792, his actions while a revolutionary directly affected the course of the revolution.

Lafayette’s introduction of his Declaration coincided with a change in the National Assembly as it occurred after it “declared itself…in effect a constitutional convention,” and drastic changes to his vision, although ‘resistance to oppression’ remained.94 While Lafayette’s declaration would have unintended consequences, in 1789 his moderate position placed him squarely between “Royalist critics on the Right” and “Republican critics on the Left.”95 Unlike in America, where American revolutionaries came to despise the British king, public sentiment was not in line with this view of the king as a tyrant. As Lane states, despite the extreme hardships they faced, “the commoners loved their king” and “considered him the father of the nation, who would come to their aid when they were in distress and who would protect them from the abuses of the nobility.”96 Therefore, while republican ideals concerning liberty and equality had permeated some levels of French society, not all citizens, and not all reformers, viewed removing the monarchy as a necessity. Lafayette himself had sought to use the monarchy to enact change, before he fell out of favour due to the embracing of what the king viewed as radical ideals. For example, upon Lafayette’s return to France he “spoke to the king about social reform, religious freedom, and his other socially progressive notions” while “the king paid little heed.”97 The lack

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95 Kramer, *Two Worlds*, 34.
96 Lane, *General and Madame de Lafayette*, 111.
of interest exhibited by the king turned to distrust as Lafayette began to gain more power in political circles that advocated for liberal principles and thus threatened his power. This created a rift between Lafayette and the monarchy, as although he “believed that the monarchy had a major part to play in popular government, he began to lose favor” and though “he was allowed to keep his rank of general…was deprived of command.” This separation from the monarchy did not put him in a popular position with many other radicals, many of whom wished to establish a republic, free of monarchical control. It was under these circumstances that the Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen was presented, and thus many changes were made in order to accommodate opposing factions. Therefore, although Lafayette presented his draft of the Declaration on July 10, and it was approved on August 26, it was not as Lafayette had envisioned it.

Chapter III | Tide of Revolution and a Clash of Ideologies

The Marquis de Lafayette’s integral role in many events of the French Revolution underscores his intention to successfully transfer what he had learned in the American Revolution as well as from French philosophy to France, to enact reform. Although brief, Lafayette played a key role in the revolution from 1789 to 1791, at a time when the revolution was growing increasingly radical. In discussing the place and significance of Lafayette’s ideology to his involvement in the French Revolution, one must examine the role of French philosophy, which contributed to the complexities surrounding this revolution. Not only did France have differing political circumstances, leading to increased divisiveness, but

98 Lane, General and Madame de Lafayette, 105.
philosophical terms carried differing, and often opposing, operational definitions in France, which prevented a direct translation of the American model. For instance, in terms of liberty and freedom, which were two of Lafayette’s foundational principles, the contrasting American and French definitions could not be integrated to form a coherent ideology. As Susan Dunn explains, “for Americans like [James] Madison, liberty meant the right of individuals to be autonomous, to act as they wished…and pursue their self-interest and happiness as they conceived them.”99 Due to Lafayette’s experience in America and his utilization of American principles into his Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen, it may be argued that Lafayette viewed freedom and liberty in this same manner. This placed him in direct opposition to the prevailing French definition of freedom, such as that proposed by Jean-Jacques Rousseau, under which “true freedom could only belong to citizens who were able to suppress their private wills, sacrifice their private, selfish interests for the good of all, and consciously choose the common good over their own desires.”100 The drastic contrast evident in these opposing descriptions helps to explain what many historians have viewed as a failure on the Marquis de Lafayette’s part to control the revolution and to successfully transfer his ideals. While he carried with him an amalgam of both French and American philosophy due to his experiences, these differing ideologies were not always compatible, and his American ideals often took precedent. This conflict in his ideals translated directly into his roles in the French Revolution and help to explain the many difficulties he faced. By strictly adhering to his principles, he faced opposition from many of the primary factions in the French Revolution, eventually leading to his increased isolation. In terms of the American Revolution, his love of liberty and his zeal ingratiated him with prominent American revolutionaries, allowing him to gain their respect, and eventually

100 Dunn, *Sister Revolutions*, 63.
military status as a general. In France, his position was much more ambiguous, as his republican ideology was largely incompatible with the philosophy that shaped events of the French Revolution. This stemmed primarily from his introduction of the Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen which provided a constitution for France, and allowed him to gain power among revolutionary leaders.

Following Lafayette’s presentation of the Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen to the National Assembly, he took on many roles that serve to highlight the impact of his ideology on the increasing difficulty of controlling the Revolution from Paris. As Leepson states, “in the summer and fall of 1789, he had become the most powerful man in the city – if not the nation,” as “[he] was,…the city’s chief judge, the head of police, and the military governor.”

His powerful positions in Paris placed him in exceedingly difficult circumstances as his ideals blinded him to the inherent complexities of the revolution. As Serge Bokobza makes clear,

Lafayette’s lack of political prudence is best exemplified by Lafayette’s organization and participation in the Festival of the Federation…of 14 July 1790. On that day, Louis XVI…attended a ceremony where the General, in the name of the people, the army, and the Constituent Assembly, swore an oath of fidelity to the Nation, to the Constitution, and to the King.

As Lafayette believed that revolutionary change could only occur by way of enacting a constitution, with the King continuing to play an integral role, he viewed this event as an unqualified success. In light of the way in which such a display was received, however, it becomes clear that Lafayette once more adhered to his ideals without being aware of conflicting political views. As Bokobza further states, major political parties on both sides of the spectrum

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did not view this event in a positive light, as “Royalists dreaded having a larger undisciplined popular in Paris,” and Jacobins…feared this festival could end the readiness of the masses for changes.” In this way it becomes clear that Lafayette’s participation in this event was marred by his adherence to Enlightenment ideals which were heavily influenced by American republicanism. A continued reliance on these ideals was highly problematic, as the French political landscape differed so dramatically from the of America, as to prevent the facilitation of the American model. As Unger concisely states, “France had no American citizens to support a Constitution, and without them, both Lafayette and his dream of constitutional rule were doomed.” This major oversight stemmed directly from Lafayette’s experience with the American Revolution and its associated political processes. Prior to declaring their independence, American Revolutionaries underwent an extensive petitioning process which was common practice among British citizens who wished to air their grievances. In France, such a process was viewed unfavourably, and “while Americans produced an innovative Constitution and Bill of Rights only after long months of methodical, disciplined, and peaceable nationwide debate, in France impulsive revolutionaries ridiculed such a slow, orderly process.” This major difference underscores the inconsistency between Lafayette’s continued reliance on a dual ideology, heavily influenced by the American political process, and the political realities of Revolutionary France. The Festival of Federation, intended to be a display of positive change, resulted in Lafayette being viewed with increasing suspicion. The following year, Lafayette’s other dual ideology, that of duty to the state and commitment to natural rights would come into conflict, leading to his position becoming untenable.

104 Unger, Lafayette, 270.
105 See From Resistance to Revolution by Pauline Maier for more information regarding this tradition.
106 Dunn, Sister Revolutions, 115.
The so-called Massacre du Champs-de-Mars was a catalyst for Lafayette’s increasing isolation following this event, as well as his forced distancing from further events of the French Revolution. Opposition began with the flight of the king from Varennes in June of 1791. As Lafayette recounts in his 1825 Memoir, “[he], in consequence of being a known friend of the royal family, though a promoter of the Revolution, fell under the suspicion of the populace” and “was suspected of being privy to the King’s flight.”107 This recollection of preceding events of the massacre sheds light on how Lafayette’s moderate position between radical revolutionaries and royalists became increasing untenable. This was primarily due to the opposing nature of these two political standpoints, as well as the power he was granted during this time in attempting to mediate between all of the various factions involved. With the king’s position becoming exceedingly precarious, Lafayette was not able to achieve his primary objective which “had been to unite all revolutionary factions around a constitutional monarchy that embraced revolutionary values of equality and freedom.”108 Lafayette was called upon to put down resistance amongst the populace stemming from growing unrest concerning economic circumstances. In doing so, he isolated himself from the major factions as “royalists condemned him for…tolerating mob demonstrations”, while “‘radicals attacked him for quelling popular demonstrations.”109 Lafayette’s difficult position between these two opposing factions became untenable in 1791, as in “quelling” such a demonstration, he acted as a soldier and enforcer who obeyed the will of the state, rather than as a reformer and revolutionary.

108 Dunn, Sister Revolutions, 15.
109 Dunn, Sister Revolutions, 15.
Reminiscent of the Boston Massacre of 1770, the Massacre du Champs-du-Mars of 1791 and its varying interpretations, provided a catalyst for increased extremism of the populace against royalists and the royal family, eventually contributing to the Reign of Terror. As Lafayette played a key role as general of the National Guard, this event led to “his popularity [being] completely destroyed…when he ordered the Guard to fire on demonstrators demanding the abolition of the monarchy.”¹¹⁰ In his article on the subject, historian David Andress discusses the significance of the this event as well as the place of social conflict in the many narratives surrounding it. While Andress provides many varying interpretations, the most crucial statement contains evidence as to the ongoing class conflict that characterized the French Revolution and which is particularly evident in the massacre. Andress states that “the massacre as retold by some of its contemporaries was an exercise in the suppression of the popular will by a violent and oppressive elite.”¹¹¹ This interpretation sheds light on Lafayette’s position as his role as a soldier and thus oppressor of the “popular will” put him in direct conflict with his other roles as revolutionary and human rights advocate. As such, it was this event that “turned public opinion against [Lafayette]” and “put an end to [his] reputation as a patriote.”¹¹² In this way, this event gains significance, as it demonstrates the clarity of his duty and obligation as a soldier of the state as well as his ability to accept reform as long as it did not conflict with this duty by involving violence. Lafayette’s situation as soldier of the state and moderate reformer led to a further erosion of his status and provided no alternative but to flee from France, with the onset of war with Austria.

¹¹⁰ Dunn, _Sister Revolutions_, 15.
Events surrounding France’s decision to go to war with Austria in 1792, made it necessary for Lafayette to utilize his military experience, thus further displaying his adherence to the constitution he had helped implement. The decision to declare war during a revolution may appear paradoxical, due to the complex factors intrinsic in a revolution, and detrimental to cohesive foreign policy, however, many viewed war as leading to positive consequences France. Lafayette viewed such a military solution in positive terms as “fighting foreign powers, [he] believed, would promote nationalism, heal political divisions, and give the government more power to maintain stability.” Unfortunately radical revolutionaries, including Duport, continued to view the king with suspicion, and exceedingly as a barrier to revolutionary reform. Furthermore, Lafayette’s emphasis on a “defensive posture to keep the poorly organized and undisciplined French army from being utterly defeated” seemed “to radical revolutionaries” to display a “lack of devotion to the revolutionary cause.” This conflict marked the final break between Lafayette and other, more radical, revolutionaries as the start of the war directly coincided with the forcible removal of the king. In the end, “the war, instead of increasing the king’s power as Lafayette had hoped, increased suspicions that the king was a traitor and wanted France to lose the war,” which “was declared in April 1792.” John Quincy Adams, in his biography of Lafayette, provides perhaps the most concise description of what the war and the eventual execution of the king meant for the Marquis. He states that “this revolution, thus accomplished, annihilated the constitution, the government, and the cause for which Lafayette had contended” as “the people of France, by their acquiescence, a great portion of them by direct

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approval, confirmed and sanctioned the abolition of the monarchy." Stated in this way, it becomes clear that Lafayette’s dualistic philosophy, which had allowed for both monarchy and elements of republican ideology, the increasingly radical position of his fellow reformers, and the desires of the people and of radical revolutionaries for a complete break with the past, made his position untenable. This is most apparent in examining his decision to flee from France as public sentiment fully turned against him as his adherence to a moderate path became impossible.

A new definition of freedom, one that emphasized rule by the people instead of a sovereign, in direct opposition to Lafayette’s constitutional aims, came to characterize events following the execution of the king. This “culminat[ed] a year later in the Reign of Terror,” and as “law, order, and constitutionality fell victim to the increasing violence…so did Lafayette’s dreams for establishing liberty and constitutional order in France.” In maintaining a moderate position, Lafayette came to view liberty in a very different way than did radical reformers. Such a position is in a sense ironic, as such a “movement toward terror would be largely justified as a result of…natural rights” being “violated.” In this way, the revolution may not be viewed as has been popularly depicted, that is bloody anarchy, but rather as a principled revolution led by radicals. In his 1792 letter to his wife, upon his forced exile from Paris Lafayette displays a modicum of consciousness regarding the discrepancy inherent in being a constitutional monarchist who adhered to republican ideals. Lafayette wrote,

I have, to the last, upheld the Constitution, to which I swore allegiance. You know that my heart would have been republican if my reason had not given me this shade of royalism,

116 Adams, Life of General Lafayette, 149.
and if my fidelity to my oaths and to the national will had not made me a defender of the constitutional rights of the king.\textsuperscript{119}

This admission displays as many historians have asserted, both naivety and self-interest, as despite Lafayette’s consciousness concerning the difficulties associated with attempting to maintain often conflicting ideologies, he adhered to his principles. Furthermore, Lafayette’s failure to fully gauge the political situation, and the conflicting nature of individual liberty and duty to the general will, prevented Lafayette from being successful. Aspects of his Declaration did survive, which closely echoed Lafayette’s American influence as in the “rights of liberty, property, security, and resistance to oppression” which provide an important historical precedent as they had not existed in such a way in France.\textsuperscript{120} As has been noted, however such rights, primarily “resistance to oppression” contributed to the radical nature of the second phase of the French Revolution, as radicals sought to protect such rights. In this way, Lafayette’s assertion that he fell victim to “a persecution which was begun by the terrorists, against all those who were constituents, or considered as well affected to monarchy,” must be re-examined to allow for his own oversight.\textsuperscript{121} For many this resulted in their death, while for Lafayette, it resulted in a degrading prison sentence. As Jack R. Censer suggests in his article detailing the recent historiography of the Reign of Terror, while there are many scholarly interpretations regarding the start of the Revolution in 1789, and the events which followed the execution of the King in 1792, there is agreement among historians as to these events constituting differing phases of the Revolution. Placed in this context, it becomes clear that while Lafayette may be considered a


\textsuperscript{121} Lafayette, \textit{Memoirs of General Lafayette}, 271.
revolutionary due to his involvement in establishing a constitution and bill of rights in 1789, by 1792 Lafayette was, by definition, a moderate reformer. This is not due to the popularized depiction of the Reign of Terror as bloody mob violence, nor a conflict of ideologies, but rather in the way in which Enlightenment ideology was understood. As recounted by Censer, historian Dan Edelstein “argues that the Enlightenment had created a natural law position, which claimed to have little necessity for formal laws and government.” In this way it becomes clear that Lafayette, due to his duty to the state which required such institutions to be upheld, directly conflicted with his ability to follow French enlightenment principles regarding natural rights to their more radical ends.

IV | Conclusion: The Hero of Two Worlds Reconsidered

Many historians consider the Marquis de Lafayette to be the “hero of two worlds,” a title which has been used by Lloyd Kramer for his recent biography, and one which continues to be perpetuated by historians. This title has been bestowed on the Marquis due to his participation in both the American Revolution and the French Revolution of 1789, and has aided in the transformation of the Marquis from a man to a symbol of the American ideal. In mythologizing the Marquis, topics such as his friendship with George Washington and his 1825 tour of America have been often researched, as they speak to his military contributions in the American Revolution. When one delves more deeply into his life however, complexities arise concerning his unfavourable position in the French Revolution which shift importance to republican

ideology and raise questions as to the ways in which historians have represented him. Historians have interpreted his life and character in a multitude of ways, some embracing extremes of reverence or condemnation in discussing the man and the myth. This has been due primarily to a propensity to emphasize either his role as a soldier or as an intellectual and political thinker, allowing for varying and sometimes opposing interpretations of the Marquis’ character. For instance, in emphasizing his positive contributions to American independence, one may view him as a war hero, while his moderate position and eventual disfavour in the French Revolution allow for some to characterize his political involvement as naïve. In this latter revolution, conflict arose between his sense of duty to the state which came out of his role as a soldier, and his republican ideals, which prevented him from joining his fellow radical revolutionaries. In attempting to create an amalgam from conflicting definitions of the republican principles of liberty and freedom by adopting the perspectives of both French *philosophes* and American revolutionaries, Lafayette gained a unique perspective which set him apart from other members of his class and French radicals. Tracing the evolution of such an amalgam of republican ideals, which were paradoxically tinged with a shade of royalism, allow for a reinterpretation of the Marquis as a man capable of complex thought, which at times was deeply flawed.

Born into an aristocratic French family in 1757, the Marquis de Lafayette’s education and events surrounding his childhood provided the foundation for his republican views. As a child taught to uphold his chivalric and aristocratic heritage and defend the honour of ancestors, including his father, fallen at the hands of the British, young Gilbert was instilled with a sense of military duty which would continue throughout his life. Alongside this emphasis on the military pursuits expected of a young man of his class and family background, were intellectual
teachings, which the Marquis in his 1779 Memoir attributed to the formation of his early republican ideals. This was most evident in his depiction of the perfect horse throwing its rider upon perceiving the whip, which displayed both youthful rebelliousness and an early understanding of the republican principles of liberty and freedom. This rebellious yet informed attitude would come to characterize the young Marquis and his later studies at the College de Plessis, in which he was enrolled. At this prestigious institution, Lafayette trained to be a knight, and was acquainted with teachings of *philosophes*, such as Newton, Locke and Montesquieu. Primed with the ideas of such prominent philosophers and longing for glory, the American Revolution presented a welcome opportunity which would further not only his military pursuits but allow for the continued evolution of his republican ideals.

The Marquis de Lafayette was introduced to the American Revolution and its associated rhetoric, in 1777 at a dinner in Metz. Here, abstract ideas of justice, liberty and honour which characterized his childhood, were honed as the enlightenment principle of natural rights was emphasized alongside principles of Freemasonry. Ideals presented at this important meeting deeply interested the Marquis who viewed the plight of the American colonists as a worthy cause as they sought liberty from the tyrannical British government. While such a struggle resonated with the Marquis due to his teachings and family background, American revolutionaries, aware of their tenuous position against such a powerful entity, sought foreign aid. This manifested primarily in informal aid from the French government by way of playwright Beaumarchais as well as foreign soldiers. It was in this capacity that the Marquis fulfilled his military potential, as American revolutionaries saw in him not a self-interested mercenary but a zealous volunteer. In correspondence concerning the Marquis, as well as his agreement with Silas Deane, which
guaranteed his assistance and position in the Continental Army, both practical and ideological factors are considered. The reputation and status as a member of the nobility is discussed, but greater emphasis is placed on his character, primarily his love for liberty. This displays the importance which American revolutionaries placed on ideological factors while in the midst of their war effort, and their alignment with the Marquis’ principles. The youthful enthusiasm which is suggested in this agreement and his voyage to the American colonies, where he would display an ability to learn from and adapt to his surroundings, would prove pivotal in not only ingratiating himself with American revolutionaries but in furthering his republican ideology.

Discussing the Marquis de Lafayette’s participation in the American Revolution focusing primarily on the evolution of his ideology presents a challenge due to the nature of sources available. As the American Revolution was a military conflict that called upon the Marquis in his capacity as a soldier, the majority of the correspondence concerning this period focuses primarily on battle plans and the Marquis’ military achievements. By sifting through the information available however, information can be gleaned as to the continuation of the Marquis’ intellectual pursuits amidst such a time of conflict. This is primarily shown in a handful of lines in his correspondence, during which he takes the time to refer to intellectual pursuits including his role as a “philosopher” when writing to his wife. Perhaps one of the most interesting pieces of evidence for the importance of the American Revolution on Lafayette’s thinking, occurs as a shift that is evident in the way in which he views both America and the war as he becomes fully acquainted with the country and its people.
In the Vicomte de Mauroy’s memoir of 1776 concerning his voyage to America, the Marquis appears naive as he extolls the virtues of America and its people, including the republican virtues of liberty and freedom. In the Marquis’ 1779 Memoir, this naivety is tempered, and as he describes the causes of the revolution, it becomes clear that he has internalized American rhetoric. Citing the necessity of American independence in a way that echoes accounts of American revolutionaries, as well as conceding to the division present amongst the American colonists themselves, the Marquis displays an ability to shift his position based on his experiences. Furthermore, this line of thinking displays the way in which the Marquis viewed the revolution not only as an opportunity to avenge his father’s death, thus highlighting his hatred of the British, but also as justified on an intellectual and philosophical level. This nuanced perspective displays the malleability of certain aspects of the Marquis’ ideals while adhering to the key tenants of republican ideals. This becomes especially clear when one re-examines the Marquis’ friendship with founding father and American General, George Washington, in terms of slavery.

Following the American Revolution, the Marquis de Lafayette, embraced both Enlightenment principles of natural rights as expressed by prominent *philosophes* and the resistance to oppression as outlined in the American Declaration of Independence, displaying a blossoming commitment to human rights by firmly opposing slavery. Under republican rhetoric, slavery with its inherent oppression and therefore restriction of universal rights, contradicts the fundamental principles of American republican ideals as defined by the Declaration of Independence, and yet the institution was supported by many of the American founding fathers. This was due to the way in which the Declaration of Independence, despite its focus on rights
and opposition to tyranny, was not written to be universal, but to justify the revolution it was written for. This distinction, as well as the Marquis de Lafayette’s previous acquaintance with the principles of natural rights, which were in theory to be extended beyond white republicans, once more put him in opposition to his tutor as George Washington did not extend republican rhetoric to antislavery sentiment. In re-examining the relationship between Lafayette and Washington in this way, it becomes clear that despite the mythologizing associated with these figures and their wartime friendship, they did not always share the same views, nor did they interpret republican ideology in the same way. As is evident in Washington’s correspondence to Lafayette concerning the Frenchman’s plan to enact emancipation on a Cayenne plantation, Washington admired the Marquis for enacting such a plan as it attested to his character, but did not wish to use his power and influence to enact similar change in America.

The Marquis’ adherence to republican principles in terms of antislavery efforts, presents the first concrete instance of Lafayette applying an amalgam of both French and American philosophy to a differing context, as he would in the French Revolution. While he maintained correspondence with Washington concerning the matter, he was also in contact with prominent French antislavery advocate the Marquis de Condorcet, who no doubt influenced the Marquis’ thinking. In this instance, by utilizing principles of both American revolutionaries and the teachings of his contemporaries and French philosophers, the Marquis was able to enact positive change and further his humanitarian efforts. In the case of transferring what he had learned to France however, the complexities concerning divisive politics and other internal factors separating France from America, prevented the transference of Lafayette’s ideals from being successful.
The failure of the Marquis to transfer what he had learned in America, coupled with French philosophy, has often been discussed by historians. Due to the Marquis’ successful military role in the American Revolution, many historians have attributed his failure in France and eventual disfavour to his character, referring to his naivety and misunderstanding of fundamental differences between France and America. In viewing subsequent events in this way, one may argue that they gain a sense of inevitability that does not account for the complexities inherent in the French Revolution. To fully understand the Marquis’ role in this politically divisive era, one must acknowledge fundamental differences between France and America. These include France’s status as an Old World power directly controlled by an absolutist monarch, the existence of a stratified society, and a lack of fear concerning tyrannical rule. The argument must be made, however, that while the Marquis de Lafayette was conscious of these inherent differences, he displayed a lack of experience and a blindness to the complexities of the French political landscape. While historian Lloyd Kramer, as has been previously noted, dubs Lafayette a “political theorist”, the Marquis did not have the necessary qualifications to be considered a politician. This crucial difference helps to explain the flawed execution of Lafayette’s ideas as he had often undertaken the role as political observer but had never directly participated in politics until he was made a member of the National Assembly. While some excuse may thus be made for Lafayette’s naivety, such inexperience convinced the Marquis that the National Assembly, composed primarily of self-interested members of the aristocracy, could be analogous to American Congress. While American revolutionaries may be considered nobility in all but title, the idealistic terms of the American republican lexicon, including ‘liberty’ and ‘freedom’, were not interpreted in the same manner in France. Through inexperience and
surrounding himself with like-minded individuals, who did not challenge his ideals, as exemplified in the “Society of Thirty”, Lafayette alienated himself from other revolutionaries.

The “Society of Thirty” allowed for a forum to discuss political ideas based upon the principles of American republicanism found in the American Constitution of 1789. As a member of the National Assembly, Lafayette, working closely with Thomas Jefferson and using the American Declaration of Independence as a model, drafted a constitution for France. This pivotal connection with one of America’s founding fathers, in drafting the Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen, allowed for a transference of American rhetoric within limits. As suggested by Thomas Jefferson and seen as necessary by Lafayette, fundamental modifications were made to the American model, which resulted in France’s Declaration including not a complete republic but a constitutional monarchy. This major difference between the two documents placed Lafayette in a tenuous position as his moderate attitude to reform, which did not call for France’s complete transformation into a republic, further alienated him from other more radical reformers. While the introduction of the Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen remains an important contribution to France’s history, as it instituted many rights that had once not existed in France, including ‘resistance to oppression.’ While Lafayette intended this document to bring about positive reform, such a phrase proved incendiary, due primarily to Lafayette’s failure to provide an operational definition. In this way, the contradictions inherent in Lafayette’s ideology, prevented him once more gauging the political landscape, as it may be inferred that he expected French citizens to understand this natural right and others like it, based on his experience in the American Revolution. Thus, while aspects of Lafayette’s Declaration may have been changed as the revolution became increasingly radical, the maintenance and
utilization of this phrase, serves as a testament to Lafayette’s lack of forethought. Following his political participation as moderate reformer in the National Assembly, Lafayette was called upon in a conflicting capacity, which required him to be dutiful to the state.

By the end of 1790, Lafayette’s position in the French Revolution had shifted dramatically as he was no longer just a moderate reformer but the primary figure in maintaining order in Paris. This called upon his sense of duty as a soldier and conflicted with his role as reformer and revolutionary, placing him at odds with fellow revolutionaries and the common people. His role as General of the National Guard began with a positive outlook as Lafayette hoped through his organization of the Fête de la Fédération, which allowed for oaths to be made by both the king and the rest of the guard, that the Constitution would be upheld. Various political factions viewed this monumental occasion with unease, as royalists feared an outbreak of unrest from the large gathering of the common people, and some revolutionaries feared it signaled a reaffirmation of the king’s power. Thus, while the upholding of the constitution presented an opportunity for positive reform, popular dissent remained as France’s economic situation continued to negatively effect the common people. Viewing the king as the cause of their distress, a crowd formed at Champs du Mars in protest, and Lafayette ordered the National Guard to fire, in an event reminiscent of the Boston Massacre. The Massacre de Champs du Mar led to Lafayette’s political downfall as his duty to the state required him to adhere to his moderate principles, rather than become radical. Subsequent events, including his insistence that France adopt a defensive posture in the war with Austria in 1792, based on his prior military experience, further alienated him from radical revolutionaries, and led to his eventual irrelevance in the revolution that he had attempted to control. With the death of the king, and the beginning
of the Reign of Terror, Lafayette recognized the untenability of his position and made the
decision to flee France. Lafayette’s prominent position in many key events of the French
Revolution, as well as his failure to transfer key tenets of American republican ideals to France
are often viewed as a sign of naivety that was not tempered by his experiences. When one places
all of these events into context however, it becomes apparent that coinciding factors including
the complexities inherent in the French Revolution as well as Lafayette’s adherence to his
beliefs, attachment to the state, and relatively late political experience prevented Lafayette from
directing the revolution in a more moderate direction.

Lafayette’s participation in the French Revolution, ideologically speaking, allows for a
more critical analysis of a figure who has often be mythologized. This critical interpretation
contrasts sharply with many more favourable interpretations, a discrepancy which may not be
understood as a paradox but rather the recognition that Lafayette was a man, and not a myth and
thus was flawed. Contrasting interpretations stem primarily from differences between accounts
of Lafayette’s participation in the American Revolution, wherein Lafayette is revered for his
leadership qualities and the expertise which he had gained, and accounts of the French
Revolution, wherein he displays political inexperience. Often shown to be naïve and idealistic,
and too reliant on American rhetoric, such a conclusion serves to aid, rather than hinder a
biographical account of Lafayette. By examining his position in 1789 and important events of the
years leading up to his eventual downfall, it becomes clear that Lafayette’s ideology directly
informed how he viewed, and participated in, events of the French Revolution following the
introduction of the Rights of Man. This dual ideology prevented Lafayette from succeeding in
bringing his desired reforms to France, as his experiences in the American Revolution, and
participation in the first stage of the French Revolution, wherein he supported a constitutional monarchy, did not allow Lafayette to precipitate the more radical phases of the revolution, nor how his rhetoric would be used. Although he failed in his original mission, due to the complexities surrounding the French Revolution and his adherence to a problematic amalgam of ideals, the importance of his political and intellectual involvement must not be understated. By examining the development of the Marquis’ republican ideals, it becomes clear that he was not only important in his role as a soldier, but as an Enlightenment thinker. While a substantial amount of important research has been conducted focusing on Lafayette’s role as a soldier and hero of the American Revolution, more research needs to be done concerning his role as an Enlightenment thinker and political reformer.
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