

## "My Dear Marquis': Washington, Lafayette, and the Coming of the French Revolution"

Describing Washington as the "father of his country" is as trite as it is true. Washington *was* the "indispensable man" in the founding of the United States, and it is impossible to imagine our country without him. He began the war that redefined the British Empire in North America. This, in turn, led to a change in British colonial policy that, combined with colonial responses, ended in the American Revolution. He led the Continental Army during that conflict and, while there were other generals and other armies fighting for independence as well, his victories at Trenton and Yorktown, no less than his retreat from Long Island and perseverance at Valley Forge, solidified him as the leading figure of the revolution. Resigning his commission he returned to private life, an action which only further increased the esteem in which he was held.

Throughout this time, Washington acquired two families. The first of these was included in his marriage to Martha Dandridge Custis, a wealthy widow who brought a dignified yet affable manner and two young children, the four-year old Jackie and two-year old Patsy, to accompany her eighteen thousand acres. Patsy would die at seventeen and Jackie at twenty-seven, yet the family connection remained strong. Jackie fathered two children that Washington would help raise. To these he passed on a wealth of advice on education, morals, marriage, and money.

A second family was the inner circle of officers and aides that served with Washington during the war. This family included generals Charles Lee and Horatio Gates, Nathanael Greene and Henry Knox as well as aides John Laurens, Joseph Reed and Alexander Hamilton.(1) Within this family there was more dissension -- because there were bigger egos. These men shared the worst of times with Washington, and the relationships showed the strain. Laurens and Greene were killed in the war, and Lee and Gates became rivals. Reed fell out of favor as he was an ally of Lee. Only the relationships with Hamilton and Knox survived intact. Such is the effect of war on families.

Yet of all the relationships formed by Washington during the war, none proved as familial as that formed with a young, handsome Frenchman. The Marquis de Lafayette was the highest ranking foreign officer to serve with the American forces during the revolution. He joined Washington's command in the summer of 1777, was wounded at Brandywine, endured the winter at Valley Forge, and fought at Yorktown. In between, he found time to return to France to rally support for the American cause.(2) Throughout, he and Washington developed a relationship that was as intimate as any Washington permitted. Lafayette had lost his father at two and his mother at twelve. He joined the army at fourteen and met Washington five years later. Lafayette was immediately, and overwhelmingly, impressed. It was not just that Lafayette was young; he had lived and seen much before meeting Washington. Lafayette had married well and was, after all, a noble in the court of Louis XVI. But he had lacked a family; his life had been without a figure of the *size* of Washington. The impression was immediate, powerful, and long lasting. Two years later, Lafayette named his firstborn son George Washington Lafayette.

As any good son learns from his father, and as any good father hopes his son follows in his footsteps, so the relationship between Washington and Lafayette developed. The largest specific context linking the two was revolution. Both were integral forces in wars against their kings. Both sought to create a country where liberty was revered, yet

both hoped to do so with a minimum of bloodshed. Each recognized that in serving the cause of liberty, they were a part of something larger than themselves, and both knew, and accepted, the risks. Lafayette would come to understand this more personally than Washington, but that is another story. Washington had the father's luxury of experience, and it was this he hoped to pass on to Lafayette after the American Revolution.

During *his* revolution, Washington had learned the lesson of patience. Always eager to deliver a decisive blow against the British, he knew he needed to bide his time and deliver that blow only when he was confident of victory. For example, he had wanted to attack the British immediately upon taking command of the American army at Cambridge in the summer of 1775. A more thoughtful general staff urged a less direct approach. His style became that of Fabius, the Roman general who fought a guerrilla war against Carthage in the third century. Washington also understood that the American Revolution had to proceed according to certain expectations. Deference to established civilian and political entities was paramount; the military was to be subordinate to the civilian. There was an understanding that a person, especially a general, ought not to assert himself too strongly for power. Ultimately, patience and a willingness not to assert oneself, were the lessons he passed on to Lafayette.

Washington was not a philosopher, not a person who articulated a specific world view, but to Lafayette, as well as to others, he set forth an ideal of behavior that was unmistakable. Virtue was the cornerstone of reputation. To act honorably -- to conduct oneself, especially in times of crisis, with integrity, was the fundamental litmus test of a person's character. The Greek Stoic philosopher Epictetus had written, "it is difficulties that show what men are." Whether Washington actually read this quotation is problematic. That he would have heartily approved of it if he had, is not. As Lafayette faced the greatest test of his life, Washington offered the guidance and counsel to equip him to "deserve success."<sup>(3)</sup>

In fact, following the American Revolution, much of the early correspondence between Washington and Lafayette was not exceptional. Virtually always referring to Lafayette as "my Dear Marquis," Washington had retired "Under the shadow of my own Vine and Fig-tree" and expected to spend some time putting his affairs, and Mount Vernon, in order. He had been away from home for eight years, and as a result, he could not accept Lafayette's generous offer to come to France, but instead argued that "this not being the case with you, come with Madame Lafayette and view me in my domestic walls . . . no man could receive you in them with more friendship and affection than I should do. . ." <sup>(4)</sup> Lafayette did, indeed, come to Mount Vernon, and Washington's friendship and affection were poured out as promised. Lafayette told his wife that he was ". . . reveling in the happiness of finding my dear general again; and you know me too well for me to need to describe to you what I felt."<sup>(5)</sup> To say that Lafayette adored Washington would not overestimate his feelings. To him, Washington was the epitome of greatness.

After Lafayette returned to France, the exchange of letters continued, and they generally revolved around mundane topics. Western lands, plans for new crops, Virginia hams, and livestock were often mentioned and exchanged. Occasionally the dialogue turned to European politics; Lafayette's tour of Europe provided Washington with the latest news, and allowed the two to speculate about trade policies. Updates on American politics and membership in the Society of the Cincinnati required several letters, all of which were gracious and affectionate. It seems Lafayette, for his part, could not write enough; on one

day, March 9, 1785, he sent Washington no less than four letters.(6)

The letters lose their cavalier tone gradually beginning in 1787. An Assembly of Notables had been called in France to assist Louis XVI and his finance minister Charles Alexandre Calonne in establishing a general tax which would, hopefully, alleviate the significant problems France was experiencing with its increasing national debt. Lafayette mentioned this in passing at first, and then gave a more detailed account of the proceedings to Washington in a later letter. While Washington was in the midst of his own governmental crisis, presiding over the Constitutional Convention in Philadelphia, he found time to encourage Lafayette to continue his work on a ". . . plan of toleration in religious matters." In a fatherly way, he also reminded Lafayette of the hazards of overwork and encouraged him to pace himself physically.(7)

Though France had certainly not yet reached a crisis, Lafayette nonetheless rued the distance between he and his mentor. "What is Become of the Happy Years, My Beloved General, when, before my Sentiments were formed, I Had time to model them after Your judgement!" he wrote during the sessions. Though he was optimistic, he knew the value of wise counsel, and Washington's letters had been coming far less frequently than he had hoped, or needed. "Your letters become More and More distant, and I Anxiously Wish for your Speedy Appointment to the Presidency, in order that You May Have a More Exact Notice of the Opportunities to Write to Me."(8) Finally, Washington did respond, but he was far too overwhelmed with his own affairs to give more than platitudes. He did offer the encouragement that he was in ". . . hope that the affairs of France are gradually sliding into a better state. Good effects may, and I trust will ensue, without any public convulsion," and latter adding somewhat more fretfully, "I hope your affairs in France will subside into a prosperous train without coming to any violent crisis." Lafayette was desperate for more. Passionately he responded, his letters often overlapping those of Washington, "The affairs of France are Come to a Crisis. . . I don't live one day without Grieving for this Hard Separation."(9)

Finally Washington had time to reflect, and when he did, he better realized the danger of the situation in France. He also realized that Lafayette needed advice. "I like not much the situation of affairs in France . . ." he began, and no doubt Lafayette read these lines finally convinced that Washington understood the gravity of the occasion. "If I were to advise," he continued, and certainly Lafayette recognized that Washington was somewhat constrained in offering advice due to his forthcoming role as President, "I would say that great moderation should be used on both sides." Ever the Stoic, ever the self-controlled man, Washington specifically cautioned Lafayette from ". . . running into extremes and prejudicing your cause." Patience was what was called for, claimed the man who had outlasted, rather than outfought, the British army. Washington sensed that ". . . such a spirit seems to be awakened in the Kingdom, as, if managed with extreme prudence, may produce a gradual and tacit Revolution much in favour of the subjects . . ." (10) Washington understood the power of prudence, of not making any great errors and trusting to Providence for the outcome. It was counsel Lafayette had heard from Washington before. Years earlier, when exchanging letters on religious turmoil in France, Washington called upon Lafayette to ". . . remember my dear friend, it is a part of the military art to reconnoitre & *feel* your way, before you engage too deeply -- More is oftentimes effected by regular approaches, than by an open assault: from the first too, you may make a good retreat -- from the latter (in case of repulse) it rarely happens.(11) Washington and

Lafayette had shared the American Revolution, and no doubt Washington knew Lafayette would understand the illustration. Patience, son, the father seemed to say.

Patient or not, Lafayette soon found his way into trouble. Having signed a petition expressing concern for prisoners held in the Bastille, he fell out of favor with the government. Friends of Washington, knowing his fondness for Lafayette, wrote to let him know that ". . . Lafayette has incurred the displeasure of his sovereign . . ." and notifying him of ". . . the disgrace as it is called of the Marquis."(12) Lafayette, himself, probably had written to apprise Washington of his unfortunate situation, as Washington referred to a letter he received from Lafayette that September. Unfortunately, as Washington was soon to be President, and Lafayette unpopular with Louis XVI, Washington had to be circumspect, knowing his letters would be read by the French government.(13) All was not bad news, however, as the ardent Francophile Jefferson elatedly passed on the news that "The Marquis de la Fayette is out of favor with the court, but high in favor with the nation."(14)

Lafayette's popularity stemmed from his willingness to support the Third Estate in demanding equal representation at the Estates-General, which had been called to meet following the failure of the Assembly of Notables. He had stood for election in Auvergne, where he was chosen despite opposition from some local nobility. Gouverneur Morris boasted that "Monsieur de la Fayette's since returned [to Paris] from his political Campaign in Auvergne, crowned with Success." His victory was not without its price, however, as the nobles sought to constrain Lafayette in a way that would cost him his popularity with the people. Jefferson was ". . . in great pain for the M. de la Fayette, his principles you know are clearly with the people, but having been elected for the noblesse of Auvergne they have laid him under express instructions to vote for the decision by orders & not persons." Jefferson concluded matter of factly, "this would ruin him."(15)

Events were moving quickly in France in the spring of 1789. By July the Bastille had fallen, a largely symbolic, but nonetheless significant moment, and American observers there could not help but remember the days preceding the American Revolution. The cause was *liberte*, and it was a cause identified with Washington. But not him only. His disciple had brought the ideals of freedom with him on his return from the United States, it seemed. Certainly, it was to Washington that "the nation at large attributes the Liberties they have assumed. . ." but also to ". . . the Character and Conduct of their distinguished Compatriot, the Marquis de la Fayette." It was the connection between the two, the relationship built in the snows at Valley Forge and the trenches at Yorktown. All of France, it seemed, ". . . contemplated with Rapture and with Admiration the happy result of his early Attachment to an illustrious Preceptor."(16)

Lafayette was at the center of things and, no doubt, he reflected on how his mentor had responded in similar situations. Washington made a career out of seeming to renounce power at the right time, and this was a lesson not lost on Lafayette. To Gouverneur Morris, Lafayette had said that "he was satiated with Power," and while all of France, it seemed looked to him for leadership, Lafayette sought to model his mentor. "Do not consider what I can do, I shall make no use of it," Lafayette wrote. "Do not consider what I have done, I want no compensation. Consider the public welfare, the well-being and liberty of my country, and, believe me, I shall decline no burden, no danger, provided that the moment calm is restored, I shall again become a private citizen." He had begun to even sound like Washington when taking up power.(17)

Indeed, throughout the early days of the French Revolution, Lafayette was reluctant to assert himself. This was not from fear, he had dispelled that notion long ago, but rather from an understanding of the nature of power and leadership. A leader did not insist upon taking power, his country would insist upon having him take it. Lafayette had learned that from Washington.(18) Washington, to be sure, understood the connection, though he was too modest to point it out. He realized that he and Lafayette were involved in momentous developments that overshadowed them both. These ". . . new and arduous scenes in which we have both lately been engaged," had caused them to lessen their correspondence to each other, but Washington underscored his feelings when he wrote to others. "The renovation on the French Constitution is indeed one of the most wonderful events in the history of Mankind," he boasted, "and the agency of the Marquis de la Fayette in high degree honorable to his character."(19) And to his mentor, he might have added, had discretion allowed.

Lafayette echoed these thoughts, but in the midst of turmoil, still missed his counselor. He only had time to quickly call to Washington's mind those "Affectionate and Respectful Sentiments that Are Never So well felt as in UnCommon Circumstances." Uncommon indeed. "How often, My Beloved General," he continued, "Have I wanted your wise Advices and friendly Support!" If Lafayette was too busy with revolution to elaborate on the debt he knew he owed Washington, his wife, who knew him best, was not. "Amidst the agitations of our revolution," she wrote, "I have always participated in the pleasure which Mr. de La Fayette found in following your footsteps, in observing, according to your example and your lessons, the means of serving his country, and in thinking with what satisfaction you would learn the effects and success of them."(20) If Washington was a man who lived his life mindful of what the world would think; Lafayette lived his mindful of what Washington would think.

Kinship between the American and French Revolutions was seen by many. Equally obvious was the role of Washington, and his influence on Lafayette. Lafayette was commander of the Paris National Guard, an equivalent in many respects of the colonial militia, and in that capacity had rescued the royal family from a mob that threatened their lives. He often used his position to act as mediator between Louis and the revolutionaries. Like Washington he was patient, a gradualist. He saw no need for rash measures; the French Revolution would have enough of them on its own. Self-control was called for, and Lafayette supplied it, consequently falling out of favor with one side of the other. "Your ancient friend finds himself at the head of a revolution, it is indeed a very fortunate circumstance for the State, [but] very little so for himself," wrote fellow revolutionary, Cardinal Marquis La Luzerne. "He has occasion for all the wisdom and prudence which he acquired [from you]." Fortunately, for both France and Lafayette, La Luzerne concluded, "he has hitherto proved himself worthy of his Master."(21)

Ironically, Lafayette had even learned to complain as Washington did. "Our Revolution is Getting on as Well as it Can With a Nation that Has Swalled [swallowed] up liberty all at one, and is still liable to Mistake licentiousness for freedom, " he began. He was coming to understand that in a revolution "Every thing has been destroyed and Not much New Building is Yet Above Ground," and as a result, "there is Much Room for Critics and Calumnies." He bemoaned the fact that "We still are Pestered By two parties," a situation Washington would learn also learn to regret, "the Aristocratic that is panting for a Counter Revolution, and the factious Which Aims and the division of the Empire." This

litany of complaining is not unlike Washington during his low points in the American Revolution, ruminating about the lack of support from Congress and divisions among the people. Still, like Washington, Lafayette ultimately remained optimistic for the cause concluding that ". . . upon the Whole this Revolution, in which Nothing will be wanting But Energy of Government just as it was in America Will . . . implant liberty and Make it flourish. . ." (22)

So deeply did Lafayette feel the influence Washington had on him, and consequently on the French Revolution, that Lafayette took this opportunity to send him a memento. It was not merely a token from one revolutionary to another. This was personal. It was a son proving himself to his father by a physical memorial of a right of passage. He was including, along with a picture of the Bastille, ". . . the Main Kea of that fortress of despotism." In doing so, he wrote that "it is a tribute Which I owe as A Son to My Adoptive father, as an aid de Camp to My General, as a Missionary of liberty to its patriarch." (23) All three ties were true, but the personal tie was the strongest.

As long as Lafayette remained influential during the French Revolution, people made the inevitable comparison with Washington. The French press concluded that Lafayette was "the pupil, . . . the friend of Washington." Lafayette was Washington's offspring in the sense that he thought like him, fought like him, and sought to emulate his conduct. As any son will be compared with his father, ". . . he will enjoy the sweet satisfaction of having done that for his fellow citizens, which your Excellency [Washington] has done for America." (24) In becoming the "father of his country", Washington created much more than a nation. The relationships he formed and the influence he extended had lasting effects far beyond what even he might have imagined. Always, Washington himself was reserved in judgment about his importance and self-effacing when it came to claims of great fame. Yet it is undeniable that his character left an indelible mark on those around him. One could simply not spend time with Washington and remain unaffected. To a young man without a family, involved in a great revolution for liberty, in the passions of war, the mark left by Washington was deep and permanent. Lafayette spent the rest of his life trying to make Washington proud.

### Endnotes

1. Ellis, *His Excellency*, pp. 80-82.
2. Grizzard, *George!*, pp. 173-177.
3. Washington was very fond of Addison's *Cato*, and a line often used by him that reflected his Stoic thinking goes as follows:  
"Tis not in mortals to command success,  
But we'll do more, Sempronius, we'll deserve it. (1.2).
4. Washington to Lafayette, February 1, 1784, *PGW Confederation*, 1:87-90.
5. Lafayette to Marquise de Lafayette, August 20, 1784, *Idzerda*, 5:237-238.
6. Lafayette to Washington, *PGW Confederation*, 1, 181-191.
7. Lafayette to Washington, January 13, 1787, *PGW Confederation*, 4:516-517; Lafayette to Washington, May 5, 1787, *PGW Confederation*, 5:168-170; Washington to Lafayette, August 15, 1787, *PGW Confederation*, 5:294-297.

8. Lafayette to Washington, October 15, 1787, *PGW Confederation*, 5:377-378; Lafayette to Washington, January 2, 1788, *PGW Confederation*, 6:8-9; Lafayette to Washington, February 4, 1788, *PGW Confederation*, 6:84-86.
9. Washington to Lafayette, April 28-May 1, 1788, *PGW Confederation*, 6:242-246; Washington to Lafayette, May 28, 1788, *PGW Confederation*, 6:297-299; Lafayette to Washington, May 25, 1788, *PGW Confederation*, 6:292-295.
10. Washington to Lafayette, June 18, 1788, *PGW Confederation*, 6:335-339.
11. Washington to Lafayette, September 1, 1785, *PGW Confederation*, 3:215-218.
12. Robert R. Livingston to Washington, October 21, 1788, *PGW Presidential*, 1:55-57; James Madison to Washington, October 21, 1788, *PGW Presidential*, 1:58-59.
13. Washington to Lafayette, November 27, 1788, *PGW Presidential*, 1:133-135.
14. Jefferson to Washington, December 4, 1788, *PGW Presidential*, 1:152-158.
15. Rochambeau to Washington, January 31, 1789, *PGW Presidential*, 1:268-269; Morris to Washington, April 29, 1789, *PGW Presidential*, 2:146-148; Jefferson to Washington, May 10, 1789. *PGW Presidential*, 2:258-261. At the Estates-General, the first issue of importance was whether the delegates should vote by estate, or social class, thus ruining any real chance of reform, or by person, which would be more conducive to genuine change.
16. John Skey Eustace to Washington, July 24, 1789, *PGW Presidential*, 3:298-299.
17. Morris to Washington, July 31, 1789, *PGW Presidential*, 3:360-363; Edward Newenham to Washington, August 14, 1789, *PGW Presidential*, 3:462-464; Lafayette to Mme de Simiane, August 24, 1789, quoted in Gottschalk, *Through the October Days*, pp. 211-212.
18. Gottschalk, *Through the October Days*, p. 142; Also Chs. 22-23 in Gottschalk, *Louis Between the American & the French Revolution*.
19. Washington to Lafayette, October 14, 1789, *PGW Presidential*, 4:191-192; Washington to Catharine Sawbridge Macaulay Graham, January 9, 1790, *PGW Presidential*, 4:551-554.
20. Lafayette to Washington, January 12, 1790, *PGW Presidential*, 4:567; Marquise de Lafayette to Washington, January 14, 1790, *PGW Presidential*, 4:571-573.
21. La Luzerne to Washington, January 17, 1790, *PGW Presidential*, 5:2-4.
22. Lafayette to Washington, March 17, 1790, *PGW Presidential*, 5:241-243.
23. *Ibid.*
24. Joseph Mandrillon to Washington, June 1, 1790, *PGW Presidential*, 5:452-452; quoted in Gottschalk, *Through the October Days*, p. 306.

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