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America Was Once the Country Begging Richer Allies for Help
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Credit: Nicholas Stevenson

By Stacy Schiff

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Even before they declared their independence, it was clear to the American colonies that in their struggle against Great Britain they would need a wealthy benefactor. The colonies were desperately short of men, money and materiel. There was little by way of an American Navy, and barely an engineer on the continent. In 1776, the most gifted orator in Congress called for a declaration not by choice but by necessity, "as the only means by which foreign alliance can be obtained." In that light, our founding document nearly qualifies as an SOS.

It was no secret to Congress that France secretly favored the American experiment. With General George Washington's army down to a handful of rounds of powder per man, all eyes turned to Benjamin Franklin. No one had more experience with the world beyond American shores. Already Franklin had crossed the ocean six times. He was dimly understood to speak French. He sat on the secret committee that had dispatched an earlier envoy to Paris.

The unanimous choice on one side of the ocean, he was the ideal choice on the other. Celebrated across Europe as the tamer of lightning, Franklin met in Paris streets with cheering crowds and in theaters with thunderous ovations. His celebrity assisted little with his clandestine mission, however. The French government could not openly receive him without provoking their powerful rival, Great Britain.

Eager though he was to shrink the British sphere of influence, the French foreign minister, the Comte de Vergennes, was unimpressed by the Americans. He doubted their resolve for the task at hand, a fear on which the British ambassador in Paris played, advertising the colonists as a cowardly band of thieves and muggers. Vergennes was less impressed still by General Washington. He seemed to proceed from defeat to defeat.

In America, too, there remained varying degrees of discomfort with the idea of a foreign partner. John Jay hoped to win the war without French involvement of any kind. John Adams hoped to win the war without French funding. Washington hoped to win the war without French troops. Franklin hoped to win the war.Sign up for the Opinion Today newsletter Get expert analysis of the news and a guide to the big ideas shaping the world every weekday morning.

Though he knew the situation to be dire, he waged in Paris a war of disinformation. The farther the British penetrated the continent, Franklin crowed, the more resistance they would meet. He boasted that Washington would soon command a force of 80,000 expertly trained men.

The truth was closer to 14,000 amateurs, beset by desertions, discontent and disease. You would think we might have destroyed General Howe's forces by now, the financier Robert Morris wrote to Franklin, "and we undoubtedly should had we an army to do it." As France waited for an American army on which to bank and Washington waited for French aid with which he might deliver a victory, Franklin solicited secret arms, arranging for their covert dispatch to America.

With whispers of munitions sales swirling around Paris, the British ambassador raced to Versailles for an explanation. What was all that French military equipment doing in America? Could a shipment of 30,000 muskets, 5,000 tents, 60 cannons and 400 tons of gunpowder truly be said to represent a gift from a nation at peace? Britain would not tolerate such subterfuges. He made it his business to discredit the colonists in the drawing rooms of Paris. The French, he assured anyone who would listen, would soon tire of and abandon the ruffians on the other side of the ocean. Vergennes recognized the British strategy for what it was: They were leading the Americans to despair by crushing their hopes for French support.

The Continental Army's victory at Saratoga changed everything. In February 1778, France and America entered into an official alliance; Franklin could at last deal openly with Versailles. At one point he submitted a 38-page shopping list. Along with a frigate and a ship of the line, Congress requested clarinets and trumpets, paint and thimbles. Vergennes was floored by the scale of the demand, reminding Franklin that it was equivalent to one-tenth of the French government's annual budget.

Smitten though they were with Franklin, few Frenchmen could locate the American colonies on a map. It seemed equally likely that they bordered the Black Sea or were part of India. Nor did the two countries make for natural partners. "I cannot deny that the Americans are somewhat difficult to handle, especially for a Frenchman," was the candid verdict of the Marquis de Lafayette. The partnership was held together by various illusions about the past and a general misunderstanding about the future. Even Lafayette at one point assumed that Washington would eventually be appointed dictator.

Vergennes engaged throughout in a familiar calculation: The only danger greater than not helping the Americans at all, he insisted in discussion after discussion at Versailles, was not helping them enough. He carried the day. The majority of the guns fired on the British at Saratoga had been French. The surrender four years later at Yorktown would be to troops that were equal parts French and American, supplied and clothed by France, all of them protected by a French fleet.

Few 18th-century Europeans expected America ever to play a role on the world stage. Versailles assumed that 13 disparate colonies strung over 1,000 miles of coastline would inevitably quarrel. History had proved republics to be fragile. This new one was unlikely, Vergennes contended, to develop any great appetite for expansion. Before it did, French vices would have infected America, stunting its growth and progress.

It would be well over a century, to cries of "Lafayette, nous voici," before America acknowledged its French debt. A generation later, with the Lend-Lease Act of 1941, Franklin Roosevelt appointed America the "arsenal of democracy," a role we have since reprised regularly. The rhetoric soared but the logic was as self-serving as had been that of the Comte de Vergennes. These outlays were investments in what Mitch McConnell recently called "cold, hard American interests." The idea was "to help degrade the military of a major adversary." The 1941 Act is known more fully as "An Act to Promote the Defense of the United States."

Some 250 years after Franklin's French errand, Congress is again debating the entanglement of a young republic — one that actually does border the Black Sea — with a wealthy benefactor. Political considerations aside, it pays to remember that the United States itself was, with its own bid for freedom, once the infant republic in dire need of munitions. No one at Versailles knew that the man waving about a 38-page shopping list would be remembered as one of the greatest diplomats in our history. Nor did anyone suspect that granting his requests would help to create an "arsenal of democracy," a power that might one day, for the most high-minded and the most self-serving of reasons, assist another nation in its struggle for autonomy. Neither mattered when it came to the French calculus, based on something more fundamental. As one French gunrunner reminded Congress in September, 1776, "The enemies of our enemies are more than half our friends."

Stacy Schiff is the author of six books, including "A Great Improvisation: Franklin, France and the Birth of America." The Apple TV+ series "Franklin," based on the book, is forthcoming in April.