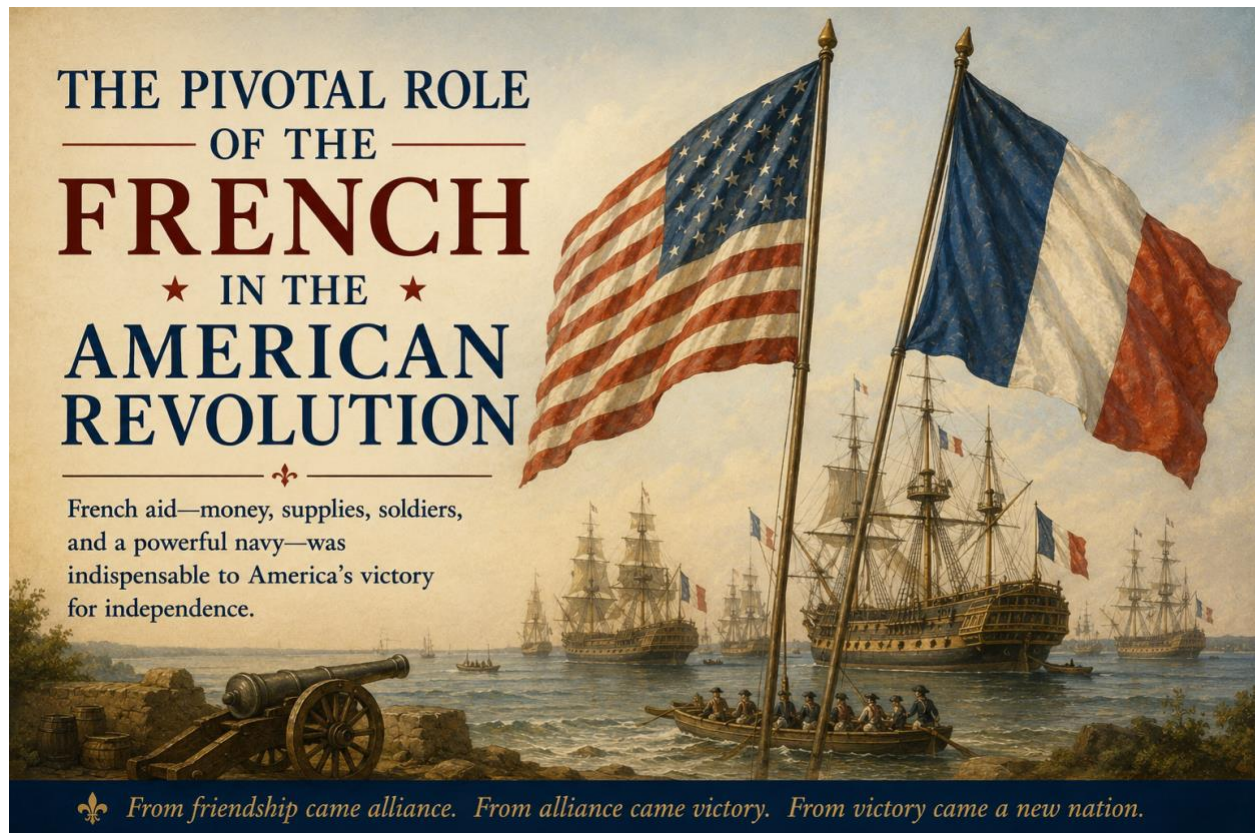




The Pivotal Role of the French in the American Revolution

The United States almost certainly could not have won the American Revolution without French assistance. Long before France presented America with the Statue of Liberty in the nineteenth century, the French had given the struggling colonies something even more valuable: money, weapons, supplies, soldiers, and the use of one of the world's most powerful navies. French support transformed a colonial rebellion into a war Britain could no longer win.

Ironically, France did not come to America's aid because its monarchy embraced republican ideals. King Louis XVI had little sympathy for rebellion against a king. Rather, French leaders saw an opportunity to weaken their longtime rival and avenge the humiliating defeat France had suffered during the Seven Years' War. Their desire for revenge became America's good fortune.

France Seeks Revenge

The French defeat in the Seven Years' War had cost France Canada and much of its North American empire. The war also damaged French prestige and strengthened Britain's position as the world's leading naval power.

When rebellion erupted in Britain's American colonies, French leaders recognized an opportunity to strike back. Supporting the Americans offered the prospect of weakening Britain while restoring French influence on the world stage.

Political philosophy played only a secondary role. As King Louis XVI reportedly remarked after hearing his brother-in-law, Emperor Joseph II, joke that, "I am a royalist by my trade," European monarchs generally had little affection for revolutions. Nevertheless, defeating Britain proved to be a powerful incentive.

Benjamin Franklin Wins an Ally

Before French soldiers ever landed in America, **Benjamin Franklin** spent years in Paris cultivating support for the American cause. Already famous throughout Europe for his scientific discoveries and wit, Franklin became one of the most admired Americans in France.

His diplomacy proved invaluable. Working patiently with the French court, Franklin secured secret shipments of gunpowder, muskets, uniforms, artillery, and money that helped keep Washington's army in the field during its darkest days.

The American victory at Saratoga in 1777 finally convinced France that the rebellion had a realistic chance of succeeding. In 1778, France formally recognized the United States and signed the Treaty of Alliance, committing itself to war against Great Britain.

Lafayette Joins Washington

Among the many French volunteers who crossed the Atlantic, none became more beloved than the **Marquis de Lafayette**.

Only nineteen years old when he arrived in America, Lafayette volunteered his services without pay and quickly won George Washington's confidence. Wounded at the Battle of Brandywine, he returned to active duty after recovering and later conducted successful operations against British and Hessian forces.

Washington came to regard Lafayette almost as an adopted son. During the so-called Conway Cabal, when several officers attempted to undermine Washington's leadership, Lafayette remained steadfastly loyal to the Commander-in-Chief.

He served with distinction throughout the war and became one of the enduring symbols of the friendship between France and the United States.

The French Navy Changes Everything

French assistance reached its greatest importance at sea.

Under Admiral **François Joseph Paul, Comte de Grasse**, the French fleet gained temporary control of the Chesapeake Bay in 1781. When the British Royal Navy attempted to relieve

General Charles Cornwallis, the French successfully drove it away in the Battle of the Chesapeake.

That victory proved decisive. Cornwallis, trapped on the Yorktown Peninsula with Washington's army advancing by land and the French fleet controlling the sea, found himself cut off from rescue or reinforcement.

Without French naval superiority, Cornwallis might well have escaped.

Yorktown: A Combined Victory

The siege of Yorktown was truly an Allied victory.

General George Washington and French General **Jean-Baptiste Donatien de Vimeur, Comte de Rochambeau**, marched their combined American and French armies to Virginia while Admiral de Grasse sealed off the Chesapeake.

Together they surrounded approximately 8,000 British troops. Unable to break out or receive assistance from the Royal Navy, Cornwallis surrendered on **October 19, 1781**.

Although fighting continued for another two years, Yorktown effectively ended Britain's ability to continue the war.

As the Smithsonian Institution has observed:

"Without French aid ... it is doubtful that the colonists could have been a match for Britain's large and well-equipped troops."

America Repays the Debt

Americans never forgot France's contribution.

More than a century later, when the United States entered World War I, American troops crossed the Atlantic to help defend the very nation that had helped secure American independence. During that conflict, approximately **117,000 Americans** lost their lives fighting in Europe.

Again, during World War II, American forces returned to liberate France from Nazi occupation. On **D-Day**, June 6, 1944, thousands of American soldiers and paratroopers gave their lives on the beaches and in the fields of Normandy, helping restore France's freedom.

When General John J. Pershing arrived in France during World War I, a member of his staff visited the tomb of the Marquis de Lafayette and declared:

"Lafayette, we are here."

Whether those famous words were spoken by Pershing himself or by Colonel Charles E. Stanton, they perfectly expressed America's gratitude. More than 140 years after France helped secure American independence, the United States had returned to repay a debt of honor.

A Partnership That Changed History

The American Revolution was won by courage, determination, and sacrifice on both sides of the Atlantic. Washington's leadership, the endurance of the Continental Army, and the commitment of American patriots were indispensable. So too were French diplomacy, French money, French soldiers, and above all the French Navy.

The victory at Yorktown was not simply an American triumph. It was the culmination of one of history's most successful military alliances.

Without France, American independence would have been far more difficult to achieve—and perhaps impossible in 1781.