

When Intelligence Made a Difference

— MIDDLE AGES THROUGH 1799 —

Lafayette and the French Intrigue to Lead the American Revolution

by Gene Poteat

A replica of Marquis de Lafayette's handsome ship, *L'Hermione*, crossed the Atlantic in 2015 to tour the East Coast. The beautiful light frigate replica docked in Alexandria, VA, welcoming visitors, the press, and historians, to commemorate France's role and support of the struggling young nation's War of Independence against the British. But the popular accounts of Lafayette's desire to aid America are not what they seem. In fact, much of the good he did for our country – and it was considerable – came only after schemes and plots of French intelligence, fell by the wayside. And we owe that to the caution and independence of George Washington and the Continental Congress's Committee of Secret Correspondence, which welcomed foreign assistance but wisely dodged foreign manipulation.

In 2000, André Kesteloot, a retired senior scientist with the Central Intelligence Agency (and Vice President of AFIO), used his keen interest in researching intelligence history to write a warts-and-all account – what might be called the “rest of the story” – of French motivations and why Lafayette came to the American colonies in the first place; revelations more interesting than Lafayette just being a passenger swept up into an historic battle for freedom. Kesteloot's research revealed the remarkable intelligence schemes



behind Lafayette's original voyage to America on *La Victoire* in 1777.¹

In brief, Lafayette, a young French nobleman, was an unwitting player in an intrigue woven by Comte Charles de Broglie, the dismissed head of the French Secret Intelligence Service: the “Secret du Roi.” Disillusioned when the young, naive King Louis XVI disbanded the French Intelligence Service, and suddenly with a lot of time on his hands, de Broglie was seized with the idea that George Washington and those other military novices in the colonies were likely headed for failure. What could be easier than coming to their rescue by insinuating himself as America's stadtholder, the military and political director, at the same time avenging France's disastrous Seven Years' War (1756-63) with Britain? Lafayette, his own father having been killed by a British shell in that war, and having served previously in the French

army, met and agreed with de Broglie's anti-British schemes, and saw the joining of America's struggle against the British a great adventure. So, at age 19, Lafayette sailed with several of de Broglie compatriots on *La Victoire* for America.

Onboard ship, and part of the Broglie French intelligence clique, was Baron Johannes de Kalb who had distinguished himself in several battles during the Seven Years War and had visited the colonies before the Revolution on a secret mission to gauge the political and economic situation. Another former “Secret du Roi” schemer was Charles Gravier, Comte de Vergennes, who became France's Foreign Affairs Secretary during the Revolution, and who would arrange meetings with Silas

Deane, the initial American Commissioner sent to France to secure weapons and financial support. The Broglie schemers manipulated Deane into recommending that America needed an entourage of French officers, including Lafayette and de Kalb, who would

1. See “Why did Lafayette Come to America?” by André Kesteloot in *The Intelligencer, Journal of U.S. Intelligence Studies*, Vol. 11, No. 2, Winter 2000, 17-22. This is an abbreviated version of the original article published in Vol. 6 of *HEREDOM, Transactions of the Scottish Rite Research Society*, Washington, DC. See also <https://www.hermione.com/en/home/>.

present themselves to the Continental Congress as seasoned French military officers, and in exchange receive handsome commissions as officers in Washington's army. And then take over the military, and possibly the colonies, when it became obvious that the colonies could not win without these brilliant French experts.

But wary members of the fledgling American colonies could not comprehend how non-English-speaking Frenchmen could be effective leaders. And then there was that nagging suspicion that the enemy (France) of my enemy (Britain) might become the next enemy, and the hidden nature of the generous proposal became clear. Dismissing the offer and waving away most of the plotters, Washington selected only Lafayette, who had learned rudimentary English, and de Kalb to join the American cause; the remaining members of the French Intelligence entourage returned to France, and the de Broglie scheme fizzled before it began.

After serving honorably under General Washington, in January 1779 Lafayette returned to France to

solicit support for the struggling American cause. Successful, he returned to the Colonies in the spring of 1780 on *L'Hermione*, rejoining the Continental Army.



Gilbert du Motier, Marquis de Lafayette, engraving.

France went on to provide the financial and military backing that helped America win the war – savoring another blow to their lifelong British adversaries; and Lafayette and DeKalb, at the right place and right time,

despite other intentions initially, chose to recraft their versions of their motivation to support America, and are recorded in the annals of history as well-intentioned, famed military officers and heroes that we revere to this day. ✂

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