



Revolutionary Humour

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When the Marquis de Lafayette returned to the USA in 1824—his first since visit fighting with the Americans in the War of Independence—a crowd of 80,000 greeted him at New York Harbour. Back then, New York had a population of 123,000.

Let's put the crowd in perspective: When The Beatles were greeted by screaming fans in New York in 1964 in those famous Beatlemania scenes, the crowd was 4,000 out of a population of 17 million.



The level of love for Lafayette in the US is remarkable, but even more so when we consider Lafayette's first visit to America. He was a nineteen-year-old Frenchman from a wealthy landowning family in France. He was also a Marquis—a title given to Lafayette at birth that guaranteed he was above (not equal with) his fellow man.

So how did this boy become such a beloved figure in the US? And what drove a teenager so far from his home to fight for a people he had never met? These are some of the questions answered in *Lafayette in the Somewhat United States*. Sarah Vowell, whose previous works include the popular *Assassination Vacation and Unfamiliar Fishes*, continues to make her mark as the historian for the pop culture era.

Lafayette in the Somewhat United States is laden with humour and personal observations, now staples of Vowell's works. Her tireless research efforts also shine through in this book, using diary entries and correspondences between Lafayette and his contemporaries to reveal fascinating insights into Lafayette's character, such as the friendship between Lafayette and George Washington and the political and military machinations of the revolutionary war. And through these insights we see how 'united' may not have been the best adjective to describe the American colonies.

Perhaps the famous painting of Washington crossing the Delaware should not be the defining image of the revolution. With what is conveyed through *Lafayette in the Somewhat United States*, a more accurate representation might be Washington standing in front of two politicians discussing how to replace Washington as leader of the rebels, next to another general deliberately disobeying Washington's orders. Then there might be a soldier off to a side receiving a letter from a bureaucrat informing him there is still no way of transporting his shoes from the factory to the front.

But there was one person fighting for the Americans that Washington could trust completely—young Lafayette. Lafayette fell in love with America from afar and became enamoured with their ideas of liberty and equality. However, his desire to join them was not



shared by the French government. Not wanting to cause an international incident, the French government forbade Lafayette from going to fight.

Of course, Lafayette ignored these demands. It took a level of bravado to abscond to a war across the ocean at the tender age of nineteen against the express wishes of family, government and King, and Lafayette had bravado in droves. Enjoying a brief visit to the United Kingdom shortly before sailing to join the American revolutionaries, Lafayette 'rejoiced at [the American] success at Trenton' while gallivanting with the English aristocracy, including with King George III and the future leader of the British army in the American War of Independence, Sir Henry Clinton.

Lafayette lost his father when young, and one gets the impression he found a surrogate father figure in Washington. He praised Washington often in letters to his wife, and once started a letter to Washington with 'it is not to the commander-in-chief, it is to my most dearest friend, General Washington, that I am speaking'. The feeling was mutual. Washington constantly expanded Lafayette's responsibilities through the war and put him in charge of some decisive battles, appointing Lafayette to lead a charge on the British instead of Alexander Hamilton. The Washingtons would also shelter Lafayette's son Georges Washington Lafayette when the latter had to flee the French Revolution.

The book is firmly grounded in the experiences of Lafayette, but Vowell also takes us to the political machinations underpinning—and often undermining—the American revolution.

The bitter divisions that marred the United States' military efforts threatened to derail the revolutionaries' plans. George Washington was nearly replaced as leader of the revolutionaries after a bitter defeat in New York, with other revolutionary leaders wanting to transition power to Horatio Gates—the victor of Saratoga. Washington was able to repel this, but ran into similar hostilities trying to appoint Baron Von Steuben to Inspector General of the army, despite Congress already appointing someone to that position so they could keep a firmer eye on Washington.

But as the Americans united behind Washington's victories, the British generals become more divided. Vowell takes us to the fascinating correspondences between British generals as they start to realise the war may be more difficult than they anticipated.

The book is not perfect however. Vowell's talent for mixing personal stories and contemporary observations on historical periods is well known, but it didn't work so well in this book when her encounter with a group of Quakers lead to a thought-provoking discussion about how we study history. When Vowell ventured into the world of modern politics, it did the book a disservice.

Vowell is a terrific historian. And as a political commentator, she is a terrific historian. Choosing to end the book on a discussion of the American suffragette movement because a major protest took place in Lafayette Park is a prime example of Vowell's political mind hindering her stronger talents.

But these moments of weakness are few and far between. *Lafayette in the Somewhat United States* is an excellent book and a must-read for all lovers of American history who prefer their non-fiction—and their historical figures—charged with humour and personality.

