Lafayette in the Somewhat United States

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF SARAH VOWELL

Though she was born and raised in Oklahoma before heading north to Montana for college, Sarah Vowell has always been fascinated by the stories and heroes of American's eastern coast. After studying art history—and developing a passion for viewing the past through physical markers and artifacts—Vowell began to write longform nonfiction, mixing history, humor, and memoir to great success. Much of Vowell's work takes a similarly sardonic view of the United States' first 200 years: her book *The Wordy Shipmates* follows the Puritans' initial pilgrimage from Britain to America, while her book *Unfamiliar Fishes* examines how Hawaii was brutally annexed to the United States. In addition to writing these books (along with several others), Vowell is also an essayist, a contributing editor for the radio program *This American Life*, and an actress. She currently lives in New York City.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Lafayette is a history book about the American Revolution, so the skirmishes and treaties that defined that war are essential to Vowell's project. Of particular note for Vowell are the 1777 Battle at Brandywine in Pennsylvania; the 1778 Battle at Monmouth, New Jersey; and the 1783 Battle of Yorktown in Virginia, where the Americans finally claimed victory over the British. But Vowell is also deeply concerned with the events of her own time. For instance, Vowell's trips to federal monuments are complicated by the 2013 government shutdown, in which Republican congressmen (most prominently Texas Senator Ted Cruz) refused to pass routine budget legislation in protest of the Democrats' Affordable Care Act. But even more importantly, Vowell's initial motivation to research Lafayette stemmed from the anti-French sentiment that abounded in the U.S. in the early 2000s. After France refused to sign on to the U.S. invasion of Iraq, many Americans began to criticize the French, even pushing to rename French fries to "freedom fries"—a move so absurd that Vowell felt she had no choice but to correct the historical record.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Though Vowell writes a sweeping, accessible history of the Revolutionary War, her research is grounded in denser, more specific scholarly texts. To give context for the larger conflict, she turned to books like Wayne Carp's *To Starve the Army at Pleasure*, which examines the administrative failures of the new United States government, and Gordon Wood's *The Radicalism of the American Revolution*, about the ideological roots of American democracy. To learn more about Lafayette as an individual, Vowell used Harlow Giles Unger's 2002 biography *Lafayette* and David Clary's 2007 *Adopted Son: Washington, Lafayette and the Friendship that Changed America* (among many others). Importantly, though, Vowell trained as an art historian, which means that in her work she often prioritizes tangible artifacts and "found objects" over written source material.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** Lafayette in the Somewhat United States
- **When Written:** 2013–2015
- **Where Written:** New York City
- **When Published:** 2015
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary
- **Genre:** History, Memoir
- **Setting:** The Thirteen Colonies/United States and France, during and after the Revolutionary War.
- **Climax:** After nearly a decade of fighting, the Americans—led by General George Washington—finally triumph over the British forces at Yorktown, Virginia.
- **Antagonist:** The British Army
- **Point of View:** First Person, Third Person

EXTRA CREDIT

An Incredible(s) Author. Vowell's dry humor might be familiar to Pixar fans; in addition to her work as a historian, Vowell is the voice of Violet Parr, the shy, sarcastic daughter in the animated movie *The Incredibles*.

The Musical Marquis. The same year that Vowell published her book, Lin-Manuel Miranda debuted his new musical *Hamilton*, a hip-hop portrayal of the American Revolution and the founding of the United States. Lafayette, played by the charismatic actor Daveed Diggs, is a major character in the musical—in fact, he is known throughout the piece as "America's favorite fighting Frenchman."

PLOT SUMMARY

Sarah Vowell, the writer and narrator of *Lafayette in the Somewhat United States*, introduces her hero, the Marquis de Lafayette. As a teenager, Lafayette recklessly snuck away from cushy life in France to fight for the Patriots in the American Revolution, under the command of General George Washington. Lafayette embodies the bizarre truth that in order

to become a democracy, the fledgling United States needed to rely on funding and troops from monarchical France. But more than that, Lafayette—who, upon returning to the country in 1824 for a national tour, was treated as a massive celebrity—is one of the few things all Americans can get behind.

Intense debate and division has always been a part of governance in the United States, from the Revolution until today. As Vowell puts it, there never was a "simpler, more agreeable time" in American politics. Though they were supposed to be fighting against the British, early U.S. leaders like John Adams and Thomas Jefferson could barely agree on what they were fighting for. Instead, they argued endlessly about everything from what kind of prayers to say to how long presidents should be allowed to serve. Vowell sees a parallel between this 18th-century squabbling and 2013, when her tour of Lafayette's former stomping grounds was interrupted by the government shutdown—which itself had been caused because of divides in contemporary politics.

To better understand how Lafayette became such a unifying figure, Vowell travels to Auvergne, the sleepy French province where her subject was born. From a young age, Lafayette was always in search of glory; even in Auvergne, he put himself in harm's way whenever he could. After being orphaned at 12, Lafayette—one of the wealthiest teenagers in France—married Adrienne, the daughter of a powerful French noble.

As soon as he learned of the war in the colonies, Lafayette saw his opportunity: now he could finally make a name for himself while also avenging his father, who had been killed by the British years earlier. Though the French government expressly forbade Lafayette from traveling to the colonies, he snuck out anyway, leaving a pregnant Adrienne to fend for herself. Sure enough, as soon as Lafayette arrived in the colonies, he fell in love with what he saw as a "sure refuge of virtue, of honesty, of tolerance, of equality."

Meanwhile, the French nobility were trying to decide whether they hated the British enough to fund the colonists' revolution against them. With the help of playwright-turned-spy Pierre Beaumarchais, foreign minister Count Vergennes convinced King Louis XVI to secretly back the Americans' efforts.

But if the French imagined a unified American army, they were going to sorely disappointed. On the ground, the Patriot soldiers lacked proper weapons or even uniforms; many of them were dressed only in torn **hunting shirts**. Despite it all, Lafayette volunteered his services for free, which impressed Washington. The two men quickly became lifelong friends: Lafayette helped Washington secure French aid and win the war against the British Redcoats, while Washington was the father figure Lafayette had always searched for.

Though Lafayette was having fun, most early battles of the Revolution were dispiriting losses for the Americans. When Vowell visits the former battle site at Brandywine—where Lafayette was shot in the knee—she marvels at the suburban rolling **fields**, which show almost no signs of a past violent conflict.

All these losses meant that Washington was increasingly at risk of losing command—and it did not help that the U.S. won the Battle of Saratoga, its first major military victory, thanks not to the future president but to his rival Horatio Gates. Gates joined forces with French immigrant Thomas Conway to try to unseat Washington (a plan that would later be known as the Conway Cabal). To his wife, Lafayette complained of "parties who hate one an other as much as the common enemy."

In the winter of 1777–1778, Washington moved his forces to Valley Forge, Pennsylvania, to recoup—but the politicians were too busy arguing to provide food and supplies to the hungry, freezing troops. Vowell compares this historical administrative failure to similar situations today, like the underfunding of public schools. However, with the help of Prussian military mastermind von Steuben, Washington was eventually able to get his troops uniformed and into shape. Cheered by this news, France agreed to formally recognize the United States as an independent nation, and Lafayette was promoted.

The Americans celebrated, but there were still three more years of war ahead. Worse still, after a botched invasion of Rhode Island, the Americans' age-old anti-French prejudice came roaring back, leading to conflict in which a French soldier was killed. Not for the last time, Lafayette was torn between his loyalty to Washington and his homeland.

Vowell breezes through the next several years of fighting and stalemates to focus on the battle Yorktown in Virginia, in which the Patriots finally secured victory. While Lafayette led troops on land to surround the British, the French Count de Grasse commanded his impressive naval fleet to attack the British at sea. De Grasse wanted to attack immediately, and he tried to get Lafayette to join him by promising it would make Lafayette famous—but Lafayette refused, further proof that he was "growing up."

The British were easily surrounded on land, but the naval fight was less of a foregone conclusion. In September of 1781, de Grasse set out to sea to fight the British in what is known as the Battle of the Chesapeake. Vowell writes that this was "the most important altercation in the [...] Revolution, a take that's all the more astonishing considering not a single American took part." Eventually, de Grasse triumphed at sea, Lafayette and fellow soldier Alexander Hamilton claimed victory on land, and Britain surrendered.

Vowell visits Colonial Williamsburg, where the Lafayette impersonator describes how many Americans have forgotten about France's role in their Revolution. Vowell reveals that she was motivated to write this book to counter Americans' anti-French feelings (as embodied by the "**freedom fries**" conflict in the mid-2000s), which have persisted even until today.

Lafayette was a key player in the American Revolution's fight for democracy, but the democracy the Patriot troops won was limited to white American men. So, to end the book, Vowell reflects on the statue of Lafayette in Lafayette Square, right in front of the White House. For the last century, this square has housed protests for racial justice, anti-imperialism, and gender equality—suggesting that in death as in life, Lafayette remains a steward of the United States' imperfect freedom.

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Marquis de Lafayette – Marquis de Lafayette was a French Revolutionary War hero and is the titular and central figure in Vowell's book. Born Marie-Joseph Paul Yves Roch Gilbert du Motier, the young Lafayette always hungered for more conflict than he could find in Auvergne, the sleepy French town where he was from. Though he was wealthy, Lafayette was orphaned at a young age—his mother died when he was 12, and his father was killed by British soldiers in combat. He spent the rest of his life looking for a father figure, which he later found in General George Washington. Indeed, as a teenage trickster, Lafayette left his new wife Adrienne in France to go volunteer for the Patriot army in the American Revolution. Initially eager to fight in every battle, Lafayette quickly came of age during his time in the American forces; by the war's end, he was able to set aside his own desire for glory and blood in order to best serve his fellow soldiers. Lafayette's rise to maturity parallels the trajectory of the new nation, which was similarly coming into its own. This Frenchman's lifelong partnership with the U.S. testifies to the essential role France played in the American Revolution.

Sarah Vowell – Sarah Vowell is a writer, historian, actor, and radio contributor. As the book's author and narrator, she tours the rolling **fields** and monuments that Lafayette traversed centuries ago, learning about her hero by retracing his footsteps. In addition to her quirky, humorous narrative voice, Vowell—who trained as an art historian—brings a unique approach to what is largely a military history. Rather than focusing merely on the written record, Vowell is preoccupied by the "found objects" and living legacies that she encounters along her journey. Just as Vowell mixes the personal and the political in her recounting of Lafayette's life, she is also fascinated by drawing comparisons between the past and the present, particularly when it comes to the infighting that has long been a part of American politics.

George Washington – George Washington was the Commander in Chief of the Patriot army, the first president of the fledgling United States, and Lafayette's closest personal friend and father figure. Over and over again, Lafayette and his fellow generals described Washington as a "majestic figure," poised, patient and always able to rally the Patriot army even against seemingly impossible odds. Crucially, the French were so enamored of Washington's can-do attitude that they placed faith in him even when he suffered military losses. And perhaps most importantly, Washington's "homebody" attitude and his devotion to his family home at Mount Vernon ensured that he left office after only two terms. This set the precedent that American presidents would always engage in a peaceful transfer of power.

Thomas Jefferson – Thomas Jefferson was a Founding Father and the third president of the United States. Almost no figure better embodies the contradictions of the new United States than Thomas Jefferson: he wrote the famous Declaration of Independence, in which he declared that "all men are created equal," and yet he was a staunch enslaver and defender of slavery. Similarly, while he was often one of the first men to compromise in any tense congressional meetings, he preferred a hands-off approach to the Revolutionary War (declining to help a struggling Lafayette provide for his troops, for example). Still, decades later—and after serving as president—Jefferson would remain close with Lafayette, a bond that was strengthened by the former's lifelong loyalty to France.

Benjamin Franklin – Benjamin Franklin, often remembered as one of the most eccentric Founding Fathers, was also a crucial figure in wartime diplomacy between the United States and France. While negotiating for more aid from King Louis XVI, Franklin would often dress as farmer with a fur cap, presenting a narrative of America as a place of folksy, pastoral virtue. This skillful self-presentation was only one of many ways in which Franklin demonstrated his prowess as a negotiator.

John Adams –John Adams, a leader in the First Continental Congress and, later, the second president of the new United States, was a controversial figure. He often sparred with George Washington, especially over the loss of Philadelphia to the British, and he was one of the least moderate voices in Congress when it came to heading into a full-scale war. He also was one of the first Americans to suggest that the Revolution should be viewed not as a military struggle but as an ideological one; he often said that victory was forged less on the battlefield than "in the minds and hearts of the people."

Silas Deane – Silas Deane was a Connecticut politician who wound up serving as an American ambassador to France for much of the war. Deane often promised fancy jobs and titles to Frenchmen, angering his American colleagues; he was even implicated in some efforts to unseat Washington as Commander in Chief. Most of all, though, Vowell uses Deane—who left his new wife with his son from a previous marriage—to show how willing Patriot fighters were to abandon their families in the name of war.

Baron Friedrich Wilhelm von Steuben – A Prussian general known for his incredible organizational and tactical skills, von Steuben was almost solely responsible for getting the Patriot

troops into shape. But at Valley Forge, Steuben learned that American forces were different than any he had worked with before: rather than blindly following orders, the Patriots demanded generals who treated them as equals, explaining the reasoning behind all of their decisions. Steuben was also likely non-heterosexual, but given centuries of homophobia in the American military, he was forced to keep this part of his identity under wraps.

King Louis XVI – King Louis XVI was King of France from 1774 (just before the start of the American Revolution) until 1793, when he was beheaded during the French Revolution. Though his anti-British sentiment led him to be staunch supporter of the American forces, Louis was himself a monarch who taxed his subjects heavily—the very thing the Americans claimed to fight against. Indeed, when the increasingly high taxes needed to pay for the Patriots' war led his subjects to revolt, Louis would express great regret at having backed the U.S.

Marie-Antoinette – One of the most famous women in history, Marie-Antoinette was Louis XVI's wife and the Queen of France during both the American and French Revolutions. Known for her luxurious tastes, Marie-Antoinette was ultimately beheaded by the French peasantry—but in this book, her main function is to laugh at Lafayette for being a bad dancer.

Adrienne de Lafayette – A wealthy French woman who married Lafayette at only 12, Adrienne would prove to be a loyal wife and mother for the next several decades. Though Lafayette constantly abandoned her to go fight in the Revolution—to the extent that he did not return home even when their baby daughter died—Adrienne supported her husband's military and political endeavors. Moreover, Adrienne was also the recipient of many of Lafayette's most revealing letters.

Count de Vergennes – As the French foreign minister during the lead-up to the American Revolution, Vergennes was the single most important figure when it came to securing French aid for the Patriots. Vowell argues that in the overall narrative of American independence, Vergennes should be viewed as just as essential as Thomas Jefferson. Over the course of the war, Vergennes worked closely (and often in secret) with Benjamin Franklin, Silas Deane, and Lafayette himself.

Count Rochambeau – Count Rochambeau was one of the oldest and most experienced French soldiers to fight with the Americans. Though Lafayette (who had arrived in the United States earlier) initially tried to give Rochambeau orders, the older man refused to take directives from a teenager. Rochambeau's attitude demonstrates that even though Lafayette was growing up during the war, he still had a long way to go to reach full maturity.

Count de Grasse – One of the unsung heroes of the American Revolution, de Grasse was in charge of a large French fleet in the Caribbean. In the final years of the war, de Grasse traveled north to assist Washington at Yorktown. De Grasse's strong strategic thinking—and his patient communication with the Americans—allowed him to triumph in the Battle of the Chesapeake, a skirmish between the French and British navies that many consider to be the most definitive battle of the war. The fact that a Frenchman could be so essential to the war effort further suggests just how much the scraggly new nation needed France to achieve independence.

King George III – King George III was the British monarch at the time of the Revolutionary War. Interestingly, rather than seeing him as their ultimate enemy, many delegates to the First Continental Congress hoped that George III would be their defender, even reaching out to him in what is now known as the Olive Branch Petition. King George's refusal to help the colonists was ultimately the final straw, prompting Thomas Jefferson to formalize America's break from its mother country via the Declaration of Independence.

Lord Cornwallis – Lord Cornwallis was the number-two general in the Redcoat forces during the Revolutionary War. After a series of initial successes, Cornwallis made the fatal mistake of positioning his troops on the Yorktown peninsula, making the British army vulnerable to siege. Indeed, Cornwallis was so ashamed that when it came time for the British to formally surrender, he could not even show his face.

Thomas Conway – Thomas Conway was a French-born Irishman who, after meeting with Silas Deane, traveled to America to fight for the Patriots in the American Revolution. At a time when George Washington was increasingly unpopular, Conway pushed to take over as Commander in Chief of the American troops (a scheme now known as Conway Cabal). Though Conway was unsuccessful, the fact that such a plot ever gained traction demonstrates just how low Washington's standing had become.

Horatio Gates – When British-born American army officer Horatio Gates triumphed in the Battle of Saratoga, he was responsible for the first major Patriot victory—earning French approval and Washington's jealously. Later in the war, Gates would join Conway in trying to unseat Washington as Commander in Chief (and, like Conway, Gates was unsuccessful in doing so).

Charles Lee – Though ostensibly a Patriot general, Lee had close ties to many British soldiers and may have been working with the Redcoats during the American Revolution. He is most known for his disastrous retreat at the Battle of Monmouth. Suspecting that Lee had thrown the battle on purpose, Washington court-martialed him.

Nathanael Greene – Often called "the Fighting Quaker," Greene was a Rhode Island-born general in the Patriot forces who abandoned his Quaker roots in order to join in the bloody American Revolution. Greene was one of Washington's most

trusted allies. Perhaps most notably, he was tasked with supplying the soldiers at Valley Forge, an unglamorous administrative task that would nevertheless prove essential to Patriot success.

Henry Knox – As a bookseller in Boston at the start of the Revolution, Knox was personally impacted by the rising British taxes. Later, he would steward the remarkable expedition to secretly transport arms from Fort Ticonderoga in New York up to Boston. Though some French newcomers pushed to take over Knox's high military rank, he was such a quintessential Patriot hero that all of the Frenchmen's efforts failed.

Phillipe du Courdray – Du Courdray was the solider who tried most actively to claim Henry Knox's position for himself. Though du Courdray was almost successful, in part because he exaggerated his connections to King Louis XIV, he failed in his quest to take power. Still, the Continental Congress's desire to cater to du Courdray shows how important French approval was to the new United States.

John Dickinson – As perhaps the most prominent Quaker delegate to the First Continental Congress, Dickinson advocated for peace long after most of his colleagues were ready to go to war. Ultimately, Dickinson's pacifism made him somewhat of a mockery in the Congress, though much of his writing (namely his series "Letters from a Farmer in Pennsylvania") is still read in history classes today.

John Quincy Adams – John Quincy Adams, John Adams's son who was elected to the presidency in 1825, was the first U.S. president to not have been a part of the American Revolution. Many felt that Adams's election, in which he won the electoral college but not the popular vote, was a "Corrupt Bargain."

Theodore Roosevelt – Vowell argues that Roosevelt was one of the United States' most war-hungry presidents, and he embraced the hardships of the winter at Valley Forge to symbolize the country's unique tenacity. At the same time, though, Roosevelt—unlike many early American generals—understood that health, safety, and basic welfare were all equally important factors in a nation's strength.

Ted Cruz –Ted Cruz of Texas is one of the most conversative senators in the U.S. In 2013, when Vowell was researching this book, Cruz was largely responsible for shutting down the government as a way of protesting the Democrats' Affordable Care Act. To Vowell, Cruz represents the chaos that can arise when politicians refuse to budge on certain issues.

Anne-Robert-Jacques Turgot – As King Louis's finance manager, Turgot had the unenviable job of persuading the French king not to go to war. His belief that the French should not bankroll American independence would prove prophetic: ultimately, the French Revolution was fought in part because the peasants could no longer survive the high taxes needed to pay for the Americans' fight.

The Chevalier de Saint-Sauveur – In a moment of Revolutionary-era tension between the French and the Americans, Saint-Sauveur (a French solider and a staunch Catholic) was killed in a skirmish in Boston. The fact that the Puritan Patriots relented to giving Saint-Sauveur a Catholic funeral showed their willingness to compromise to preserve the Franco-American alliance. Today, a monument to Saint-Sauveur testifies to his symbolic importance in this partnership.

Christopher Densmore – A prominent Quaker historian, Christopher Densmore befriends Vowell in a Quaker Meeting House near the spot where the Battle of Brandywine took place. Densmore—who holds the Quaker ideal of non-violence dear—is important for his belief that American history is defined most of all by violent conflict. Vowell does not agree with this idea.

Sherm – When Vowell visits the site of the critical battle at Monmouth, she brings her New Jersey-born friend Sherm along with her. Sherm, who discovered a great deal of freedom and agency through starting to write as a teenager, allows Vowell to think of independence as something that can be "personal" instead of just political.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Jean de Noailles – Jean de Noailles was Adrienne's father and a prominent French noble. Though he initially tried his best to prevent Lafayette from traveling to America, Noailles was eventually proud of his son-in-law's achievements across the Atlantic.

Pierre-Augustin Caron de Beaumarchais – A playwright best known for works like *The Marriage of Figaro* and *The Barber of Seville*, Beaumarchais doubled as an important diplomat and spy for the French government. Along with Vergennes, Beaumarchais was one of the first and most passionate advocates for a French alliance with the Patriots.

Count d'Estaing – Another French naval commander, d'Estaing was often indecisive and a poor communicator, especially when it came time to provide French ships to the U.S. forces near Rhode Island. Like Lafayette, d'Estaing was from Auvergne.

William Howe – As the leader of the British forces for the first half of the Revolutionary War (from 1775–1778), Howe presided over a series of Redcoat victories. However, he also made some crucial missteps, especially when it came to his initial invasion of New York and the Battle at Brandywine.

Henry Clinton – After William Howe stepped away, Henry Clinton became the Commander in Chief of the British forces during the Revolutionary War. He often sparred with Lord Cornwallis, his second-in-command, and this tension is believed to be one of the major reasons why the British ultimately lost the war.

Lord Richard Howe – Richard Howe was William Howe's older brother and the commander of the British fleet that attacked

Rhode Island during the American Revolution. Howe was renowned as one of the most skilled and experienced naval generals in the world.

Benedict Arnold – Benedict Arnold was a Patriot general and a close friend of George Washington who was later discovered to be collaborating with the British. Upon discovery, Arnold switched sides and became a Redcoat, enraging Washington so much that he dispatched an entire regiment to capture and kill the traitorous solider.

Alexander Hamilton – Like Lafayette, Hamilton was a young immigrant who rose to prominence fighting in the Revolutionary War. Hamilton was eventually made the new United States' first Secretary of the Treasury.

John Sullivan – John Sullivan was a Patriot general in the Revolutionary War who served directly under Washington. Known for his hot-headedness, Sullivan is perhaps best remembered for his conflict with the French Count D'Estaing over which general would lead the charge on Newport, Rhode Island.

Peter Gansevoort – Gansevoort was Lafayette's friend and fellow soldier in the American Revolution, but he was also the uncle of famed writer Herman Melville. Gansevoort passed on his lifelong admiration of his French friend to his equally adoring nephew.

Andrew Jackson – As a daring general who would later usher in the rise of American populism, Jackson was the first president who made old-school American politicians worry that the military was going to become more powerful than legislators.

Herman Melville – Herman Melville, who wrote *Moby-Dick*, was one the most iconic authors in American history. The fact that Lafayette was such an important figure to Melville suggests the scope of this French teenager's influence on American thought.

Frederick Douglass – Douglass, who himself escaped from slavery, was a famous orator, author and anti-slavery advocate. He often pointed out the hypocrisies in American rhetoric, especially in his speech "What to the Slave is the 4th of July?"

Evelyn Wotherspoon Wainwright – Wainwright was one of the leaders of the suffragist movement in the 1920s. In a famous speech, she invoked the statue of Lafayette in Lafayette Square as a potent symbol of American democracy.

Dwight D. Eisenhower – A decorated general who later became president of the United States, Eisenhower represents the United States' continual emphasis on its leaders' military might and endurance. In his presidency, Eisenhower often cited Valley Forge as the ultimate symbol of American strength.

Andrew Jackson O'Shaughnessy – Though he bears the name of an American president, O'Shaughnessy was actually born in Britain. Now, he works as a historian at Monticello, where he helps Vowell understand why, as former colonists, the Americans were uniquely able to put their democratic values into practice.

Mark Schneider – Mark Schneider is the beloved, charismatic Lafayette impersonator at Colonial Williamsburg.

TERMS

Patriots – The Patriots were the rebellious American colonists who rejected British rule in favor of the new, independent United States. Since many colonists remained loyal to **King George III** and the English crown, identifying oneself as a Patriot—as opposed to a Loyalist—was a divisive political statement. Once the Revolutionary War actually broke out, the American forces would deem themselves the Patriot army. Though the Patriots were notoriously underprepared (they had only torn hunting shirts as uniforms, for example), their passion and determination to win independence drove them to win the war. Famous Patriot soldiers include **George Washington**, **Alexander Hamilton**, and **Henry Knox**.

Redcoats – Given that the British army during the American Revolution wore red military jackets, the British forces were nicknamed the "Redcoats." The Redcoats had more resources and training than their American counterparts, but different branches of the army often failed to communicate with one another. Ultimately, the Redcoats were not able to withstand the Patriots' tenacity, especially not once the French government officially backed the rebels. The most important Redcoat generals were **William Howe**, **Henry Clinton**, and **Lord Cornwallis**.

THEMES

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DEMOCRACY, DISAGREEMENT, AND COMPROMISE

In her humorous history *Lafayette in the Somewhat United States*, Sarah Vowell reflects on the origins of American democracy through the French general Marquis de Lafayette's perspective. When Lafayette arrived in the colonies to fight on the American side of the Revolutionary War, he expected to find a straightforward conflict between the British Empire and its former subjects. But he was shocked to find that (as Vowell's title suggests) the colonies were only "somewhat united" in their goals and beliefs. Indeed, from the very moment

of the nation's inception—and even *before* the nation's inception—an inability to agree on even the most basic laws defined American politics: the country's Founders fought over everything from who should lead the army to what kind of prayers were appropriate at congressional meetings. As Vowell digs deep into these 18th-century disagreements, she also draws parallels to more contemporary political situations. In particular, Vowell points out the irony that she is conducting her research in the fall of 2013, when Republicans and Democrats took so long to agree on a budget bill that the government had to shut down for several weeks. Such infighting is clearly a pattern throughout nearly all of U.S. history.

On the one hand, then, *Lafayette in the Somewhat United States* shows that debate and deadlock are inescapable parts of any democratic system, because democracy allows for many people to govern themselves rather than obeying a single leader's orders. But on the other hand, Vowell emphasizes that communication and compromise are essential to ensure that such idealistic governments survive. Whether it was transporting much-needed supplies to the starving soldiers at Valley Forge or coordinating the climactic Battle of Yorktown with the French navy, a willingness to work across cultural and ideological lines proved essential to American victory in the Revolutionary War. And similarly, Vowell argues that compromise and negotiation are the only way to solve present-day U.S. problems (like underfunded public schools and crumbling infrastructure). While disagreement may have slowed down the process of policy-making since the earliest days of United States history, Vowell is firm that even the most representative governments must put their citizens' well-being over their ideological debates. After all, the point of self-governance is that everyday people are able to advocate for their own interests—and if debate overshadows action, then democracy serves no one.

LANDSCAPE AND HISTORICAL MEMORY

Throughout *Lafayette in the Somewhat United States*, Sarah Vowell combines history with memoir, describing her present-day visits to major landmarks of the American Revolutionary War. Many crucial sites of U.S. political history remain perfectly preserved and curated: Vowell visits Thomas Jefferson's famed Monticello home, takes a trip to Colonial Williamsburg to meet a George Washington impersonator, and even stops in to see a pair of her hero Marquis de Lafayette's gloves at the Smithsonian museum. But while these political artifacts are celebrated, Vowell is repeatedly struck by how former battlefields—though they were equally important to the nation's history—are unmarked and unremarkable. To the layman, these once-violent sites appear like any other peaceful, rolling **fields** or bustling suburbs. While she retraces Lafayette's steps, Vowell realizes how easily history can be forgotten in favor of daily routines. Even the fact that Americans celebrate Independence Day on July 4 is telling: rather than rejoicing on October 19, the anniversary of the Patriots's actual military victory, the U.S. has always dated its creation to the day when a piece of paper (the Declaration of Independence) was signed. As she studies statements from John Adams to today's politicians, Vowell ultimately comes to believe that this revisionism is intentional. The conspicuous absence of war monuments demonstrates how the United States glorifies its ideological turning points while erasing the violence that made such political success possible.

YOUTHFUL GLORY VS. MATURE LEADERSHIP

Though Sarah Vowell's *Lafayette in the Somewhat United States* is largely a military history of the American Revolution, Vowell also tracks the personal evolution of her titular character, the general Marquis de Lafayette. When the French-born Lafayette began his involvement with the American army, he was reckless and irresponsible, putting himself—and the tenuous Franco-American alliance he helped forge—in danger. As a teenager, Lafayette prioritized person glory over all else: his first trip across the Atlantic was done in secret, against the French nobility's wishes, and he was so eager to fight in his first battle that he led his troops into danger and got himself shot in the leg. Gradually, however, as Lafayette became more invested and entangled in building the new nation, he learned to set aside his own desire for notoriety in favor of the country's larger needs; in one particularly telling anecdote, he was able to ignore the French naval officer Count De Grasse's offer of everlasting fame in order to best serve his beloved George Washington. And just as Lafayette grew up, beginning to balance communal needs against his own interests, the various American politicians he worked alongside similarly learned to compromise. Lafayette's coming of age thus parallels the United States' growth from a collection of sparring individual states—each one determined to assert its own interests—to a more mature country, concerned with its own permanence.

FREEDOM AND PROTEST

Lafayette in the Somewhat United States traces the arc of the American Revolutionary War, in which a ragtag band of British colonial subjects theorized about—and fought violently for—their independence. But Sarah Vowell, a historian and the book's author, suggests that this call for independence was not quite as simple as the revolutionaries made it seem. On the one hand, the newly democratic nation was dependent on monarchist, hierarchical France, a diplomatic relationship personified in the Patriot army's reliance on the French volunteer soldier the Marquis de

Lafayette. On the other hand, many of the white American men who were most forcefully against the British were themselves slaveholders—slaveholders who refused to acknowledge the clash between their cries for freedom and their everyday practice of bondage.

By pointing to these contradictions, Vowell suggests that rather than merely accepting the Founders' own language of freedom and independence, it is important to question the real meaning of this revolutionary rhetoric. In fact, Vowell ends her book with a focus on the protests in Lafayette Square, the plaza in front of the White House conveniently named for her titular hero. For decades, the people who have protested here—whether it was anti-imperialist Vietnam activists or women advocating for the right to vote—have tried to expand American democratic principles to new geographic regions and types of people. By concluding with a focus on these protestors, many of whom called out to the memory of Lafayette in their advocacy, Vowell calls for a freer United States, one that truly lives up to the principles it claims to represent—namely, liberty and equal rights for all.

WAR, POLITICS, AND FAMILY

At the beginning of Sarah Vowell's *Lafayette in the Somewhat United States*, the teenaged Marquis de Lafayette abandons his pregnant wife in France to fight in the United States, a country he had never visited before and could barely conceptualize. As he commits himself to the battle for U.S. independence, however, Lafayette—who was orphaned as a 12-year-old—finds a surrogate family in America's most important early politicians (and particularly in George Washington, who was a father figure to the young Frenchman). Lafayette's readjustment represents a larger pattern in the war. On the one hand, many of the men who fought for the American army were unable to return home for years on end, and so they had to turn to fellow soldiers for the support they might usually seek from their families. Indeed, the fact that Lafayette's familial commitments shifted from his wife and children to United States generals was not uncommon among high-ranking officers, who began to view one another as "brothers" in arms. And on the other hand, those loyal to the British crown fled or raised arms against their Patriot siblings and in-laws. As Vowell follows the breakage and redefinition of these domestic bonds, she demonstrates how frantic battles and deeply felt political beliefs can split blood families apart—and create new families, based on shared experience and ideology, in their place.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

HUNTING SHIRTS

Throughout her book, Vowell uses the image of freezing Patriot soldiers in hunting shirts to symbolize the Americans' persistence against impossible odds during the Revolutionary War. Whereas the British had the resources to buy warm, matching uniforms for their troops, Americans had to stand and fight in whatever they had on hand. Lafayette often wrote to his wife, Adrienne, about how shabby the Patriots looked, but he was not alone in being shocked by this lack of proper clothing. In fact, he and his French colleagues were often the only people offering military gear to the bedraggled Patriot forces. Yet the Americans' willingness to continue fighting in such demoralizing conditions impressed Europeans even more than their (rare) military victories, as this resilience showed how far Americans were willing to go in their quest for independence.

On the one hand, then, the hunting shirts represent Patriot soldiers' intense desire to defend democracy, even when that meant going up against a much wealthier and more powerful army. But on the other hand, the image of these torn shirts recalls the degree to which the United States depended on France for victory. Patriot troops had enough grit and determination to impress more powerful allies, but without those allies' help, the American army would have been too cold to achieve much of anything.

FIELDS AND HILLS

In *Lafayette in the Somewhat United States*, rolling fields and hills represent how the United States idealizes its complicated, often violent past. As Vowell retraces Lafayette's steps through the peaceful hills that were once the sites of bloody Revolutionary War battles (like Brandywine and Yorktown), she is struck by the lack of landmarks or monuments memorializing this history of conflict. While there are plenty of monuments commemorating important moments in American politics, from the signing of the Declaration of Independence to the First Inaugural Ball, there are very few physical markers of the death and pain that were necessary to guarantee American freedoms. Vowell sees this absence as proof of Americans' tendency to "believe, as Adams did, that 'the Revolution was in the minds and hearts of the people,' as opposed to the amputated limbs and bayoneted torsos of Continental and French casualties."

Fascinatingly, this desire to celebrate the pastoral American landscape—while ignoring the violence that takes place in it—stretches back to the nation's inception. When Lafayette himself first arrived in South Carolina (a colony where slavery was legal), he wrote home to his wife Adrienne not to express his horror at human bondage but to tell her about the "vast forests and immense rivers" he encountered on his journey. In other words, Lafayette was too awed by the impressive vistas

of the new United States to notice the brutality that defined them.

FREEDOM FRIES

In the mid-2000s, when France refused to join the United States in its invasion of Iraq, a wave of anti-French sentiment led some American senators to cry that French fries should be renamed "freedom fries." To Vowell, this seemingly silly protest was fascinating because it symbolized just how little Americans understand their own history. As Vowell proves over and over again in her book, the ill-prepared American Patriots would not have stood a chance against the British Redcoats in the Revolutionary War were not it for French aid; if anything, it was the Americans who failed their French allies, when they refused to get involved in the French Revolution just a few years after their own victory. Vowell was so mystified by this widespread anger at the French that she was motivated to write her book about Lafayette, a French hero of the American Revolution whose very existence embodied the close tie between the two nations. If "freedom fries" are the product of Americans' short historical memory, then, Lafayette is a necessary counterbalance, a human reminder of the essential role France played in the development of the new United States.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Riverhead Books edition of *Lafayette in the Somewhat United States* published in 2016.

Pages 1-59 Quotes

❝ In other words, Lafayette mania circa 1824 was specific to him and cannot be written off as the product of a simpler, more agreeable time. In the United States of America, there was no simpler, more agreeable time.

Related Characters: Sarah Vowell (speaker), Marquis de Lafayette

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 10

Explanation and Analysis

Though Lafayette was a unifying presence when he returned to tour America, 1824—like 2013, when Vowell was doing her research—was a time of tense partisan infighting in the U.S. government. In the 1820s, a contentious presidential election sparked the American people to accuse their government of corruption; in 2013, the Democrats and Republicans were unable to come to an agreement for so long that the government was shut down. So, in one sense, this quote makes clear that heated debate and conflict have always been (and perhaps always will be) a part of U.S. politics.

But in this passage, Vowell is also hinting at the idea that Americans tend to rewrite their history, making the past look "agreeable" when it was just as complicated and difficult as the present. By pushing back against this nostalgia, Vowell both corrects the historical record and suggests that the great triumphs of the Revolutionary era—whether it was winning a war, writing a Constitution, or even getting everybody to rally around a single figure like Lafayette—are not out of the realm of possibility today.

❝ Who knows what happened to that particular chair. It could have been burned during the British occupation of Philadelphia in the winter of 1777-78, when firewood was scarce. But it might have been a more helpful, sobering symbolic object than that chair with the rising sun. Then perhaps citizens making pilgrimages to Independence Hall could file pass the chair Jefferson walked across an aisle to sit in, and we could all ponder the amount of respect, affection, and wishy-washy give-and-take needed to keep a house divided in reasonable repair.

Related Characters: Sarah Vowell (speaker), Thomas Jefferson , George Washington

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 15

Explanation and Analysis

As Vowell tours Philadelphia, she compares two important chairs from American history: the "rising sun" chair that George Washington used to symbolize his hope for democracy, and the chair that Jefferson sat in when he (literally) walked across the aisle at a congressional meeting. While Washington's chair reflects the sunny, often naïve optimism associated with the abstract ideal of democracy, Jefferson's chair represents the muddier, more "wishy-washy" reality of democracy in action. In a government where many opinionated people are emboldened to defend their opinions, real lawmaking takes work. And here and elsewhere, Vowell emphasizes that this kind of democratic work is intensely human—it requires personal relationships

built on "affection" and "give-and-take."

It's no wonder, then, that the American government is often described in familial terms: Vowell calls it a "house divided," and many of the nation's founders frequently referred to their colleagues as fathers, brothers, or sons. In other words, in order to keep the U.S. in "reasonable repair," lawmakers have to commit not just to their principles but to the other people they work with.

Said Lafayette, "I did not hesitate to be disagreeable to preserve my independence." Spoken like every only child ever.

Related Characters: Sarah Vowell , Marquis de Lafayette (speaker), Jean de Noailles

Related Themes:

Page Number: 33

Explanation and Analysis

Lafayette spoke this famous phrase when, after briefly serving in the court of his father-in-law Jean de Noailles, he got himself fired and was subsequently placed more directly in the line of military action. First of all, then, this quote displays the teenage Lafayette at his most stubbornly adolescent: rather than showing deference to and cooperation with his new family members, he sought out dangerous, potentially glorious conflict.

Fascinatingly, though, the word Lafayette chooses to use—"independence"—suggests a crucial parallel between the young Frenchman and the fledgling United States, the very country he would soon devote his life to defending. Lafayette's headstrong desire to act on his one wishes made him a natural ally for a group of colonies rebelling against the British Crown. And similarly, Lafayette's youthful willingness to be "disagreeable" echoed the disagreements happening in America, where various leaders were trying to figure out how to get anything done in a society where everyone was allowed to speak their mind. Like Lafayette, the new United States would have to learn how to be independent without being disagreeable.

Lastly, it is worth noting the familial language that Vowell uses to contextualize Lafayette's statement. This early in his life, Lafayette is the stereotypical "only child": he is confident, stubborn, and unable to think of other people's needs alongside his own. Over time, Lafayette would find surrogate brothers in his fellow Patriot soldiers, allowing him to value cooperation in addition to "independence."

As for Lafayette becoming a Freemason: one did not have to be an orphaned only child to be predisposed to joining a mysterious brotherhood with snazzy secret handshakes, but it didn't hurt. Famous Freemason Benjamin Franklin set of the group, "While each lodge is created from individual members and while individuality is treasured, lodges are designed to be sociable and to encourage mutual works." What a perfect arrangement for Lafayette, who harbored contradictory ambitions to both fit in and stick out.

Related Characters: Sarah Vowell , Benjamin Franklin (speaker), Marquis de Lafayette

Related Themes:

Page Number: 34

Explanation and Analysis

The Freemason society was a semi-secretive gathering of men that existed on both sides of the Atlantic; many famous Enlightenment philosophers developed their ideas in the company of other Freemasons. Benjamin Franklin's assessment of the balance of "individuality" and "mutual works" is, as Vowell acknowledges, a perfect example of the struggle Lafayette himself would face—he spent much of his time in the American Revolution struggling to balance a "contradictory" personal desire for glory with his understanding of the need to cooperate.

Perhaps less obvious, however, is the elitism embedded in the Freemason brotherhood—and therefore in the governments and philosophies it helped to create. Only wealthy, well-educated white men could be Freemasons; the group's exclusivity (its "snazzy secret handshakes") was what made it so appealing. It's no wonder, then, that a government founded in Freemasonry would come up with inventions like the electoral college, which ensured that the president would ultimately be selected not by the masses, but by a select (and not very transparent) group of elite men.

Because these words convinced Louis XVI to open his heart and, more important, his wallet to the patriots, Vergennes's memo arguably had as much practical effect on the establishment of American independence as the Declaration of Independence itself. Jefferson's pretty phrases were incomplete without the punctuation of French gunpowder.

Related Characters: Sarah Vowell (speaker), King Louis XVI , Count de Vergennes , Thomas Jefferson

Related Themes:

Page Number: 50

Explanation and Analysis

History textbooks rarely dwell on the letter sent by Vergennes, France's foreign minister, encouraging Louis XVI to secretly support the rebellious colonists. But here, Vowell makes the case that this memo—which emphasized the need for geopolitical alliance and strategic violence—was just as important to the United States' success as the soaring rhetoric in the Declaration of Independence. This desire to focus on the ideals articulated in the Revolution instead of the practical conflict that realized those ideas ("pretty phrases" vs. "gunpowder") is a major reason why so many histories of the war feel sanitized.

Moreover, this passage highlights the essential French contribution to the war. Though in 2013, at the time of Vowell's writing, many Americans were passionately angry at the French (because France refused to back the U.S. invasion of Iraq), a close look at the past reveals how the United States owes its very existence to France's aid. Paradoxically, then, America could not become independent without entangling itself with another European monarchy—the very kind of government it claimed to be rebelling against.

Pages 60-125 Quotes

❝ To establish such a forthright dreamland of decency, who wouldn't sign up to shoot at a few thousand Englishmen, just as long as Mr. Bean wasn't one of them? Alas, from my end of history there's a big file cabinet blocking the view of the sweet natured Republic Lafayette foretold, and it's where the guvment keeps the folders full of Indian treaties, the Chinese Exclusion Act, and NSA-monitored electronic messages pertinent to national security.

Related Characters: Sarah Vowell (speaker), Marquis de Lafayette, Adrienne de Lafayette

Related Themes:

Page Number: 71

Explanation and Analysis

In this critique of Lafayette's sunny view of the United States—which he told his wife, Adrienne, was a place of "virtue," "equality," and "tranquil liberty"—Vowell juxtaposes the American mythology with the country's much less equal, virtuous reality. In particular, Vowell hones in on the virulent racism that has defined so much of U.S. policy. There is nothing "tranquil" about the treaties that, in concert with genocidal military campaigns, forced indigenous peoples off their lands, nor is there any equality in the Chinese Exclusion Act, which barred all immigration from China.

Vowell's choice of the "file cabinet" as metaphor is especially useful here. In public documents like the Declaration of Independence, American leaders could preach freedom for all—but in the backroom workings of bureaucracy, a much more insidious, exclusionary narrative was taking shape. Just like documents shoved in a file cabinet, America keeps its worst atrocities out of sight—but Vowell wants to ensure that they are not out of her readers' minds.

❝ The place looks wrong. I'm not bothered that the present intrudes on the past, what would the combination Pizza Hut-Taco Bell looming near a road once crammed with redcoats; or that Fuzzy Butts Dog Daycare is situated a stone's throw from the old Quaker house where Lafayette reportedly spent the night before the battle. No, my problem is springtime. The Brandywine countryside is in bloom—too green, too chirpy, too full of life.

Related Characters: Sarah Vowell (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 93

Explanation and Analysis

As Vowell later explains, her background is as an art historian, and accordingly, she is fascinated by finding tangible, sensory ways to access history. But when she visits Brandywine, there is no trace of the loss and violence that occurred there. The present has completely taken over the past: this is a place where one can get a burrito and laugh at a dog daycare with a silly name, not a place of mourning or memorial.

Vowell struggles with this seemingly peaceful field because this peace seems to symbolize just how easy it is for Americans to forget their own history. There are no

monuments or plaques to acknowledge the soldiers (and civilians) whose lives were taken or uprooted by the conflict here in 1777. When Vowell says that Brandywine feels "too chirpy," it is in part because there is no context for the real pain that occurred at this very same place. Ultimately, then, Vowell discovers an issue at Brandywine that will haunt her for the rest of her research: as someone who seeks physical evidence of history, she can find plenty of remnants of American triumphs. But the U.S. tends not to display its losses in any tangible way.

❝ Just as Densmore's religious ethics seemed to filter through his nonfiction, my background bubbles up into mine. Having studied art history, as opposed to political history, I tend to incorporate found objects into my books. Just as Pablo Picasso glued a fragment of furniture onto the canvas of *Still Life with Chair Caning*, I like to use whatever's lying around to paint pictures of the past—traditional pigment like archival documents but also the added texture of whatever bits and bobs I learn from looking out bus windows or chatting up the people I bump into on the road."

Related Characters: Sarah Vowell (speaker), Christopher Densmore

Related Themes:

Page Number: 113

Explanation and Analysis

When Vowell meets Christopher Densmore, an acclaimed Quaker historian who focuses on the history of nonviolence, she is forced to reflect on her own methodology. Vowell emphasizes that her own approach to history is based on "found objects": she is fascinated by the quotidian "texture" of everyday life, so she adds sensory information and personal stories to more traditional historical source material.

This passage is especially important as a way of understanding the overall tone of *Lafayette in the Somewhat United States*. Vowell's present-day anecdotes and humorous asides are more than just a way of keeping her readers involved in the narrative. These "bits and bobs" humanize the past, making it feel more recognizably linked to readers' own lives. And rather than putting her protagonists on a pedestal, Vowell suggests that there are ways of accessing historical figures' more everyday thought processes. Using "whatever's lying around," she can create a fuller picture of these icons than the one afforded by their best writing or most valiant battle. It is thus worth paying special attention to the firsthand impressions and jokes that Vowell sneaks in—they are, in fact, clues to another, more human kind of history.

❝ While the melodrama of hucking crates of tea into Boston Harbor continues to inspire civic-minded hotheads to this day, it's worth remembering the hordes of stoic colonial women who simply swore off tea and steeped basil leaves in boiling water to make the same point. What's more valiant: littering from a wharf or years of doing chores and looking after children from dawn to dark without caffeine?

Related Characters: Sarah Vowell (speaker), Marquis de Lafayette, Adrienne de Lafayette

Related Themes:

Page Number: 121

Explanation and Analysis

The only woman who gets any meaningful mention in Vowell's book is Adrienne, Lafayette's wife—and even then, it is only because she is continually left to fend for herself. Here, as Vowell watches a female war reenactor spin wool, she discusses the less glamorous (but no less valuable) contributions that women made to the Revolutionary effort. Whether it was creating their own clothes or imagining a new recipe for a hot drink, women were quietly creating the social and financial realities that would eventually make war possible.

Besides, while Vowell is joking about the lack of caffeine, it is no accident that she uses the word "valiant" to describe 18th-century women's childcare duties. Though men like Lafayette could only conceptualize glory as something won through dangerous battle, Vowell suggests here that other kinds of heroism are worth remembering. Still, without archival documents or commemorative landmarks, it can be more difficult to honor the lives of the women whose everyday contributions to the war effort made all the difference.

Pages 126-190 Quotes

❝ As for Washington, how could he not envy Gates? Saratoga was the turning point of the war, the most spectacular patriot victory to date. And when it went down, His Excellency was more than 200 miles away, licking his wounds from his recent setbacks.

Related Characters: Sarah Vowell (speaker), George Washington, Horatio Gates

Related Themes:

Page Number: 130

Explanation and Analysis

In the early years of the American Revolution, George Washington had yet to win a single major battle—and worse still, just after he suffered a major loss at Germantown, his colleague (and competitor) Henry Gates triumphed at Saratoga. So while today, Washington is remembered as the unequivocal hero of the war, Vowell makes clear that that was not always the case. Instead, Washington fell prey to many of the same personal jealousies that his men did, suggesting a much more flawed (and therefore more human) general than the one who is celebrated on every dollar bill.

Importantly, then, this insight into Washington's "envy" complicates the narrative that the Revolution was purely a battle fought over ideals and ideologies. Instead, it was a series of battles fought by real human beings, each with their own grievances, desires, and hopes for attaining eternal fame. And even Washington, who would later be fawned over for his "coolness and firmness," sometimes lost sight of the overall mission in favor of his own immediate wants.

> When Lafayette wrote his letter to Washington worrying that America could lose the war not at the hands of the redcoats but rather "by herself and her own sons," he might not have been referring solely to the Conway cabal. He may have also had in mind the observable fact that the military, congressional, and state bureaucracies responsible for supplying the common soldiers with luxuries like food, water, and shoes word, to use an acronym coined by the grunts of Ike's war, FUBAR.

Related Characters: Sarah Vowell , Marquis de Lafayette (speaker), George Washington, Thomas Conway , Dwight D. Eisenhower

Related Themes:

Page Number: 152

Explanation and Analysis

In a moment of intense infighting (when Thomas Conway and his friends were actively plotting Washington's downfall), Lafayette was able to see the very tangible consequences of too much debate in the highest ranks of politics. Regular people were giving up their families, their comfort, and potentially their lives for the yet-untried ideology of democracy. When each general and politician began to stick to his guns rather than work with his colleagues, regular people suffered. As Lafayette rightly noted, the only people starving the Americans were the Americans themselves—the supposedly representative government was not representing the actual citizens at all.

But even in this most fractious moment, Lafayette returned to the familial rhetoric that would be so constant throughout the Revolution, framing each of the warring factions as America's "own sons." As a true believer in the American experiment, Lafayette implicitly urged Washington to lead with the sense of care and responsibility so essential to families—and eventually, Washington would do just that, becoming a figure now frequently called the father of the United States.

> It's possible that the origin of what kept our forefathers from feeding the troops at Valley Forge is the same flaw that keeps the federal government from making sure a vet with renal failure can get a checkup, and that impedes my teachers friend's local government from keeping her in chalk, and that causes a decrepit, ninety-three-year old exploding water main to spit eight million gallons of water down Sunset Boulevard during one of the worst droughts in California history. Is it just me, or does this foible hark back to the root of the revolution itself? Which is to say, a hypersensitivity about taxes—and honest disagreement over how they're levied, how they're calculated, how that money is spent, and by whom.

Related Characters: Sarah Vowell (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 155

Explanation and Analysis

In this critical passage, Vowell draws a parallel between the administrative failures at Valley Forge and the governmental hold-ups that still plague the United States today. In each case, Vowell sees that this chaos is born from the uniquely democratic spirit of the United States—in which each individual is emboldened to fight for their own personal freedoms, to honestly "disagree" with their colleagues.

But too much disagreement, and too much emphasis on independence over cooperation, leads to breakdown. That's what happened at Valley Forge in 1777–1778, and that's what's happening during the 2013 government shutdown, when Vowell is writing the book. As Vowell has expressed since the very beginning of her book, compromise is necessary to put actual policies in place—and actual policies are necessary to help actual people.

Perhaps the single most striking point in this paragraph, though, is that Vowell specifies who, exactly, is hurt when governments take too long to agree: it is the most vulnerable people in society, whether that is sick war veterans or children without access to good school supplies. Embedded in this critique of administrative failure, then, is also a critique of where American priorities have tended to lie. Rather than prioritizing individual freedom above all else, Vowell quietly calls here for a cooperative vision of government, in which those in power are able to think outside of themselves, embracing the people (or environments) who cannot necessarily advocate for themselves.

❝ "Do not underestimate my ignorance about a war we were not really taught in England," [my British friend] continued. "We concentrated on the wars we won—the First World War, the Second, the Tudors. Nobody taught me American history. Well, maybe a bit when we study the Georges—there was always trouble off stage in America. To us it was just the loss of a colony."

Related Characters: Sarah Vowell (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 160

Explanation and Analysis

In this conversation with a friend who was born and raised in Great Britain, Vowell experiences a crucial perspective shift. On the one hand, American leaders and historians have tended to cover up some of the more violent chapters in their past, but on the other hand, they also exaggerate their victories. To some extent, this is a universal tendency—each country sees itself as the center of the world, and each country "concentrate[s] on the wars we won."

But also, as Vowell has made clear earlier, the mythology of the American Revolution was particularly important to the Americans' idea of their own success. In the first years of the war, the Patriots persuaded the French to send aid purely on the weight of symbolic victory. Thus, it's no wonder that even today, the symbolism of winning the war is essential to the United States' sense of self. And it is especially telling that even someone like Vowell, who seeks to disrupt American exceptionalism (the idea that the United States is inherently special and destined for greatness in a way no other nation is), can be shocked to find that for many people, the U.S. is "off stage" instead of at the center of the action.

❝ Washington had also been ruminating on a deeper, less obvious stumbling block than the fact that summer—and summer battle season—was coming all too soon. Namely, that the rebels under his command were not fighting to become free; they were cornered into fighting because the government of Great Britain had failed to understand that they already were. […] Yet the self-respect and self-possession that incited said people to revolt was hindering the revolution goal, independence, because functional armies required hierarchy and self-denial, orders barked and orders followed.

Related Characters: Sarah Vowell (speaker), George Washington, Marquis de Lafayette, Baron Friedrich Wilhelm von Steuben

Related Themes:

Page Number: 167

Explanation and Analysis

Already, Washington, Lafayette, and their colleagues had seen how difficult the idea of personal freedom made government. At Valley Forge, it became clear that while this representative structure could with difficulty succeed for the new United States government, the same would not be true on the battlefield. In order to succeed against the regimented British, the Patriots would need to embrace some of the hierarchy that they were ostensibly fighting against.

In addition to the supply shortages and lack of available troops, this passage makes clear that America's idealism could be a strength in some ways and a weakness in others. But more than that, this idea of newfound personal independence as well as political independence shows just how deeply Americans were internalizing the Revolutionary ideology. Rather than viewing democratic freedoms as merely abstract and large-scale, the freshly independent

U.S. citizens were beginning to change how they participated in every aspect of daily life.

"The loss of our poor child is almost constantly in my thoughts," [Lafayette] wrote to Adrienne. "This sad news followed immediately that of the treaty; and while my heart was torn by grief, I was obliged to receive and take part in expressions of public joy."

Related Characters: Sarah Vowell , Marquis de Lafayette (speaker), Adrienne de Lafayette

Related Themes:

Page Number: 172

Explanation and Analysis

Just a few days after the Franco-American alliance was formalized and made public, Lafayette learned that his two-year-old daughter Henriette had passed away. In this letter home to his wife Adrienne, Lafayette articulates the difficulty of being torn between two types of loyalty: the metaphorical family he established as a key figure in the French and Americans' partnership, and the flesh-and-blood family he had left back in Europe.

Yet even as Lafayette struggled to balance these competing objectives, he never let go of his belief in the necessity of putting "public joy" over private "grief." Perhaps this focus on political and military life above all else stemmed from Lafayette's childhood desire for glory, but Vowell seems to suggest that more than anything, Lafayette is emblematic of his time. The idea of family, it seems, meant something very different to Revolutionary-era men than it did to Revolutionary-era women. The very absence of women in Vowell's book suggests that Lafayette was able "take part" in celebration because his relationships with his fellow soldiers were more important to him than this relationships with Adrienne and Henriette.

Anyone who accepts the patriot's premise that all men are created equal must come to terms with the fact that the most obvious threat to equality in eighteenth-century North America was not taxation without representation but slavery. Parliament would abolish slavery in the British Empire in 1833, thirty years before President Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation. A return to the British fold in 1778 might have freed American slaves three decades sooner, which is what, an entire generation and a half? Was independence for some of us more valuable than freedom for all of us? As the former slave Frederick Douglass put it in an Independence Day speech in 1852, "This is your 4th of July, not mine."

Related Characters: Sarah Vowell , Frederick Douglass (speaker), Thomas Jefferson

Related Themes:

Page Number: 178

Explanation and Analysis

The Patriots claimed to fight for freedom and independence, but as Frederick Douglass's speech makes clear, that was largely rhetoric, not reality. Many of the men who wrote most eloquently about American freedoms were themselves enslavers, keeping other human beings in bondage for their own personal profit. So, just as Vowell is gearing up to celebrate America's ultimate victory over the British, she pauses to give her readers time to consider the true consequences of this triumph. Maybe the Americans had better ideas than their Redcoat rivals, but slavery was more widespread, longer-lasting, and more brutal in the U.S. than it had been overseas.

There are two other important ideas to note in this passage. First, though the Patriot forces often claimed to fight for freedom, Vowell is careful to distinguish between the concepts of "freedom" and "independence." What white Americans were really fighting for was the right to make their own rules and laws at a large scale (governmental independence), not the right to have agency over their own bodies and everyday actions (freedom). And as Vowell makes clear, at the end of the day, the American Revolution was more a conflict about financial policy than it was about lived experiences.

But most of all, this passage demonstrates the difference between theoretical ideals and real, life-changing policy. The idea of political representation that Americans fought for was an ideal. For the first decades of the U.S.'s existence, the only people who felt the practical effects of this idea were wealthy white men. But as Vowell points out when she reflects on the "generation and a half" of people who remained enslaved because the Patriots won the war,

slavery was anything but abstract. Ultimately, then, Vowell contrasts the nobility of American rhetoric with the brutality of real American policy. Words, like the famous ones Thomas Jefferson wrote on July 4th, are just words.

Pages 190-268 Quotes

"Not only was stopping at one of Springsteen's childhood homes appropriate," Sherm replies, "it was an important part of the day for me as a Jersey boy, since it served as a great reminder that not all important fights take place on battlefields. Some take place in tiny houses, or half-houses, whether with family members or within oneself, and involve changing your course, convincing your mother to rent you a guitar (or my father to buy me a typewriter,) and getting the hell out of that house, that town, that state. It's a different kind of independence, personal instead of political, but one of the many things we won in that war fought over two centuries ago turned out to be the freedom of expression that led a dude from Jersey write a song like 'Thunder Road.'"

Related Characters: Sherm (speaker), Sarah Vowell , Marquis de Lafayette

Related Themes:

Page Number: 190

Explanation and Analysis

Embracing her desire to take in all of the textures of historical landscapes, Vowell and her New Jersey-born friend Sherm stop at Bruce Springsteen's house after a day spent touring the historical Revolutionary War battlefield at Monmouth. Sherm's reflection on "a different kind of independence," uttered 250 years after the American Revolution was won, reveals just how much that war transformed not only global politics but also individual beliefs and worldviews. Sherm identifies with Springsteen because both men sought their own kind of "fight"—but rather than rebelling against the British, they rebelled against their parents or the places in which they grew up.

In one sense, Sherm's view of the Revolution's legacies is uniquely positive: he takes the Patriots' victory as an inspiration to make great art and bold life decisions. But on the other hand, it is worth examining the idea (prevalent in this quote but also in today's politics) that all things worth having in the U.S. must be "fought" for. Like Lafayette putting himself in harm's way, Americans can't seem to shake that same battlefield mindset even centuries later.

The Americans, who had been British for centuries and not British for only three years, were quick to turn on the French after Newport—too quick. Most of that ire can be explained by the current events in Rhode Island, but some of the patriot disdain was older, in their blood.

Related Characters: Sarah Vowell (speaker), Count d'Estaing , John Sullivan , Benedict Arnold

Related Themes:

Page Number: 205

Explanation and Analysis

After D'Estaing (the commander of a large French naval fleet) and Patriot General John Sullivan sparred over the proper way to invade Rhode Island, the usually peaceful partnership between the French and the Americans grew tense. Of more note, however, is the fact that the rebellious colonists were far less distinct from their enemies than they would care to admit (after all, they "had been British for centuries and not British for only three years").

The fact that the Patriots had much more in common with their English enemies than they did with their French allies would pose immediate problems—as it did in the ordeal with Saint-Sauveur, the Frenchman who was killed by Patriot soldiers. But throughout the war, the blurry line between the Patriots and the Redcoats would plague both camps in more nebulous ways as well. Whether it was in traitorous generals like Benedict Arnold (who betrayed his American colleagues) or in the families that were split when different brothers were on different sides, the divide between colony and mother country was never as neat as the two sides wanted it to be.

De Grasse cajoled Lafayette by promising "to further your glory. Lafayette later confessed, "The temptation was great, but even if the attack had succeeded, it would necessarily have cost a great deal of blood." Therefore he decided not to sacrifice the soldiers "entrusted to me to personal ambition." Lafayette was growing up. Two days later he turned twenty-four.

Related Characters: Sarah Vowell , Marquis de Lafayette (speaker), Count de Grasse , George Washington

Related Themes:

Page Number: 231

Explanation and Analysis

In the lead-up to the decisive Battle at Yorktown, de Grasse and Washington wanted to take slightly different approaches—and Lafayette, as Washington's closest French collaborator, became a critical middleman. This passage is important because it contrasts so thoroughly with the teenage Lafayette Vowell introduced at the beginning of her book. Whereas that Lafayette was initially reckless, hungry for "blood," and desperate for fame (Vowell even jokes that his prefrontal cortex had yet to develop), this more mature Lafayette is able to set aside his own "ambition" and desire for "glory" for the good of the country. This is, in part, a testament to the sense of familial obligation Lafayette felt to Washington, something he had never felt as an orphan (and certainly never seemed to feel toward his wife and children). But there is also a symbolic weight to Lafayette's newfound wisdom: if the French teenager's "growing up" parallels the growing up of the new United States, it is only fitting that he come of age right at the moment when America was about to emerge from the war victorious.

❝ Washington repeated this performance as president, leaving office after two terms rather than staying on his president for life, because he honestly wanted to live out his days, as Voltaire put it, cultivating his own garden—and painting his dining room the world's most alarming shade of green. Washington's homebody side tempered his ambition, staving off the lure of power.

Related Characters: Sarah Vowell (speaker), George Washington, Marquis de Lafayette

Related Themes:

Page Number: 233

Explanation and Analysis

Both as Commander in Chief of the Patriot army and as the first president of the United States, Washington stepped down with grace, modeling a *truly* revolutionary peaceful transfer of power for all of his successors. In some ways, then, Washington embodies what made the American experiment with democracy successful while other experiments (like the French one) failed. Washington put his ambitions for his country's strength over his ambitions for individual power, which startled the world (and even some of his own colleagues).

But what is most striking about this passage is Washington's unexpected "homebody" commitment to domestic life. While many of his colleagues, Lafayette included, abandoned their families to join in the fighting, Washington balanced his loyalty to his country with his loyalty to his wife and peaceful "garden." In other words, in addition to being a surrogate father to Lafayette and the symbolic father of the United States, Washington remained a real father. And perhaps it was his ability to priortize his own flesh-and-blood family that made Washington such a great patriarch for the symbolic American family.

❝ For that reason, some scholars consider this somewhat forgotten maritime dust up—referred to as the Battle of the Chesapeake [...]—to be the most important altercation of the American Revolution, a take that's all the more astonishing considering not a single American took part in it. Nor did a single American even witness it.

Related Characters: Sarah Vowell (speaker), Marquis de Lafayette, Alexander Hamilton , Count de Grasse

Related Themes:

Page Number: 234

Explanation and Analysis

While Lafayette and Alexander Hamilton encircled the British on land near Yorktown, the truly definitive clash happened at sea, when the British navy sailed south to face off against its French counterpart (led by Count de Grasse). On the one hand, then, this critical battle once more disrupts the narrative of a ragtag band of Patriot soldiers facing off against the more organized Redcoats. In many ways, this final conflict was more about European power politics than it was about Americans' views on taxation or independence.

Even more importantly, however, is Vowell's emphasis on the fact that not a single American "even witness[ed]" this world-altering battle. Rather than the neat history that is told today, Vowell suggests that the real truth of the war is more ambiguous—and more difficult to know—than any textbook or cheerful reenactment can capture. Though the Revolution is defining of so many aspects of the American psyche, perhaps no American can ever truly understand the war that shaped their country.

Over at the battlefield, we drove from the site of the French encampment to the French artillery park to the French Cemetery, where someone had left a single yellow daisy on the plaque commemorating the burial of fifty unknown French soldiers. Then we went for lunch on the York River waterfront at the Water Street Grille, a few yards away from a statue of Admiral de Grasse. There were freedom fries on the menu.

Related Characters: Sarah Vowell (speaker), Count de Grasse

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 240

Explanation and Analysis

In the early 2000s, after France refused to aid the U.S. in its invasion of Iraq, many Americans turned against the French. At its most extreme, this anti-French sentiment led some politicians to push for renaming French fries to "freedom fries," and many menus in federal buildings were actually rewritten to reflect this change. For Vowell, whose historical methodology involves comparing the "textures" of everyday life then and now, such a seemingly mundane shift is particularly revealing of how history gets passed down and revised.

Therefore, Vowell uses this passage to juxtapose the historical reality—in which the French were an absolutely vital ally to the Patriot forces—with the present-day understanding of that alliance. Almost poetically, a statue of de Grasse (an embodiment of the 18th-century Franco-American alliance) exists in the same geographic location as a menu with freedom fries on it (which symbolizes how contemporary Americans have forgotten that alliance).

Vowell thus shows just how easily one nation can forget what it owes to other nations. But she also shows how we live, every day, with tangible history. A site that was once a violent, pivotal battle has now become a peaceful place to get lunch, French fries become freedom fries, and life moves on.

The lesson of Yorktown is the value of cooperation—the lack of it among Britain's top commanders, and the overwhelming strength of the Franco-American alliance. […] A more interesting aspect of the Franco-American collaboration was the way the French and American officers kept talking each other out of bad ideas.

Related Characters: Sarah Vowell (speaker), George Washington, Count de Grasse

Related Themes:

Page Number: 241

Explanation and Analysis

If many of the early chapters of *Lafayette in the Somewhat United States* are devoted to the perils of too much democracy—disagreement, petty infighting, and administrative failure—now, Vowell presents an example of successful democratic governance. Rather than trying to lead unilaterally, Washington and de Grasse debated and compromised with each other. The two leaders were able to listen to opinions besides their own, and so they were able to "talk each other out of bad ideas." In this case, rather than simply slowing down the political process, democracy made it more effective.

It is fascinating that rather than showing American politicians working together well, Vowell uses a Franco-American relationship as the model for successful democracy. Though Vowell has earlier discussed how the U.S. was uniquely able to succeed with its representative government, here, she suggests that what matters most to democracy is not any particular national identity but rather the individual personalities involved. Washington and de Grasse were both patient, open-minded leaders, and so despite being from different sides of the Atlantic, they were able to work together effectively.

Following the lead of John Adams, Americans prefer to think of the American Revolution not as an eight-year war but rather as a revolution "effected before the War commenced." We like to believe, as Adams did, that the revolution was "in the minds and hearts of the people," as opposed to the amputated limbs and bayoneted torsos of Continental and French casualties.

Related Characters: Sarah Vowell , John Adams (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 258

Explanation and Analysis

At Yorktown, Vowell reflects on why the United States celebrates July 4th—the day the Declaration of Independence was signed—as opposed to Yorktown Day,

the date five years later when the final battle was actually won. In this passage, one of the most important in the entire book, Vowell realizes that since the very beginning of this nation's history, Americans have tried to present the Revolutionary War as an ideological one, not a practical (violent) one. It follows, then, that the victory worth celebrating is rhetorical, not tangible—that American Independence Day honors a shift in people's "hearts," not their actual legal rights.

There are several complications that such an emotional understanding of the war creates. First, it allows Americans to smooth over the messier parts of the narrative: the violence that it took to turn independence from an idea into a reality, and the "Continental" (French) help that was necessary to win battles on the ground. Perhaps more damagingly, suggesting that the Revolution was really about a battle for noble ideals (freedom and equality, to name a few) obscures the fact that most people in America were not made free or equal by the Declaration of Independence—or by the victory at Yorktown. Instead, slavery and violence against indigenous people would persist for decades, and the legacy of those atrocities lingers even today.

❝ Appeals upheld a ruling against discrimination in the issuing of permits and chastised the National Park Service's periodic attempts to curb demonstrations in Lafayette Square "because use of parks for public assembly and airing of opinions is historic in our democratic society, and one of its cardinal values."

Related Characters: Sarah Vowell (speaker), Marquis de Lafayette

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 265

Explanation and Analysis

By choosing to end *Lafayette in the Somewhat United States* with a focus on the protests in Lafayette Square, Vowell expands the timeline of her history; rather than suggesting that American democracy was created in a very short period in the late 1700s, she instead posits that it is still being built and altered even today. Each time a new group of protesters—whether it is anti-Vietnam War activists or women advocating for the right to vote—join in Lafayette Square, they are continuing the work of expanding the freedom and equality that was initially so limited. And rather than granting political rights to a select group of elite white men, this park (located right in front of the White House) allows anyone the freedom to "air [...] opinions."

Moreover, this quote positions Lafayette as the symbolic (and to some extent literal) guardian of democracy, this most "cardinal [American] value." As Vowell demonstrates, time and again activists at this square call out to the statue of the French general at the center. And so just as the Marquis de Lafayette was a critical figure in that first wave of building American democracy, even in the 21st century, his memory continues to turn rhetoric into reality.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

PAGES 1-59

Author Sarah Vowell introduces her hero, the Marquis de Lafayette, a wealthy French teenager who traveled to Philadelphia in 1777, at the start of the American Revolution. General George Washington hired Lafayette to work in the Patriot army in part because the young aristocrat was willing to work for free—and in part because Washington thought that working with a well-connected Frenchman would encourage Louis XVI, King of France, to bankroll the Americans' war. Though the Patriots were fighting against British taxation, they hypocritically had no problem with Louis XVI, who taxed his subjects at even higher rates.

From the beginning, Vowell portrays Lafayette as the human embodiment of France's contribution to the American Revolution. On an ideological level, the Franco-American alliance doesn't make sense—the Americans were fighting for democracy, and King Louis governed one of the most hierarchical monarchies in the world. But the generous personalities and passionate friendships of people like Lafayette were enough to tie these two unlikely partners together.

Lafayette was only 19 when he joined the American forces. But Vowell points out that the new United States' founders made lots of terrible decisions, including the electoral college and the three-fifths compromise around slavery. Ultimately, though Lafayette made plenty of reckless decisions, his eagerness to help proved immensely useful in the war. As Vowell puts it, it might have been the "the last time in history a Frenchman shirked rest and relaxation to get back to work."

Here, Vowell introduces two crucial ideas. First, though Patriot soldiers claimed to fight for freedom, their definition of freedom was extremely limited. The electoral college was designed to exclude lower-class men from voting, while the three-fifths compromise dehumanized enslaved Black people and denied them equal rights (it essentially deemed that each enslaved Black person would count as only three-fifths of a person for the purpose of representation in the House of Representatives). Second, Vowell begins to draw a parallel between Lafayette and the new United States, showing that both the man and the country were young and had a lot to learn about patience and cooperation.

In 1824, years after Americans had won the war and established their own government, Lafayette returned for a tour across the U.S. The former general was greeted as a celebrity everywhere he went: thousands of people flocked to see him in Philadelphia and New York, and artisans cranked out commemorative souvenirs of his visits. This trip through America was especially important for Lafayette because, soon after the Americans won independence, he had seen revolution fail in his own country.

That Lafayette remained so popular even 40 years after the end of the Revolution is a testament to how much French aid mattered to the Americans. It is also worth noting that, despite being so closely allied during the war, the Americans and French soon diverged in their paths toward democracy. This question—why was America able to achieve democracy where France could not?—will be a central topic throughout Vowell's book.

One of the stops on Lafayette's 1824 tour was Albany, where he visited Colonel Peter Gansevoort. In the Revolution, Gansevoort had helped the Americans win the Battle of Saratoga, a victory that then convinced the French to back the new U.S. government. Gansevoort passed on his admiration of Lafayette to his nephew Herman Melville, who would go on to write the classic novel *Moby-Dick*. No matter where he went, Vowell explains, Lafayette seemed to stir up this "delirium of feeling," gaining American citizens' love and admiration.

Melville is one of the most important American writers in the country's history; many consider Moby-Dick to be "the great American novel." The fact that Lafayette was such an influence on Melville's life symbolically demonstrates Lafayette's important to American culture and art more broadly.

Though Americans of all stripes appreciated Lafayette, 1824 was not an easy time politically for the U.S. Andrew Jackson had just won the popular vote, but the electoral college had instead selected John Quincy Adams as president, prompting popular outrage. Plus, more and more members of the Revolutionary generation were dying off—Adams and Jackson were the first two presidential candidates not to have fought in the war. The American people were nostalgic for the founders. And Lafayette was nostalgic, too: when he visited Thomas Jefferson at Monticello in Virginia, both men wept.

Here and elsewhere, Vowell is careful to note that the good feeling and unity that Lafayette represented was an exception, not the norm. When Lafayette returned for his tour, the wealthy coastal elites (many of them descended, like John Quincy Adams, from Founding Fathers), were at odds with the masses, who wanted Andrew Jackson to be president. Thus, even as Americans mourned the founding generation, they began to resent inventions like the electoral college, which claimed to be democratic but were in fact exclusive.


Lafayette's journey was also a boon to the growing newspaper industry. In 1824, printing presses were considered essential to the preservation of American freedom; in the pages of newspapers, citizens could debate and criticize policies without ever coming to violence. Just as Andrew Jackson made a show of peacefully congratulating rival John Quincy Adams on the presidency, anti-Adams Americans were able to turn to the press (and not the bayonet) to vent their grievances.

Still, despite political tensions, Americans were able to resolve their differences without recourse to violence. This is especially important to note in comparison with France, where the independence movement quickly devolved into intense, widespread violence (an era known today as the Reign of Terror).

Still, as Vowell points out, conflict has always been a part of U.S. political life. Lafayette's warm welcome "cannot be written off as the product of a simpler, more agreeable time" because "there was no simpler, more agreeable time." For example, after John Adams began the First Continental Congress with a simple ceremonial prayer, Americans of different faiths immediately began to squabble about whether or not such a prayer was appropriate. Thus, even as the various colonies tried to rally against the British, they were always plagued by intense infighting.

In this essential passage, Vowell insists that heated debate and disagreement have been a part of the U.S. since day one—literally. Rather than encouraging nostalgia for the past, Vowell instead suggests that such conflict will always be part of any society that tries to include a multitude of opinions. Fascinatingly, some of the debates in that time—over the appropriateness of prayer in government settings, for example—still echo today.

On a tour of Philadelphia's Independence Hall, Vowell reflects on the various conflicts that defined the Constitutional Convention. The founders could not agree on how long presidents should serve, or on how to deal with the issue of slavery in a country that claimed to fight for freedom. Eventually, 39 out of the 55 delegates signed the Constitution, though many retained their doubts. The tour guide in Independence Hall shows Vowell George Washington's chair, which had a sun carved into the back of it. After the Constitution was signed, a newly optimistic Washington declared that "now…I have the happiness to know it is a rising, and not a setting sun."

As she will do often throughout the book, Vowell's understanding of history is shaped or altered by a physical object—in this case, George Washington's chair. But rather than accepting the sunny outlook indicated by this chair, Vowell juxtaposes Washington's optimism with the conflict and uncertainty that accompanied the writing of the Constitution. It is especially worth noting Vowell's mention of the tension over slavery, as less than 100 years later, the country would erupt into civil war over this very issue.

Vowell is skeptical of this optimism, especially because she is researching this book in 2013, when Republican Senator Ted Cruz has shut down the federal government in protest of the Democrats' Affordable Care Act. This political deadlock, Vowell points out, is also nothing new. In fact, she suggests that rather than Washington's sunny chair, a more appropriate symbol for democracy might be one of Jefferson's chairs—namely, one he crossed the room to sit in as a gesture of good will during a particularly heated policy debate. To Vowell, Jefferson's chair demonstrates the "amount of respect, affection, and wishy-washy give and take needed to keep a house divided in reasonable repair."

Vowell now draws a straight line between the polarized political history she is writing about and her own polarized present. In both eras, productive debate becomes unproductive when people (in this case, Ted Cruz) refuse to negotiate or compromise. Not for the last time, Vowell asserts the necessity of "give and take" in a democracy: when many voices are elevated, no one person is ever going to get their way without making some concessions.

The government shutdown worries Vowell for another reason: as long as U.S. employees are furloughed, many of the historical monuments Vowell has planned to visit for her research will remain closed. Fortunately, Congress is able to reopen the government just in time for Vowell to revisit Yorktown, the site of the Americans' most crucial victory. Alongside her sister and her pre-teen nephew, Vowell is able to witness Yorktown Day, in which French citizens celebrate the French contribution to the American Revolution's success.

Compromise is especially important because political debates—many of which are long, drawn-out thought experiments—can have real human consequences. Not only is Vowell's trip threatened by the 2013 shutdown, but thousands of federal employees were suddenly furloughed, meaning their livelihoods were put their risk.

The French were not so lucky with their own revolutionary efforts. Though at first, the French Revolution of 1789 seemed guided by high-minded, democratic principles, the violence quickly escalated beyond the point of reason. As more and more French aristocrats were guillotined, moderate revolutionaries like Lafayette had to flee to protect themselves. When Vowell visits Jefferson's Monticello, she asks British historian Andrew Jackson O'Shaughnessy about why the French failed where the Americans succeeded. O'Shaughnessy explains that while pre-war Americans had been able to practice small forms of democratic governance in town halls and colonial legislatures, the French had had no such options prior to their revolutionary efforts.

As she looks more closely at the difference between the American and French Revolutions, Vowell again demonstrates just how difficult it is to achieve and maintain democracy. In order to pull off such a system at the federal level, Americans needed practice. As O'Shaughnessy explains, it was essential that the nation's founders had gotten to try out these processes of debate and compromise on a smaller scale. In other words, rather than being natural or inborn (as many Enlightenment philosophers believed), Vowell paints democratic politics as something to be learned.

Most of all, though, O'Shaughnessy argues that Americans got so good at political debate because they really "enjoyed it." From the fiery rhetoric used in early revolutionary debates to the backroom deals that eventually ended the 2013 government shutdown, American politics has always worked best when leaders know when to argue and when to compromise. Indeed, after only five months in the U.S., even Lafayette realized that total agreement would be nearly impossible. From the very beginning, the country was plagued by the "fatal tendency of disunion."

Here, O'Shaughnessy seems to argue that democracy is most successful when infighting and negotiating are treated as "enjoy[able]" on their own terms. Instead of taking an absolutist view or an extreme, dramatic stance, Vowell argues that politicians function best when they take pleasure in making democracy and cooperation work against all odds. After all, democratic government was never destined to succeed—"disunion" has been a persistent threat since Lafayette's time.

No matter what, though, Lafayette was always loyal to George Washington. Even at the beginning of the war, when many political leaders doubted him—and when many generals tried to usurp his power—Lafayette believed in the future president. And similarly, Vowell admits that she was drawn to Lafayette because he is one of the very few people that seems to inspire admiration and faith in Americans across ideologies.

In a society of clashing opinions, it is rare that a public figure is able to unify people of different beliefs. After a rocky start, George Washington was one of those figures, and Lafayette was another. This passage is also notable because it is the first mention of Lafayette's lifelong close friendship with General Washington, a friendship that would have profound geopolitical consequences.

Though Lafayette wanted to fight in America for many reasons (boredom and a thirst for fame among them), his main motivation was his grudge against the British. After a humiliating military loss to the British in 1763, most Frenchmen wanted to get back at their rivals. But Lafayette was especially angry because the British army had killed his father in combat. Though Lafayette was born and raised in the sleepy, rural French province of Auvergne, he felt that his destiny was on a far-away battlefield, where he could avenge his father and grandfather's deaths.

Wars, like governments, are underpinned by people's varying backgrounds and opinions. More than any political or ideological motivation, Lafayette wanted to go to war because he sought revenge—and because he was bored of his quiet, rural life. Lafayette's desire for bloodshed over boredom would remain a recurrent pattern throughout his life.

Vowell visits Auvergne, where she is charmed to experience an "old-fangled French time warp." She learns that in Lafayette's childhood, the town was stalked by the mythical Beast of Gévaudan. Eight-year-old Lafayette, always up for "glorious deeds," was constantly trying to kill the monster. The locals also take Vowell on a tour of Lafayette's childhood home. While there, Vowell recalls that Lafayette's mother died when the boy was only 12, leaving him "the richest orphan in France."

In addition to another reminder of Lafayette's desire for glory, it is important to note his extreme wealth. Ultimately, many of the ways that Lafayette would contribute to the American cause were financial, whether it was providing uniforms or just being able to volunteer his time.

Having lost both his parents before he became a teenager, Lafayette was always in search of a family—and though he hoped to find one through military service, he got one through marriage. By the time he was 15, however, he was paired up with Adrienne, the daughter of the powerful French noble Jean de Noailles. The marriage cemented both Lafayette and Adrienne as important French royals, though the new French queen Marie-Antoinette famously laughed at Lafayette out of court when she noticed his poor dancing skills.

There are two essential ideas in this passage. First, having lost his parents at a young age, Lafayette was looking for a surrogate family—which he would ultimately find in George Washington. Second, even though Lafayette has come to symbolize democracy and independence, he was in the same social circle as Queen Marie-Antoinette, who was directly associated with corrupt monarchy.

Lafayette was supposed to serve his father-in-law's cavalry unit in Provence, but that seemed boring, so the rebellious teenager quickly got himself fired (as he put it, "I did not hesitate to preserve my independence"). Instead, soon after getting Adrienne pregnant, Lafayette joined the mysterious Freemason society, where he heard news that the American Revolution had begun. Right away, Lafayette knew what he wanted to do: cross the Atlantic and fight for this new country's independence.

Again, Vowell draws a parallel between Lafayette and the fledgling United States—both are recklessly determined to remain "independent[t]" at all costs. For Lafayette, and for many of the men who fought in the Revolutionary War, that desire for independence was not just political but domestic. Though Lafayette loved his wife, he could never seem to share a life with her for very long.

Masonic societies were important breeding grounds for democratic thought on both sides of the ocean. In the colonies, both Washington and Benjamin Franklin were Masons. In France, important Enlightenment philosophers developed their theories of government and human rights over dinner with their Masonic colleagues. Lafayette loved this brotherhood, in part because it provided the surrogate family he so desperately craved. But he was also drawn to the exchange of ideas—in particular, Lafayette embraced the abolition of slavery as essential. A few years later, motivated by his Masonic colleagues, he bought a planation in French Guinea and emancipated the enslaved people who lived on it.

Even before Lafayette crossed the Atlantic, he had been exposed to many of the same ideas driving the American rebellion. But crucially, Lafayette followed the Masonic value of freedom through to its logical conclusion—namely, that slavery was inhumane and needed to be abolished. The same was not true of his Patriot colleagues, who would not outlaw slavery in the Constitution.

While Lafayette was planning to abandon his family in France, Silas Deane, a politician in Connecticut, was set on doing the same thing to his wife and child in America. Whereas Lafayette hoped to fight in the colonies, Deane wanted to serve as an American ambassador in France. In particular, Deane's mission abroad was two-fold: he needed to recruit French fighters and to convince the French government to fund the revolutionary war effort.

To emphasize just how willing these revolutionary men were to leave their families, Vowell introduces the reader to Silas Deane, the Patriot ambassador to France. Not only did Deane mistreat his family, but he was often more interested in his own personal gain than in actually aiding the war effort (as can be seen in the ill-equipped Frenchmen he often sent to George Washington).

Since the French had just lost a war to the British, they did not have the excess money necessary to support the American rebels. But the French hatred for the British—best embodied by the French foreign minister, the Count de Vergennes—was so deep that the French got involved anyway. Vergennes hired Pierre-Augustin Caron de Beaumarchais, a popular playwright, to spy on various British officials in preparation for conflict. Beaumarchais then befriended prominent American rebels, including the Virginia-born Arthur Lee. After hearing Lee and others describe their passion for the war efforts, Beaumarchais was so hooked on the idea of the revolution that he wrote directly to King Louis XVI, advising that France should smuggle weapons into America.

Though many history textbooks present the American Revolution as a story of ideological change, Vowell is careful to note just how many different factors made the war possible. Flamboyant characters like Beaumarchais, for instance, got involved in the action more out of a love of scheming than any higher political beliefs. Moreover, the French were driven by a desire for revenge so strong that it usurped any risks the American Revolution might have posed. After all, why else would a monarchy support a war to overthrow another monarchy?

Before Vergennes committed to involving France in the war, however, he sent a fact-finder to America with the express purpose of finding out just how serious the Patriots really were. The answer was complicated: fighting had already begun at Lexington and Concord (in Massachusetts), but many politicians were still hoping that King George III would put an end to parliamentary taxation. In fact, Thomas Jefferson even wrote directly to the British king (what is now known as the Olive Branch Petition), asking him to intervene on the colonists' behalf.

Surprisingly, America's founders looked to British King George III not as a villain but as a possible savior—as with King Louis of France, the Patriots could not quite shake their lifetimes spent trusting monarchs. The Olive Branch Petition is evidence that although the Americans were dreaming of a new kind of government, they could not quite let go of the ideas and people they had been raised with.

This confusing effort to establish a last-ditch relationship with the monarchy ultimately did nothing but embarrass the Patriots. It also led to conflict between Pennsylvania Quaker John Dickinson, who wanted to avoid violence at all costs, and future president John Adams, who thought this degree of moderation was foolish.

At every stage of the war, religious and political conflict threatened to disrupt Patriot efforts. Both Dickinson and Adams are essential American figures—Adams because he was the second president of the U.S., and Dickinson because he wrote some of the most important American political texts (namely, "Letters from a Pennsylvania Farmer"). It is especially telling, then, that no one of these men was objectively right. Rather, each had a different and valid approach to achieving independence.

After the failure of the Olive Branch Petition, Thomas Jefferson drafted the Declaration of Independence, cementing the Americans' willingness to go to war. (Interestingly, that Declaration, written by a slave-holder, contains the famous phrase "all men are created equal"). There would be no more Patriot compromises. So, by the time he returned home to France, Vergennes's fact-finder could report that Americans were dead set on going to war. In fact, they were so committed that despite being understaffed and underfunded, Vergennes believed their passion might just fuel them to victory.

Nothing better symbolizes the contradiction of America's founding than the fact that Jefferson, himself a future president, could proclaim equality while being a slaveholder. It is also worth noting Vowell's focus on the American passion for this war. For the French (and later, to other European countries), the Americans' willingness to fight even in the face of likely defeat was an essential part of why this scrappy army seemed worth backing.

In a letter to Louis XVI, Vergennes suggested that the French should send secret aid to the Patriots, so as to avoid starting an overt war with Britain. Ultimately, Vowell argues that Vergennes' decision to push for aid was just as important to American independence as Jefferson's Declaration. But Vowell also calls attention to the argument made by France's finance minister, Anne-Robert-Jacques Turgot. Turgot believed that the colonies were right to want freedom, but he also believed that independence was "inevitable"—and that France should avoid the financial strain of giving the Patriots arms. Vergennes won the debate in the moment, but Turgot was right. The money Louis XVI sent to the U.S. caused even greater poverty in France, prompting the revolts that would eventually lead to Louis's downfall and death.

Though in recent years, Americans have downplayed French contributions to the Revolution, Vowell is clear that French figures like Vergennes were every bit as essential to Patriot success as their U.S. counterparts. Worse still, though the French provided essential aid and guidance at every stage of the conflict, the United States would not return the favor less than a decade later, when the French fought for their own independence.

With Beaumarchais's help, Vergennes created a plan to secretly send aid to the Americans, through Silas Deane. Even as the French began to stockpile weapons, however, the British were faster. Thousands of Redcoats came over in ships and attacked the Patriots at a series of battles across New York (which would remain under English control for the rest of the Revolution).

Given that the Franco-American alliance was tenuous and separated by a giant ocean, it makes sense that—at least at first—the British were capable of communicating and acting faster. It is also important to remember that especially at the beginning of the war, the Americans were at a huge disadvantage compared to their better-funded, better-organized rivals.

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Meanwhile, Beaumarchais went undercover to stockpile more guns and ships—only to reveal his true identity when he saw a group of actors putting on a subpar production of his play, *The Barber of Seville*. The British complained to the French about this playwright-spy, and Beaumarchais had to stand down. However, by the time the British found out what was going on, Beaumarchais had already sent most of his supplies across the Atlantic.

In this silly anecdote, Vowell again reminds her readers that many Revolutionary War events were lucky or coincidental. If a bad play can change the course of history, then anything is possible. Rather than seeing the Patriot victory as a destined triumph, Vowell portrays the Revolution as a collection of human mistakes and successes.

In other good news, Washington had just had his first success of the war. In December of 1776, the general led Patriot troops across the Delaware River in New Jersey to launch a sneak attack on the Hessians (Germans who were under temporary hire as British soldiers). Though Washington's victory had little tactical effect, it cheered the rebellious colonists and prompted the French to offer up even more of their resources.

This early victory—the subject of the famous painting Washington Crossing the Delaware*—shows the importance of symbolic success for the Patriot forces. Even when they could not reclaim large chunks of land, the Americans' show of force and resilience was enough to win them the French support they needed to go keep going.*

The French sent guns, but they also sent high-ranking officials and engineers (including Pierre L'Enfant, who would later plan the city of Washington, D.C.). Some of these military men wanted to unseat George Washington as Commander in Chief and pressured Silas Deane to allow them to do so. Lafayette also went through Deane—but unlike some of his older, more titled counterparts, Lafayette had nothing but respect for the American generals he planned to serve.

Just as the nation's founders debated laws and political principles, they also fought even pettier, more personal battles—especially over who got to command the Patriot forces. Also of note is that D.C., the capital of the U.S., was designed by a Frenchman. This is yet another example of France's role in shaping American life.

When Noailles learned of his son-in-law Lafayette's plans, he forbade Lafayette and his young friends from crossing the Atlantic. To appease Noailles, Lafayette—stubborn as ever—pretended to drop the idea of joining the war. He even took a quick trip to England, where he talked about revolution with important British officials like General Henry Clinton (the man who would later be put in charge of the whole Redcoat operation). But on his way back from England, rather than returning to his wife's home, Lafayette instead snuck onto the *Victory*, a ship he had purchased for the express purpose of going to America.

Lafayette's fly-by-night escape from France is perhaps the most obvious evidence of the fact that as a 19-year-old, Lafayette was not yet a responsible decision-maker. To this wealth French teen, the war was more of a game than anything. In this passage, he essentially plays hide-and-seek with the French nobility.

Lafayette's secret exit horrified Noailles and upset Adrienne, his now very pregnant wife. For his part, Lafayette's guilt about leaving his wife did cause him to return to France—but only briefly. All it took was one royal aide encouraging Lafayette to head to America, and he was off again, going to Spain and then across the Atlantic. Vowell surmises that Lafayette's antics can be attributed to the fact that as a teenager, his prefrontal cortex (the part of the brain that assesses risk) had yet to be fully formed.

There are two important things to take in here. First, Lafayette is willing to put a country he has never even visited above his wife and unborn child; like many men of the Revolutionary generation, he prioritized glory and ideological pride over any domestic bonds. Second, Lafayette's immaturity at the beginning of his journey parallels the immaturity of the new United States, which had yet to come together into a unified whole.

Lafayette had endless faith in the new American republic: he saw the nation as a "sure refuge of virtue, of honesty, of tolerance, of equality." Vowell points out that he was overly optimistic, as U.S. history (from the brutal treatment of indigenous peoples to the Chinese Exclusion Act) is defined by intolerance and a lack of equality. At the same time, despite his naivete and his desire for glory, Lafayette's promise that he was "coming as a friend" would prove true for the next 40 years. And while Lafayette was a hero on the battlefield, he also performed a host of "dull grown-up kindness" (like arranging trade agreements) later on.

Just as Jefferson used the word "equal" in the Declaration of Independence, Lafayette marveled at the seeming sense of "equality" that he witnessed in America. In both cases, this rhetoric of equal rights obscured the inequality at the very foundation of U.S. history—the mass murder of indigenous peoples and the practice of slavery. Though Lafayette may initially have been naïve, despite his private abolitionist views, he did not ever use his position as a "friend" of the nation to push for an end to slavery.

After a long, nauseating voyage, Lafayette at last arrived in Charleston, South Carolina on June 13, 1777. Though the city was hot and filled with mosquitoes, Lafayette thought it was the most wonderful place he had ever been. He was particularly taken with the sense that in America, "all citizens were brothers."

Again, the claim that "all citizens were brothers" ignores just how many people were denied citizenship—and brotherhood—because of race or gender at this time. Furthermore, Lafayette's use of the word "brothers" shows that he is already beginning to think about his fellow revolutionaries as a surrogate family.

Lafayette and his associates then began the long, difficult journey north toward Pennsylvania (all of which Lafayette paid for). Though many of his comrades complained of the physical hardship, Lafayette's letters to Adrienne were filled only with praise for the "vast forests and immense rivers" he encountered. He also, again, celebrated the sense of equality he felt with all those around him—though Vowell points out that "only a white guy" could feel that way.

Throughout the book, Vowell is fascinated by the gap between beautiful landscapes—in this case, those "vast forest"—and the horrible things that took place in them. While Lafayette praises America's natural beauty, echoing the pastoral image that most Europeans had of the New World, he ignores the human horrors (primarily slavery) taking place around him.

After a 32-day trek to Pennsylvania, Lafayette hoped that the Continental Congress would rejoice at his arrival. Instead, they dismissed him; the Patriot politicians were sick of fancy Frenchmen (many of them sent by Silas Deane) coming over and demanding a high-ranking office. As Washington put it, "these men have no attachments or ties to the country."

Lafayette was not the only Frenchman hungry for glory—in fact, many such men had already tried to join the war effort. In a revolution so founded on a shared pride and belief in this new nation, the French soldiers' lack of "attachment" was particularly frustrating.

One particularly egregious case of this was when Phillipe Du Courdray, a high-status Frenchman, tried to unseat the American Henry Knox. Knox was a Boston bookseller whose business was gravely affected by the Intolerable Acts (a steep 1774 British tax). When the British moved to attack Boston in March of 1776, Knox was able to sneak away to Fort Ticonderoga in New York, where many of the Patriots' weapons were held. Knox then smuggled the weapons thousands of miles—overnight—up to Boston, allowing the Americans to fend off the encroaching Redcoats. The idea that such a man as Knox could be replaced by a French stranger was therefore ridiculous.

The conflict between Du Courdray and Knox, in which a titled Frenchman tried to unseat an iconic American hero, would repeat itself later with Washington and French general Thomas Conway. Ultimately, men like Knox and Washington—the first American celebrities of sorts—would triumph over their more titled French counterparts. But the fact that there was even a question shows just how much the United States needed to stay on good terms with the French, even if it meant upsetting homegrown war heroes.

Still, Congress was hesitant about annoying the French but ignoring Du Courdray (who claimed that he was much closer to Louis XVI than he actually was). Eventually, the entire debacle was sorted out, but it made Congress skeptical about rewarding Lafayette with a fancy title. It was only when Lafayette promised to serve "at his own expense" and "as a volunteer" that the Patriots agreed to let him join. From his first moments in the U.S., Vowell comments, Lafayette seemed to have "vomited up his adolescent petulance," emerging as a more thoughtful and mature man than he had been on the European side of the Atlantic.

Lafayette's selflessness is uncharacteristic, especially when compared to his actions of only a few months before (when he skipped out on his pregnant wife to come to America). If this book is, in part, Lafayette's coming-of-age story, his decision to volunteer himself is a pivotal moment in his growth.

After speaking with Congress, Lafayette met with Washington and found himself instantly amazed by the famed general. The two men became fast friends, especially once Washington asked Lafayette to "consider himself at all times as one of his family." For the orphaned teenager, this kind of father figure was exactly what he had been looking for.

Lafayette had just abandoned his flesh-and-blood family back in France, but as someone from a long line of soldiers, perhaps the teenager was craving a particular kind of wartime bond. Plus, the fact that Washington described Lafayette as "one of his family" suggests that many Patriots were starting to think more readily of their fellow soldiers as family members.

Lafayette hoped that eventually he would stop being a volunteer and gain an actual title, which made for some awkwardness with Washington. But the awkwardness was overcome when once Lafayette saw how outmatched the Patriots were; many of them had only torn **hunting shirts** instead of proper uniforms, for example. Yet rather than critique Washington's work, Lafayette embraced this raggedness as yet another example of a kind of uniquely American "virtue."

Hunting shirts are an important symbol throughout Vowell's work. On the one hand, these torn shirts show how few resources the Patriots had to work with. But on the other hand, the fact that the Americans were willing to stand and fight even without the proper attire shows their passion for democracy, a kind of idyllic "virtue" that would inspire their allies abroad.

Besides, while there was lots of internal conflict on the colonists' side, the British were far from unified in their fight against the Patriots. Most crucially, British Commander in Chief William Howe had a plan to attack the Patriots at Albany from all sides, but Parliament refused to give him the troops he needed to accomplish this goal. Howe decided to change course and attack Philadelphia, but the officials in London never comprehended this plan, either, leading to a lot of tactical confusion on the British side.

Infighting constantly threatened to derail the American forces, but poor communication was an issue for the British as well. Several years later, the Redcoat generals' inability to communicate with one another at Yorktown would result in the Americans winning the war.

Meanwhile, Washington was coming to terms with his troops' inherent weakness. ("Are these the men with which I am to defend America?" he once famously asked.) Stressed and overworked, Washington decided to embrace what is known as the Fabian strategy, in which one army continually retreats, hoping to outlast an opponent and therefore eventually defeat them. When Washington realized that Howe was planning to attack Philadelphia, he decided to apply this strategy and let the new nation's capital be slowly taken by the British.

Washington's decision to employ the Fabian strategy demonstrates just how dire the Patriot situation really was. Though it was likely a wise tactical choice, many members of Congress were frustrated and humiliated that Washington kept pushing their troops to retreat. This conflict between politicians and the Commander in Chief would continue to bubble up throughout the war.


In 2013, Vowell revisits the Brandywine countryside, the part of Pennsylvania in which Washington fought a brutal battle with General Howe. Vowell is surprised to find that the once-famous site now is occupied by a combination Pizza Hut-Taco Bell. Additionally, the Battle of Brandywine was fought in the winter, and Vowell is visiting in the spring. It is hard for her to process that centuries ago, these lush **fields** were the site of such violence. Plus, Vowell has to contend with Nick, the very grumpy tour guide she's hired.

Though the Revolutionary War was a time of great violence, illness, and death, that history isn't very tangible in today's United States. Vowell is repeatedly struck by the fact that former battlefields have become suburbs or peaceful valleys. The fact that these sites go unmarked, instead appearing as picturesque fields, symbolizes how the history of the American Revolution has been rewritten. The violence and conflict necessary for American victory has largely been smoothed over, replaced with a simpler narrative of ideological triumph.

Though the Battle of Brandywine is famous mostly for the mistakes that both Washington and Howe made, Vowell is en route to a surprisingly festive celebration of this fateful battle. Vowell is amused that contemporary Pennsylvanians are able to celebrate a battle that was far from victorious for the Americans. The Patriots lost here, largely because the lush **hills** around Brandywine allowed the British Redcoats to conceal their identities—and launch a sneak attack.

In an even more obvious case of rewriting history, war reenactors make a festive day out of was once a moment of great hardship for Patriot forces. Here and elsewhere, Vowell draws attention to the gap between historical reality and how history is commemorated today, with reenactors and other sources telling a celebratory narrative that glosses over the war's complicated, violent reality.


Vowell takes a break in the Brandywine River Museum, where she sneaks a glance at painter Andrew Wyeth's depictions of the region. Even aided by maps and GPS technology, Vowell has struggled to find her way through Brandywine, and she can only imagine Washington had an even harder time. Vowell wonders if the British ambush at Brandywine reminded Washington of his brutal loss at Long Island, giving him the worst kind of déjà vu.

Though Lafayette and his contemporaries often complimented the pastoral beauty of the American landscape, that same landscape could also prove tactically difficult. This passage also speaks to how Vowell works as a historian: she uses physical landscape and present-day sense association to try to understand how historical figures like Washington must have felt about the pivotal events in their lives.

But Lafayette, always hungry for glory and ready for blood, nevertheless begged Washington to allow him to join the fray. The Patriots' Fabian strategy was supposed to be an orderly retreat, but instead, the soldiers were fleeing at random, leading to deadly confusion. As more and more Americans deserted, Lafayette started using his body to block the exits from the battlefield—and wound up getting shot in the leg in the process. When Lafayette went to get his bullet hole treated, Washington told the doctor to "take care of him as if he were my own son."

Lafayette's time at Brandywine showcases both his increased maturity and his youthful recklessness. His loyalty and determination to help Washington were signs of selflessness, but his determination to find glory (even if it meant getting shot) was less wise. Still, the surrogate father-son relationship that Lafayette so coveted with Washington was growing stronger by the day.

Then and now, Brandywine was and is Quaker country, and Vowell ends up at a Quaker meeting. Quakers are known for their belief in nonviolence—though one of the most important generals in the American Revolution was Nathanael Greene, known as the "Fighting Quaker" because he abandoned his faith and joined several local New England militias. Vowell wants to talk about Greene, but the Quakers at the meeting prefer to remember just how much regular civilians suffered during the war. Both armies plundered food and goods from the quiet citizens of the Brandywine valley.

Vowell's time with the Quakers is a useful reminder of the very real, very human consequences of the war. While men like Lafayette were chasing victory and fame, everyday farmers were finding their fields destroyed—meaning that they were no longer able to feed their families.

Vowell chats with Christopher Densmore, whom she later learns is one of the country's most important Quaker scholars. Densmore explains that he views the history of the United States as a history of war, but Vowell disagrees. Instead, informed by her training as an art historian, Vowell prefers to explore American history through artifacts, monuments and "found objects." Densmore criticizes this view, and Vowell jokes that though Quakers are wise, they often are "a little more honest than the situation calls for."

This passage is important for several reasons. First, though Vowell does not agree with Densmore's view of U.S. history as one defined by conflict, war did play a central role in the nation's very founding. Second of all, Vowell's background as an art historian—and her commitment to a history told through "found objects"— reveals her unique methodology, which grounds history in present-day spaces.

Though they disagree on some things, Vowell and Densmore share their concern that Americans are forgetting their own history—for example, more than half of U.S. citizens incorrectly believe that the Civil War came before the Revolution.

Just as the lush fields at Brandywine symbolize Americans' ability to gloss over the bloodshed in their own history, the tendency to think of the Civil War as an earlier event than the American Revolution is yet another way in which Americans revise history (even unintentionally).

Vowell travels to a nearby monument for Lafayette, commemorating the blood he lost at Brandywine. As she reads the quotes inscribed on the monument, Vowell once more comes to terms with how much Lafayette seemed to seek out danger. He greeted gunshot almost with excitement, because it meant that he was finally a part of the war's real action. And again, Vowell is struck by the juxtaposition of the peaceful **fields** with their violent past: "there would be no indication of the mayhem that went down here," she muses, "unless this Lafayette doodad marked the spot."

Since he was a little boy hunting for a mysterious beast in Auvergne, Lafayette has loved taking risks. But while the present-day U.S. loves to valorize and commemorate individual risk-takers like Lafayette, there are few memorials to the anonymous soldiers who fought and died in revolutionary "mayhem."

It's time for the battle reenactment, and Vowell marvels at Americans' ability to convert sad historical events into happy summertime celebrations. She watches a well-researched puppet show about Lafayette's life, and she hears some war reenactors talk about their wives' resentment of their historical hobbies. Many of the men acting as Patriots are wearing the shoddy **hunting shirts** that, at least to Lafayette, symbolized both the colonists' virtue and their lack of preparedness.

In the 18th century, men like Lafayette and Silas Deane left their wives to go wage the Revolution, and today, 21st-century men leave their wives to go reenact that war. And again, this reenactment signals the contemporary desire to make U.S. history seem more lighthearted and celebratory than it actually was.

Off to the side, Vowell notices a woman winding yarn, dressed in Revolutionary garb to reenact this less flashy part of history. Though nobody pays much attention to this woman, her actions have great historical significance. When the British raised taxes on imports, the colonists created non-importation agreements as a form of protest. As part of this protest, many women began making their own yarn and sewing their own garments in what was known as the Homespun Movement. Homespun clothes then became an international symbol of America's folksy strength; Washington eventually wore a homespun suit to his inauguration. And Ben Franklin went even further, wearing a simple fur cap to all of his fancy French meetings as way of advertising (and overplaying) America's pastoral values.

The story Vowell tells of Lafayette, Washington, and the like is dominated by men. But here, she focuses on how women were able to aid the war effort even within the domestic sphere that they were largely confined to in the 1700s. It is also important to note that the pastoral, "homespun" image of Americans—as symbolized by Franklin's fur cap and the recurring hunting shirts—was, in part, an intentional, political statement on the part of the women who made those clothes.

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That folksiness was not enough to shield Franklin from the news that the Patriots were about to lose Philadelphia to the Redcoats. Though the city was not very important strategically to the Americans, it acted as a political hub, and it was therefore a crucial symbol of independence. Washington, Franklin, Lafayette and John Adams all worried that losing Philadelphia would destroy Patriot morale.

Just as symbolic victories were essential to American morale, symbolic losses were crushing—like when the Patriots had to surrender Philadelphia, the seat of American democracy and the place where the Declaration of Independence was signed.

Meanwhile, back home in France, Adrienne fretted that Lafayette had been killed in battle. When she learned it was only a leg wound (and one that was healing quickly), she was relieved. Better still, Lafayette's wartime exploits were earning him applause among the very French nobles who had once discouraged his journey to America.

Lafayette was finally getting the glory he had dreamed of for so many years. But as reports of his wartime exploits reached France, he further upset his wife. Again, glory on the battlefield was getting in the way of Lafayette's family obligations.

As Lafayette recovered, Washington tried to attack the British Hessian forces in Germantown, a few miles north of Philadelphia. The battleground was foggy, and though very few men were killed, many were injured due to the poor visibility. Eventually, Washington's troops were forced to (once again) retreat, though the British were finally impressed with the Americans' bravery—all the odds were against them, but the ragtag army still persisted.

The Patriot's persistence had already helped them get aid and backing from the French government, but now, it also helped them frighten their enemies. Even in the thick of actual fighting, then, the Revolution can be seen as a partially symbolic war—for example, the fog that hurt the troops on the ground paradoxically helped their cause because the situation also showcased their tenacity.

Washington lost the battle in Pennsylvania, but Horatio Gates, another Patriot general, was much luckier. In a rare turn of events, the Americans outnumbered the British at the Battle of Saratoga, and Gates emerged with a critical victory. Though Washington was happy that his forces had at last succeeded, he was jealous of Gates, especially because Gates wanted to take over Washington's post as first-in-command.

George Washington is arguably the most iconic figure in American history, as he's often viewed as the person most responsible for the nation's very existence. But here, Vowell humanizes him, showing that he, too, was capable of failure and petty jealousy. Rather than showing the Founding Fathers as a unit, Vowell thus presents them more like a group of friends, as prone to squabbling and gossip as any friend group would be.

Washington hoped to invade Philadelphia as a way of getting his own glorious moment, but his colleagues wisely talked him out of it; the Americans could not afford another loss, especially when it came to impressing their European allies. And indeed, the French were pleased enough by the win at Saratoga: when word of Gates's triumph reached the European continent, Beaumarchais was so excited to break the news that he literally broke his arm on the way to tell his friends.

Indeed, Washington almost let his desire for personal glory get in the way of sound military strategy (a rarity for the mostly level-headed general). Also worth noting here is the extent to which Frenchmen like Beaumarchais were emotionally invested in American success.

Saratoga is often thought to be the battle that prompted Louis XVI to officially recognize America as an independent government. Vowell acknowledges there is some truth to that narrative, but she also makes it clear that the French were just as impressed by Washington's loss as they were by Gates's win. After all, the Battle at Germantown showed just how committed the Americans were to victory at any cost, and that commitment impressed both King Louis and his Spanish allies.

Again, symbolic victory was almost as important as military victory in the early years of the Revolution. The narrative surrounding Patriot persistence was so compelling to King Louis XVI that he continued to fund what in many ways should have been a lost cause.

After Lafayette recovered from his injury, he was ready to get back into the thick of things, so he wrote to Washington asking for increased responsibilities as a military leader. In contrast to many of the other French soldiers, Lafayette had impressed Washington with his eager-to-please attitude and his fast language learning. So, when Nathanael Greene (the Fighting Quaker) prepared to attack the British in New Jersey, Washington sent Lafayette along as his second in command.

To the extent that Vowell is writing about Lafayette's transformation from a young boy into a man, this moment of trust on Washington's part is a huge stepping stone on that journey. Though Lafayette was still hungry for glory and danger, he had also earned enough trust from the Patriot higher-ups to be given real military command.

In New Jersey, Lafayette was able to find a weak patch in the British line of defense, and—always "determined to be in the way of danger"—he attacked. This successful maneuver earned Lafayette Washington's respect and command of his own army unit in Virginia. The unit was in a sorry state (again, they had only **hunting shirts** as uniforms), but Lafayette vowed to provide them with training and even cloth at his own expense.

Not only was Lafayette becoming a more thoughtful, generous person (as can be seen in his decision to donate uniforms), but he was also becoming a better fighter. Whereas at Brandywine, his desire for danger merely got him shot in the leg, in New Jersey, Lafayette put his bravery to better use, and he was able to achieve real success.

Crucially, even as Lafayette gained power, he never grew less enamored of General Washington. But in the fall of 1777, many men in Congress (John Adams included) were so frustrated about Washington's Fabian strategy that they were thinking of demoting him. In fact, once Washington became president, many American dignitaries would scramble to hide or retract the scathing critiques they had made of him during this dark time.

The conflict over whether Washington would retain his position signals both Lafayette's loyalty and the Patriots' pettiness. Rather than prioritizing tactical continuity, each politician and soldier looked at Washington through the lens of his own personal grievances and desires. Lafayette was therefore the exception, not the rule. In part because he viewed Washington as a father figure, Lafayette never tried to unseat the soon-to-be-beloved general.

The most involved attempt to replace Washington was known as the "Conway cabal." Thomas Conway was a Frenchman who had wound up in America because of his relationship with Silas Deane. In a moment where Washington was particularly unpopular, Conway wrote to Congress asking to be made Commander in Chief. When Washington found out, he threatened to quit entirely. Ultimately, Congress refrained from replacing Washington, but they still promoted Conway, adding to Washington's sense of unease. Throughout it all, Lafayette remained completely loyal: as he wrote in a letter to his beloved commander, "I am now fixed to your fate."

Once again, Congress was trying to balance its reliance on Washington's expertise with its desire to appease the French by promoting someone like Conway. It was thus especially important that Lafayette, as a high-status Frenchman, remained such a vocal and steadfast defender of Washington.

There was a silver lining in Washington's waning popularity, however—his lack of military success humanized him and made Americans more able to trust him. This was especially important because politicians like Adams were constantly worried that the new nation would succumb to a military dictatorship (as Rome had when Julius Caesar took over). Dictatorship would be a recurring fear in American politics, especially in the 1820s, when famed general Andrew Jackson shot to power.

Democracy was especially fragile in the early days of the new United States, and a peaceful transfer of power was not guaranteed. The fact that Washington made his mistakes so publicly reassured his contemporaries that he would not be able to paint himself as a god of sorts—and therefore that he could not hold onto power forever.

With Philadelphia now under British control, the Patriots' squabbling reached new heights. As Congress hid out in Massachusetts, Lafayette complained of "parties who Hate one an other as much as the Common enemy." But while many politicians pushed for the glory that would come regaining Philadelphia, it was impractical, especially since American soldiers lacked weaponry, shoes, and **shirts.**

Lafayette's reflection about the dangers of opposing "parties" foreshadows the partisan conflict of 2013 (and today). And as in more contemporary times, such political debates often overshadow—or lose sight of—the fact that real people are struggling because of government's failure to act.

Instead of rushing into battle, therefore, Washington decided to take the winter of 1777–1778 as a time for rebuilding American morale. The Patriots decamped to Valley Forge, about 20 miles north of Philadelphia, where they struggled not against the British but against frostbite and a whole host of diseases. At one point, a soldier was so thirsty that he spent the last money he had on a single sip of water.

The encampment at Valley Forge is one of the most discussed and memorialized events of the entire war. Rather than depicting the full extent of Patriot soldiers' suffering, however, many people distort what happened at Valley Forge to tell a more cheerful story of American perseverance.

In the centuries since this freezing winter, Valley Forge has become a symbol of American tenacity. But while later presidents like Dwight D. Eisenhower would valorize the campground, Vowell points out that much of the suffering here was America's "self-inflicted wound," the result of a massive administrative failure. As Lafayette himself understood, all this Patriot infighting was undermining the troops' basic safety and health.

Here, Vowell directly articulates what she has implied throughout the book: though political debate is healthy in moderation, too much of it can "wound" the very people politicians ostensibly serve. The starvation at Valley Forge was not purely an accident—it happened largely because generals and delegates failed to come together and act decisively.

To expand on this failure, Vowell notes that there were crops available for the soldiers to eat, but no wagons to transport these crops. And while the British troops were well-fed and consistently well-supplied, Washington could not even fill crucial positions in the Valley Forge supply corps. Vowell then draws a direct parallel between this long-ago incompetence and the governmental failures that still plague the U.S. today: long lines at Veterans Affairs hospitals, underfunded public schools, and broken-down highways, for example. Vowell blames many of these failures on Americans' longstanding reluctance to pay taxes.

In one of her most explicit and compelling historical parallels, Vowell argues that this kind of administrative failure is still present and deeply problematic in today's United States. Because many Americans stubbornly hold onto certain principles—like resisting taxation in the same way their Revolutionary ancestors did centuries before—the most vulnerable members of society (children, veterans) are put at risk.

At the same time, though, Vowell acknowledges that the soldiers at Valley Forge really did demonstrate "backbone, reliance, grit." Public figures from Lafayette to Theodore Roosevelt have cited these men as an inspiration, though Vowell applauds the fact that during his presidency, Roosevelt's idea of strength prioritized his citizens' health and safety as well as their military might.

Though Roosevelt also simplified the history of Valley Forge, his own presidential behavior can be seen as a counterexample to the administrative failures Vowell critiques. Roosevelt valued symbolic victories and military might, but he knew that a functioning bureaucracy—capable of providing social services—was essential to such strength.

When Vowell actually arrives at Valley Forge, she is once again struck by how peaceful and pleasant it looks. She reflects that Gettysburg, the site of the most famous battle of the Civil War, feels similarly unremarkable. The only way to know "about the fifty thousand men who were lost or ruined" at Gettysburg, Vowell writes, is "to read the National Parks Service's signs."

Once again, Vowell finds that a former site of violence now just looks like a lush field. Valley Forge and Gettysburg are two of the most brutal, bloody memories in American history, but there are no museums or monuments to help contemporary Americans make sense of these dark chapters. Thus, the peaceful fields of Valley Forge and Gettysburg signal how the U.S. rewrites its own past.

Vowell visits Valley Forge with a British friend, but she is surprised to learn that her friend never learned about this crucial revolutionary site in school. Vowell's friend explains that in his history classes, "we concentrated on the wars we won." In other words, the American obsession with this war against the British is in many ways one-sided.

The urge to gloss over painful history by talking about victory (and ignoring defeat) is not uniquely American. Here, Vowell learns that the British do it too, barely teaching their children about the American Revolution.

A few months later in 1778, as Lafayette wrote home to his wife Adrienne, the anti-Washington gossip in Congress still had not quieted down. While Washington was trying to—at last—introduce military discipline to his troops, Conway and Gates were still gunning for the top job. Plus, to punish Lafayette for his loyalty to Washington, the Congressional Board of War sent him on a wild goose chase through upstate New York.

The extent of American governmental dysfunction is especially clear during this stretch of 1778. Rather than using the talented, dedicated volunteer soldier they had in Lafayette, the various anti-Washington politicians preferred to enact petty grudges on the battlefield.

Luckily, the Americans had a new asset in the Prussian soldier Baron Friedrich Wilhelm von Steuben. Steuben was renowned in Europe for his military prowess, and though the U.S. wanted to stop importing soldiers from overseas, Steuben was too valuable to pass up. So, with Beaumarchais' help, Steuben made his way across the Atlantic and volunteered his service. The only complication was that Steuben was (probably) gay, and Washington was simply the first of many American generals to be intensely homophobic. Thus, for his entire time in America, Steuben had to keep his true identity secret.

Baron von Steuben is another pivotal figure in the Revolutionary War. As one of the only fighters with traditional military training, he would prove invaluable in forcing the American troops into shape. Furthermore, though it is not a major plot point in the text, it is still worth noting the historical parallel Vowell draws between the bias Steuben faced and later homophobic American laws like "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" (which barred open gay or bisexual people from military service).


Once Steuben arrived at Valley Forge, he was impressed that the Americans had managed to hold themselves together even with so few resources. But things were looking up: Nathanael Greene was now in charge of the supplying the soldiers, a task he completed with grace, while Steuben was going to teach the Americans some long-overdue battle tactics.

Unlike the heat-of-the-moment battlefield glory that Lafayette had always dreamed of, real American success came in less glamorous improvements. The main shift in Patriot fortunes happened on an administrative level—the troops had more to eat and better weapons and tactics to practice with.


But though Steuben was itching to introduce some discipline into the army at Valley Forge, Washington understood that this would be more difficult in the colonies than it had been in Europe. After all, the soldiers were motivated to fight because they believed in independence, and so it was hard to convince these new Patriots to follow orders of any kind. Steuben, too, soon realized that he could not give orders without explaining why he had given the order in the first place, a reality that made his job harder but that also added to his admiration of the Americans.

The American focus on independence and democracy had already created complications when it came time to agree on laws and policies. Here, Steuben realized that training a democratic army would be more difficult because a group of people accustomed to political representation would similarly expect their voices to be heard when it came to military maneuvers.


Under Steuben's guidance, the Patriot army finally learned how to perform drills and operate as a coherent unit (and it didn't hurt that the soldiers finally got uniforms). Washington even promoted Steuben, angering Gates and Conway but pleasing Beaumarchais. Ultimately, Washington had proved himself, and Congress sided with him while his competitors quietly left the highest ranks of the American military.

Valley Forge was a turning point for several reasons, but one of the most important is that it marks the end of the conspiracy against Washington. From the 1778 onward, Washington would be almost universally trusted and respected.


Best of all, France had at long last formally recognized American independence. But just as Lafayette was joining in a flurry of public celebration, he learned that his baby daughter had died back in France. Though Lafayette expressed his grief in letters to Adrienne, he continued to lead military parades to honor the new Franco-American alliance.

In this passage, Lafayette both literally and symbolically chooses his love of the new United States over his loyalty to his family back home. As an important connection between the French and the U.S., Lafayette understood his own importance to the celebrations of the Franco-American alliance—but his sense of duty did not extend to the flesh-and-blood child he had just lost.

To formalize the alliance, Louis XVI invited Benjamin Franklin—still dressed like a farmer—to the showy palace at Versailles. Vowell points out the irony in the fact that "this deeply weird partnership was history's first military pact between an absolute monarch and anti-monarchist republicans." It took a lot of diplomatic skill for Franklin to convince King Louis that supporting an independence movement was really in his best interest. And indeed, a decade later Louis XVI would indeed express regret about backing the Americans' revolutionary effort.

When Vowell praises Franklin's diplomatic skill, she is also calling attention to his particularly gifted use of symbolism. In portraying the Patriots as a folksy, pastoral people, Franklin was able to divert King Louis's attention away from the political danger a democratic revolution posed to a monarch. In other words, since the Revolution itself, Americans have been skilled at using American mythology for political gain.

Inflamed by news that France was formally backing the new United States, the British declared war on the French. At the same time, fearing that they might be outmatched, the British tried to patch things up with the rebellious colonists, offering to repeal some of the steepest taxes. But it was too late. As Washington put it, this far into the war, "nothing short of Independence [...] can possibly do."

Once more, the age-old tensions between the British and the French reared their head, prompting Britain to try to make amends with the disgruntled Patriots. But whereas initially the Americans were fighting to avoid taxation, now they were fighting more for principles than for material gain.

Rather than merely celebrate the Patriots' persistence, however, Vowell points out that independence was far from universal. Slavery was abolished in Great Britain three decades before the U.S. followed suit—because the freedom that the Patriots fought for was really freedom for white men only. To emphasize this contradiction, Vowell quotes Frederick Douglass, the once-enslaved writer, orator and activist who famously declared on Independence Day that "this is your Fourth of July, not mine."

Yet while the Americans claimed to fight for a noble, more free ideology, the practice of slavery undercut all this high-minded rhetoric. As Frederick Douglass made clear in his speech "What to the Slave is the Fourth of July?", the "independence" Americans fought for was hypocritical, as white people's freedom was founded on the enslavement of Black people.

By May of 1778, the British Commander-in-Chief William Howe had been replaced by Henry Clinton. As Washington debated whether to attack Clinton in New Jersey, he leaned on Greene, Steuben, Knox and Lafayette as his most trusted military advisors.

The fact that the still-youthful Lafayette was now one of Washington's closest advisors shows just how much the Frenchman had proved his worth during his time in America.

The other person present in these discussions was General Charles Lee, who had been held as a British prisoner of war—and who was now trying to play both sides of the conflict. When Lee retreated in the heat of the Battle at Monmouth (possibly throwing the fight to the British), Washington flew into a rage and court-martialed him. Still, the town of Fort Lee in New Jersey continues to bear Charles Lee's name, prompting Vowell to joke that Lee's behavior was "the most New Jersey-like in the battle, if not the entire war."

Lee's flip-flopping loyalty between the British and the Americans shows that these two opposing camps were actually much more similar than different. In many ways, the Patriots were still culturally British; most rebellious soldiers had Loyalist family members, and it was not uncommon for individuals to feel torn between rival camps. On another note, Vowell's New Jersey joke again reflects her use of humor as a means of linking the present to the past.

Trapped into a corner by Lee's retreat, Washington had no choice but to stand and fight Clinton's Redcoats. Once again, Washington's "coolness and firmness" rallied the Patriot troops, inspiring great admiration in men like Lafayette and Alexander Hamilton. Vowell adds that the Patriots were also newly able to hold their ground, in large measure because of Steuben's military guidance.

Washington is an icon even today, but his status as a real-life hero was critical to the Patriots' success throughout the Revolution. The great general inspired this kind of admiration in all of his troops, from regular soldiers to high-ranking officers like Hamilton.

When Vowell visits Monmouth, she is struck by the monument to Mary Hays, a folk hero who may or may not have actually existed. The legend goes that when Hays found her husband dead, she was so committed to the Patriot cause that she immediately stepped in and took his place. Vowell has heard a rumor that this sculpture of Mary Hays is actually based on the inventor Thomas Edison, and she and her friend Sherm reflect on Edison's grit.

Though there are no markers of the suffering and death that occurred at Monmouth, there is a statue of a folk hero. On the one hand, Monmouth is one more place in which Americans smooth over the messier aspects of their history. On the other hand, the possibly fictionalized Mary Hays is one of the few women who is honored in the Revolution's all-male historical narrative.

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Though the conflict at Monmouth was hot and difficult, the Patriots ultimately emerged victorious. Vowell and Sherm are hot, too, so they head back home, but not before stopping at Bruce Springsteen's house. Funnily enough, the famous singer had relatives who fought in the Revolutionary War. But more than that, Sherm wants to visit Springsteen's house because it reminds him that "not all fights take place on battlefields." Sometimes, independence is more "personal," as simple as picking up a guitar or starting to write.

Throughout her book, Vowell has blurred the boundaries between the personal and the political. She has shown how ideological debates can become petty grudges, and how desires for glory and fame can motivate important international alliances. With Sherm, Vowell explores how fundamental American ideals can be internalized—rather than seeking any sort of national independence, Sherm is interested in art as a form of rebellion.

The victory at Monmouth did not help the Americans with very many of their strategic objectives, but it did allow Washington to feel new faith and enthusiasm about his troops. However, the Americans were overly optimistic—even though French support had rejuvenated the Patriot cause, the British were far from finished. In fact, it would be another five years before the war would end, and for most of that time, Washington would do big-picture work instead of commanding individual battles. As Vowell puts it, "the Revolutionary War's classic period ends at Monmouth."

Though Vowell crafts a fairly sweeping history of the American Revolution, ultimately, her focus is on Lafayette and his contribution to the war. In the remaining years of the war, Lafayette and Washington would each take a backseat on the battlefield, instead engaging in higher-level strategy. Accordingly, Vowell zooms out, giving readers a general overview of these years instead of a detailed play-by-play.

Vowell lives near Union Square in New York City, where there are statues of both Washington and Lafayette. Vowell reflects on the fact that though the British did eventually abandon New York (at the end of the war, in 1783), Washington never got the glorious battle he dreamed of.

This is another moment in which historical memory clashes with lived experience. Though Washington is famous for leading glorious battles, he never lived up to his own expectations for himself.

Initially, Washington had planned to use French naval reinforcements to attack New York. But when the fleet actually arrived, captained by Count d'Estaing, the French realized that the ships were probably too big to fit into the shallow channels of New York Harbor.

The confusion over d'Estaing's fleet proves the challenge of communicating across a giant ocean. Both the British and the Americans had struggled to get a message across in a transatlantic war.

D'Estaing changed his mind frequently and was not always a skilled communicator. More than that, when he first arrived in America, the Patriots worried that he was much less experienced than his British counterpart, Admiral Lord Richard Howe. For Lafayette, however, d'Estaing (who was also from the province of Auvergne) was a much-needed reminder of home.

In a war as widespread and international as the American Revolution, good communication was key—and poor communication would almost certainly lead to loss. It is also important to note that in this second half of the war, Lafayette began to act more and more like a representative of his home country (rather than just a devoted American volunteer).

Instead of attacking New York, Washington had to settle for trying to reclaim British-occupied Rhode Island. Rhode Island was founded as a colony based on religious tolerance, and Nathanael Greene (a native Rhode Islander and a beneficiary of this tolerance) was upset when he was not put in charge of the battle plan. Instead, Washington made the hotheaded General John Sullivan the leader.

This tension between Greene and Sullivan, who were each important generals in their own right, once more exposes how individual priorities clouded overall strategy. And as this incident in Rhode Island makes clear, such individualism could cause real damage.

Sullivan and d'Estaing each wanted the glory of leading the charge on Newport, but before they could decide who got to go first, the British arrived. The French fleet set out, only to get caught in a storm and have its sails damaged beyond the point of usefulness. Rather than trying to fight at Newport, d'Estaing headed toward Boston to fix his ships—and though Sullivan had recruited thousands of troops from Massachusetts for the attack, he was still outnumbered without the naval supports.

Now that the Franco-American alliance was formalized, more and more French soldiers came over to work with their Patriot colleagues. But each group wanted glory for themselves, and without a shared nationalism to unite them, French and American soldiers got into increasingly heated conflict with one another.

The Americans viewed d'Estaing's change of plans as a huge betrayal, and Lafayette felt caught in the middle. Lafayette defended d'Estaing to Washington, and Washington asked Lafayette to persuade d'Estaing to change his mind. Lafayette failed, and in the process, he missed some fighting in Rhode Island. Congress sent Lafayette a formal apology for keeping him out of battle, proving that they finally understood the hotheaded Frenchman's priorities.

By this point in his life, Lafayette, though always hungry for a fight, was mature and thoughtful enough to know he could be more useful elsewhere. While he tried to act as a liaison between the French and the Patriots, it is worth remembering that Lafayette always ultimately deferred to Washington. Though d'Estaing was from his home province, Lafayette's loyalties remained with his beloved American general.

More importantly, the indecision over whether to attack Newport had inflamed tensions beyond France and the burgeoning U.S. The British had hated the French for centuries, and though the Patriots were nominally no longer British, they had their fair share of "ancient hereditary prejudices" (as one Patriot soldier wrote in a letter home).

Because the Patriots were still British at heart, they had many of the same grudges that their Redcoat rivals did. Tensions between the Americans and the French prove just how complicated this fledgling "American identity" really was. In other words, the rebels were not as ideologically independent from their Redcoat rivals as they claimed to be.

Eventually, this disagreement escalated to physical violence, and two Frenchmen were assaulted; one, the Lieutenant Saint-Sauveur, did not survive. To make matters worse, Saint-Sauveur (who was, like most of the French, very Catholic) died in Puritan Boston. Eventually, to appease the French, the Americans did give the dead soldier a proper Catholic burial, though they did so in the dead of night. The Patriots also promised to create a monument to Saint-Sauveur, which they did not actually get around to building until World War I.

The Saint-Sauveur incident illuminates some of the unnatural aspects of Franco-American alliance. But at the same time, the Puritans in Boston—some of the most rigid believers in the new U.S.—were willing to give Saint-Sauveur a Catholic burial, demonstrating the extent to which the Patriots knew they needed French support.

Ultimately, the Franco-American alliance persevered. But when Lafayette wanted to invade Canada on behalf of the French, Washington said no, fearing that hostilities could return if the French were to regain such a major New World colony. Vowell sees this as an early instance of American isolationism, especially because Washington remarked that "no nation is to be trusted farther than it is bound by its interest."

Washington's isolationism would come into even clearer focus when the United States refused to intervene in the French Revolution only a few years later. And even today, politicians in the U.S. debate whether or not the country should get involved on the international stage or focus on its own affairs.

In early 1779, Lafayette went back to France for the year. He was initially put on house arrest as punishment for sneaking out to America two years earlier—but even this punishment could not conceal the depths of French enthusiasm for Lafayette's victories abroad. While home, Lafayette got Adrienne pregnant again (with a son he later named George Washington Lafayette). He also nagged Vergennes to send more French weapons and soldiers across the Atlantic.

The fact that Lafayette named his son after George Washington is tremendously telling: to the orphaned Frenchman, Washington was more family than anybody else. It is unsurprising, then, that even on his visits home, Lafayette spent his time lobbying for more French aid to the Americans.

When Lafayette returned to the colonies, Washington shed tears of joy to be reunited with his friend. But the military situation was bleak: two days later, the British took the city of Charleston, South Carolina, and the Americans were exhausted and once again starving and yearning for good clothes.

Though Washington had rejoiced a year earlier, believing that the war was done, the British continued to be better-equipped and better-trained. Plus, symbolically, Charleston was the city Lafayette had first arrived in when he came to the U.S., and it was no doubt upsetting for it to be taken now.

Fortunately, a few days after the loss at Charleston, 6,000 French troops arrived at Newport, commanded by the very experienced Count Rochambeau. Lafayette went up to convince Rochambeau to attempt a joint attack on New York, but the middle-aged Rochambeau refused to take orders from a 20-year-old, and the relationship between the two Frenchmen quickly deteriorated. From then on, Rochambeau would always communicate directly with Washington.

Though Lafayette had matured internally, he was still much younger than most of the other generals he was working with. This exchange with Rochambeau shows that even though Lafayette had earned Washington's respect, people didn't give him the same degree of deference and responsibility that they gave Washington.

Adding to the tension, trusted general Benedict Arnold was revealed to be a British spy when he was caught smuggling information about Washington's plans to the Redcoats. A panicked Washington wrote to Ben Franklin in France to persuade Franklin to ask for further French reinforcements. Franklin expressed Washington's anxiety to Vergennes, and Vergennes contributed 6 million more French lives to the Patriot cause (of the 25 million that Franklin had requested).

Just as Charles Lee's flip-flopping emphasized the blurred line between British and American identity, Benedict Arnold's famous betrayal suggested that American identity was far from stable. As Vergennes' quick aid proves, in some cases, French people overseas were more reliable than some of Washington's oldest Patriot friends.

Washington could not forgive Benedict Arnold for his betrayal, so though the American troops remained poorly fed and clothed, Washington ordered them to trek down to Virginia and kill Arnold. Fortunately, Lafayette was in charge of this particular mission, and as the troops marched south, the charming Frenchman convinced various citizens to donate food and supplies to the passing soldiers.

Again, even Washington could fall prey to petty grievances. Though there was some strategic merit to assassinating Arnold, it probably wasn't worth sending an entire battalion all the way to Virginia. Nevertheless, Arnold's betrayal was so emotionally fraught that Washington put Lafayette—now one of his most capable soldiers—on the job.

Due to a change in Arnold's plans, Lafayette's mission was called off as soon as he reached Virginia, and he headed north—only to be told to go south again to support Nathanael Greene. Many of the Patriot troops under Lafayette's command deserted because they were so sick of going back and forth. Lafayette wrote what Vowell labels a "melodramatic" letter to Vergennes, begging for money. Vergennes promised to send some, and he also told Lafayette that the Count de Grasse—currently commanding the French navy in the Caribbean—would soon head up the Atlantic to offer support to the Patriots. De Grasse's arrival would prove to be a turning point in the war.

As the Revolutionary War moved into its final, most crucial stages, Lafayette's role became even larger and more essential. While the Patriot generals faltered, sending their troops all over the Eastern Seaboard, Lafayette's strong people skills and his deep love for both America and France allowed him to secure the aid the Patriots needed. Plus, as Lafayette's "melodramatic" letter proves, though emotion was sometimes a hindrance, it could also be a useful diplomatic tool.

Next on her tour of the Eastern seaboard, Vowell stops at Colonial Williamsburg, which she thinks might be "Republican Disneyland." But instead, she finds a George Washington impersonator complaining about states' rights and emphasizing the "great debt" all Americans owe to Lafayette. Vowell and her family take in the old-timey, "foreign" look of this early British settlement.

Like Vowell, the impersonators at Williamsburg are frustrated by how Americans sanitize their history. In paying tribute to the French and pushing back against the conservative rhetoric of states' rights, the Washington impersonator asserts that early America was never the isolationist paradise that some modern-day politicians make it out to be.

Vowell is presently surprised by the anger and complexity of the war reenactors, many of whom are especially angry about the lack of shoes for Patriot troops. In fact, by 1781, the American army was in dire straits. Only 5 of 500 promised recruits showed up for Steuben's Virginia militia, and Thomas Jefferson, the state's governor, did little to encourage his people to pitch in.

Like in the winter of 1778, when Patriot troops starved at Valley Forge, administrative failures at the highest levels of government were again hurting the people actually on the ground. Moreover, Vowell emphasizes that men like Jefferson—famous for their grand ideas and eloquent writing—were not always useful in moments of real crisis.

The British general Lord Cornwallis had thousands of men stationed in Virginia, and so a panicked Lafayette took matters into his own hands. He recruited James, an enslaved Virginia man, to spy on Benedict Arnold, and teamed up with General Anthony Wayne to antagonize the British forces. The only problem was that both Lafayette and Wayne (sometimes called "Mad Wayne") loved glory, and older soldiers feared that the two young men would push each other to commit more and more daring acts of war.

For the first time, Lafayette was beginning to execute larger-scale strategic plans on his own. Perhaps more interesting, however, is the fact that although James is the only enslaved person that Vowell mentions in her entire book, many enslaved people—most famously a man named Cato—played a critical role in the Patriot victory.

These fears came to light when Lafayette and Wayne played right into Cornwallis' hands, attacking what they thought was a small legion of men only to discover that it was actually a much larger battalion. Still, Lafayette and Wayne were skilled enough fighters that they were ultimately able to turn the battle around, forcing the British to retreat and eking out a minor Patriot victory (or at the very least avoiding defeat). As the Washington impersonator at Colonial Williamsburg explained to Vowell's tour group, "Cornwallis did not make a mistake. We turned what he did into a mistake."

Even if Lafayette's recklessness had not subsided entirely by this point, his bravery and commitment to the cause nevertheless allowed him to snatch victory out of the jaws of defeat. The contrast between the British forces and the American ones is made clear in the Washington impersonator's language: the British may have been more strategically advanced, but the Americans could sometimes trip up them through sheer force of will.

Meanwhile, though Washington still wanted to attack New York, Rochambeau and de Grasse were planning to plant the French navy at the mouth of the Chesapeake Bay. The French troops were dressed in fancy plumed hats and colorful coats, whereas the Americans barely had any clothes on. Each side was shocked by the other's appearance. Yet rather than dividing the two nations, the French saw the Americans' ragged clothing as another proof of the Patriots' determination and wholesomeness.

Though Vowell does not explicitly mention the hunting shirts in this passage, the contrast between the well-dressed French and the bedraggled Americans has similar symbolism. Just as homespun clothing signaled Patriot commitment to the Revolution, the soldiers' ragged uniforms showed the French just how determined their American counterparts were.

Anxious to get back to protecting the French sugar plantations in the Caribbean, de Grasse sent word that his ships would arrive in Virginia by September 3, 1781. Washington needed to transport thousands of foot soldiers down to Virginia, and to incentivize this giant trek, he realized he would need to pay the Patriot army (which Congress had not been able to do in years). Rochambeau generously loaned Washington some Spanish gold, and the loyal American troops at last received some form of payment for their services.

At the same time, however, ideology alone could not sustain the Patriot army after so many years of fighting. Once again, the French came through, finally uniting Patriot troops around money as well as belief.

Cornwallis and his men had chosen to make their camp in Yorktown, a small finger of land off the coast of Virginia. This was a poor strategic decision: because Yorktown was on a peninsula, it would be easy for the Americans to surround the British on all sides. Washington put Lafayette in charge of encircling the Redcoats in Virginia, while other officers set up decoy tents near New York City to confuse the British about the Patriots' plan of attack.

In this section of her book, Vowell digs deep into the military specifics that made the Patriots' ultimate victory at Yorktown possible. Interestingly, while the Americans did make good strategic choices around decoy camps, the single most important factor to U.S. triumph was actually the Redcoats' failure.

Sure enough, on September 3, de Grasse's ships arrived in the Chesapeake Bay and the British were surrounded. Washington wanted to wait for more re-enforcements, but de Grasse wanted to attack immediately. To get Lafayette on his side, de Grasse promised "further glory" if the young general could persuade Washington to attack now. But knowing that waiting was more strategically sound, Lafayette restrained himself—further proof that he was "growing up."

This is one of the most crucial anecdotes in the entire book. On the one hand, this passage shows how important Lafayette was as a bridge between the well-resourced French and the more patient Americans. On the other hand, Lafayette's willingness to defer to Washington even at the expense of promised "glory" is the ultimate proof that he had become a mature, generous hero (as opposed to the reckless teenager he was at the beginning of the book).


Washington was taking his time making his way to Yorktown. On the way down, he stopped at his beloved home in Mount Vernon. Washington's love of this quiet mansion would prove tremendously impactful for the health of the young nation. Rather than holding onto the presidency indefinitely, his "homebody side" compelled him to step down after only two terms, setting a crucial precedent for future U.S. leaders about the peaceful transfer of power.

Earlier, Vowell discussed various politicians' anxieties that a powerful military figure such as Washington would turn the infant U.S. into a dictatorship. But unlike many of his colleagues, Washington valued his home and family far more than he valued political power. This last-minute trip to his home at Mount Vernon (which Washington would later call out in his presidential resignation speech) assured many that the general sought only what was best for his country, not for himself.


Before Washington could fully take a victory lap, however, he learned that the British navy had also arrived in the Chesapeake. Fearing a shoot-out in the small bay, de Grasse brought his fleet out to sea to fight the British in what is known as the Battle of the Chesapeake. Vowell thinks that this battle was probably "the most important altercation in the American Revolution, a take that's all the more astonishing considering not a single American took part."

In turning focus to the Battle of the Chesapeake—fought between the French de Grasse and the British general Thomas Graves—Vowell reminds readers that an ostensibly American war was often as much about European politics as it was about the Patriot fight for democracy. Yet as Vowell's British friend explained, because neither the French nor the British emerged stronger from the American Revolution, those countries feature it less in their history classes than the U.S. does.


At sea, the two opposing navies lined up and shot at each other—but there was no clear winner until September 9, when a second French fleet started making its way to Yorktown. The British were doomed, and it was largely thanks to de Grasse. With the help of her historian friend Andrew Jackson O'Shaughnessy, Vowell makes the case that de Grasse is the largely under-sung hero of the final stages of the Revolution.

In this critical naval victory, yet another Frenchman (in addition to Lafayette, Vergennes and Rochambeau) proves to be a driving force in the Revolution. Vowell's emphasis on the importance of the French at this late stage implies a critique of American isolationism. Though the early U.S. would refuse to help other countries, it would not exist without international allies.

Vowell meets the Lafayette reenactor at Williamsburg, who once again emphasizes just how much the Patriots needed the French—and particularly Lafayette—in order to win the war. Vowell is reminded of the reunion between Washington and Lafayette after Yorktown, when the Americans had emerged victorious from the naval fight: the two men hugged "with as much ardor as ever an absent lover kissed his mistress on his return."

Perhaps this desire for isolationism is part of why Americans today tend to downplay the French involvement in the Revolutionary War. Yet actual revolutionaries could not afford to ignore their French compatriots. The "ardor" between Washington and Lafayette makes clear just how deeply the French and Americans valued each other.

America has not always acknowledged its debt to France. In 2003, when France refused to support the U.S. invasion of Iraq, many Americans (especially Republicans) began to loudly critique France, even pushing to rename French fries "**freedom fries**." While all this was going on, Vowell came across the tiny dress that Herman Melville's wife had worn when she'd met Lafayette as a baby, still perfectly preserved. The contradiction between Americans' modern-day anger at the French and their deep appreciation for Lafayette spurred Vowell to start her research on the French general.

As she contrasts the reality of American history with the push for "freedom fries," Vowell again invokes Melville's lifelong admiration of Lafayette. Because Melville was such a critical figure in American culture, his love of Lafayette symbolizes how much that famous Frenchman is entangled with all aspects of American culture. In other words, the "freedom" in freedom fries would not be possible without Lafayette, a fact that earlier generations of Americans recognized.

Vowell interviews Mark Schneider, the Lafayette impersonator; Schneider is so charismatic as the Marquis that there is an entire Facebook page devoted to him. He tells Vowell that his favorite part of his job is being able to convince anti-French tourists to love and appreciate the longstanding Franco-American friendship.

Schneider can be seen as a sort of kindred spirit for Vowell: both share a similar mission (reminding Americans of their storied history with the French), and both use humor and charisma to accomplish this goal. As Vowell's book makes clear, Lafayette was himself funny and charismatic, so he probably would have appreciated this approach.

The next day, Vowell visits Yorktown for the annual Yorktown Day celebration of American victory. A French NATO general talks about the warm welcome Lafayette received on his 1824 tour throughout the United States. To end the day, Vowell gets some lunch with her family—and sees that **freedom fries** are on the menu.

In this passage, Vowell juxtaposes a history of French appreciation with the present day, when the U.S. is trying (through the symbolic "freedom fries") to disavow that relationship.

"The lesson of Yorktown," Vowell summarizes, "is the value of cooperation." The British failed to talk to each other, and the French communicated almost perfectly with the Americans. Of particular interest to Vowell is the fact that both de Grasse and Washington were able to talk "each other out of bad ideas." For example, de Grasse initially wanted to leave Yorktown entirely because he feared the British might outnumber them. Only because Washington patiently urged caution was de Grasse finally willing to remain in place.

Though the early years of the war were defined by American infighting, by the end of the Revolution, the Americans were able to communicate and compromise with one another and with the French. Ultimately, it was this ability to listen and learn from one another that allowed the Patriot forces to triumph over the British troops, even though they were outnumbered.

Though General Clinton took all the blame for the loss at Yorktown, it was not fully his fault. Rather, it was the result of a breakdown in communication between himself and Thomas Graves, who commanded the crucial British fleet. Besides, Washington and the rest of the Patriots had fought exceptionally well: with the help of men like Lafayette, Steuben and Alexander Hamilton, the Americans cut the Redcoats on Yorktown off from food to such an extent that they resorted to killing and eating their horses. Because starvation was a key part of the Americans' tactics, Vowell feels that "the real heroes of Yorktown were the Corps of Sappers and Miners, the men who dug the ditches laid out by the French engineers."

If the victory at Yorktown was a strategic coup for the Americans, it was also another example of particularly brutal violence. Though only a few years before the Patriots had experienced the horrors of starvation at Valley Forge, now, they were now willing to subject the British to an even more intense version of that torture. So, while Vowell uses the word "heroes" to describe the fighters at Yorktown, it is worth noting that some of these actions were arguably equal parts valiant and cruel.

On October 6, 1781, the Patriots snuck up on the Redcoats and dug their final line of trenches. Three days later, the Americans began pelting the British nonstop with ammunition; one soldier recalled that "at night you could see the mortar shells raining down on Yorktown." The British would not be able to withstand this siege for very long.

Unsurprisingly, this extensive Patriot violence is a world away from today's history textbooks and parties celebrating the anniversary of Yorktown. In order to win the war, the United States had to enact a "rain" of death on their enemies.

The final obstacles to victory were the British redoubts, the well-made earthen forts that served as the final line of defense for the Redcoat camp at Yorktown. Under Alexander Hamilton's command, 400 Americans attacked one of the redoubts. As soon as the code word "Rochambeau" was uttered, the Patriot troops pounced—and the British, gravely outnumbered, caved after five minutes. Four hundred Frenchmen struggled for half an hour to take a redoubt on the other side of the camp, but soon that was accomplished, too.

Though much of this passage is simply a reenactment of military maneuvers, it is worth paying special attention to the fact that "Rochambeau"—the most famous code word of the Revolution—was the name of yet another beloved Frenchman.

Realizing how dire his situation had become, Cornwallis did his best to escape. But before he could get all of his troops to safety, a storm broke out, leaving Cornwallis with no option besides surrender. Through cannon fire, the Americans recognized a Redcoat drummer approaching their camp with a white flag—and at this sign of surrender, the Americans ceased firing. It was the first time in eight days that there had been silence in Yorktown.

Without discounting the French and Americans' military skill, Vowell is careful to note that coincidence—in this case, an unexpected storm—was always a part of victory. And again, the fact that such violent shelling went on for eight days speaks to the amount of violence Americans were willing to enact to finally win the war.

Washington gave Cornwallis two hours to prepare for the surrender negotiations, which took place in a clapboard building known as the Moore house (which is still standing today). The British wanted their surrender decked out with the traditional "honors of war," but Lafayette remembered the humiliation Americans had suffered at Charleston, when the Redcoats had denied them these very same honors. He therefore pushed for the Patriots to make the British surrender with any flags or pomp and circumstance. Traveling to the battlefield in 2013, Vowell remarks that it is a "silent, grassy expanse surrounded by trees." It is hard for her to imagine that a world-altering fight occurred here.

There are two key ideas in this passage. First, while Lafayette had matured, he still had some of his childhood concepts of glory and revenge. And second, the recurring symbol of the lush fields returns at Yorktown with extra force. Though Vowell has just dwelt on the starvation and shelling that took place for more than a week at this Virginia site, it now appears "silent" and forested. Life has replaced death to such an extent that it is hard for Vowell to wrap her head around the loss that occurred here.

The surrender itself was mortifying for the British. Cornwallis was too embarrassed to go, so he sent his second-in-command, General Lincoln. Lincoln at first moved to give Cornwallis' sword to Rochambeau, but Rochambeau refused; Lincoln then approached Washington, who referred Lincoln to Washington's own number-two general. Lafayette was giddy, but Washington remained calm, urging his troops to maintain their dignity and not to rejoice too much at the British humiliation.

The Patriots had jostled with one another for years over who got to be Commander in Chief—so it follows that when the British surrendered, Washington and company were equally fussy about the chain of command. Still, as always, Washington remained a strong leader, modeling behavior for his soldiers (like Lafayette) who had less self-control.

Back in Europe, the French celebrated at news of American victory while the British nursed their wounds. The only thing left to do was make it official, which happened in 1783 with the Treaty of Paris. As Vowell points out, due to the complicated European system of alliance, all of the continent (from the Netherlands to Spain) was now seemingly involved in this war across the Atlantic.

Though contemporary retellings of the American Revolution depict it as simply the Thirteen Colonies' rebellion against the British Crown, the reality was much more complicated. Indeed, the Revolution was in some ways two wars: the Patriot rebellion and an extension of the earlier Seven Years' War, in which the British and French (along with several other countries) used the New World to play out European power struggles.

When it came down to it, however, the new United States went behind France's back to reach an agreement with Britain—acting in violation of the Franco-American Treaty of Alliance. Upon learning of this breach of trust from Ben Franklin, Vergennes fretted that "we shall be but poorly paid for all that we have done for the United States, and for securing to them a national existence."

Vergennes was prophetic when he predicted that the U.S. would not be loyal to France, its most trusted ally. From their failure to assist in the French Revolution only a decade later to the modern-day "freedom fries" controversy, Americans have failed to return France's favors. This is especially surprising given, as Vergennes puts it, the U.S. would not "exist" were it not for French help.

The park ranger at the Yorktown battlefield ends Vowell's tour by asking visitors to think about the promise inherent in the Declaration of Independence. The ranger acknowledges that "we've made horrible mistakes, and we've had incredible successes" in the years since that document was signed, especially when it comes to Jefferson's statement that "all men are created equal."

This contradiction—between the wonderful promises of American democracy and the often much darker reality—is at the heart of Vowell's book. in particular, Vowell emphasizes that the freedom and equality the Patriots fought for were extended only to wealthy white men—and coexisted with the horrific practice of slavery.

Vowell ponders why Americans celebrate July 4—the day that Declaration was signed—rather than Yorktown day, when the war was actually won. She decides that it is because Americans, following in the footsteps of men like John Adams, tend to believe that the Revolution was more about a change of heart than "amputated limbs and bayoneted torsos." Moreover, Americans do not want to acknowledge just how essential the French were to their victory.

In this crucial passage, Vowell traces the revisionist history she has been frustrated with to its roots. In advocating for the Revolution to be seen through an ideological lens, Adams was—even in the first years of the United States' existence—already papering over the violence that made such ideological change possible. Thus, Americans celebrate a day when a piece of paper was signed versus the day when, after eight days of slaughter, the war was actually won and the world actually changed.

The French have not forgotten this alliance so quickly. Every Fourth of July at Pipcus Cemetery in Paris, the French put a bright new American flag over Lafayette's grave (which is filled with dirt from Bunker Hill). Vowell notes that Pipcus is filled with many bodies of people who were slaughtered during the Terror, or the period of intense violence that ultimately marked the downfall of the French Revolution. In fact, Lafayette's wife, Adrienne, would have been a victim of the Terror were it not for some last-minute U.S. involvement on her behalf.

The close friendship between Lafayette and Washington should have been a symbolic guide for a larger bond between the two nations. But instead, the bond remained largely a personal one. And similarly, America would come to Adrienne's aid, but it would not assist the hundreds of thousands of other French people who were killed or endangered during the Terror.

And though Lafayette's loyalty was not always repaid, more often than not, the U.S. came through for its French allies. In World War I, when America at last entered the sprawling conflict, the generals began their campaign by marching directly to Pipcus Cemetery. An American colonel stood in front of Lafayette's tomb and declared that "in the presence of the illustrious dead, we pledge our hearts and our honor in carrying this war to a successful issue. Lafayette, we are here."

The use of Pipcus Cemetery to initiate the American entrance into World War I demonstrates that Lafayette has left a lasting geopolitical legacy. Even today, France and America are strong allies (working together as two key member-nations of NATO). As this WWI moment indicates, there is no better symbol (or no clearer instigator) of that centuries-long bond than Lafayette himself.

To Vowell's dismay, when most Americans hear the word Lafayette, they hardly know this was the name of a critical historical figure. Instead, they think of all the many places that bear this name: there are cities called Lafayette in Louisiana, Colorado, Utah and Oregon, to name just a few. Jokingly, Vowell "moralize[s] upon the instability of human glory." In 1824, 80,000 Americans went to greet Lafayette's ship, and now, nobody even remembers him.

In one way, Vowell's "moralizing" serves to reiterate her earlier thoughts about how history is forgotten or revised. But in another sense, there is some sad irony in the fact that Lafayette, who desperately craved glory but eventually learned to forgo it, is now almost entirely forgotten in the country he helped to create.

One of the places named after Lafayette is Lafayette Square, located directly in front of the White House. This square is where many of the country's most passionate protestors go to make their grievances heard. People of radically different beliefs—from civil rights activists to members of the Ku Klux Klan—have gathered here to try and get through to the highest levels of government.

As Vowell turns to the protests at Lafayette Square, she seems to suggest that the work of creating a true democracy, begun in the Revolution, is unfinished. Still, even as some activists protest for greater freedom and equality, the racial prejudice that has shaped the U.S. since the beginning lives on in groups like the Ku Klux Klan.

Though some presidents have tried to shut themselves off from Lafayette Square, protestors have gone to court to keep the square open, ensuring that it remains a place for the public to get the government's ear. The courts always side with the protestors; in one such ruling, a judge declared that the "airing of opinions is historic in our democratic society, and one of its cardinal values." Vowell continues to list the varying protests that have taken place here, emphasizing that they are just a regular part of life in front of the White House.

Though Vowell has shown over and over again how political debate can get in the way of useful political action, here she celebrates the uniquely American desire to "air [...] opinions." When everyday people are able to articulate and argue about their real needs and desires—and to do so in front of a center of power like the White House—democracy is actually working as it should.

The first major protest in Lafayette Square occurred in the early 20th century, when suffragettes picketed in the hopes of passing a constitutional amendment that would give women the right to vote. Though these women faced violence and the threat of arrest, they continued to fight for their voice in American democracy.

In addition to focusing on how protests can give new meaning to American democracy, Vowell is implicitly addressing the largely male slant to her book. After being excluded from U.S. politics during the country's founding, the women at Lafayette Square forcibly inserted themselves into the democratic process.

In September of 1918, Evelyn Wotherspoon Wainwright, one of the leaders of this movement, walked up to the Lafayette statue in the middle of the square. Calling on the memory of Lafayette as the ultimate defender of democracy, Wainwright prayed for the passage of an amendment that would take another two years to finally be made law. In her final plea for a voice for women, Wainwright called out to the famed French general: "Lafayette," she cried, "we are here."

By ending with Wainwright calling out to Lafayette, Vowell suggests that her hero lives on—and, specifically, that his passion for independence and equality inspires others to fight for the same principles. In other words, if the American Revolution did not live up the promise of its ideals, Lafayette's legacy might still achieve the freedom he so recklessly—and bravely—fought for.

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