Lafayette was America's greatest European supporter of American democracy. No other foreign soldier-statesman ever brought with him to his native land and the rest of Europe as much about the American Dream embracing political, social, and religious freedoms including commercial reforms as did Lafayette.

When he was a teenage officer in the French Army in the service of the King of France, he heard about the Declaration of Independence. Here was a model he would accept as a blueprint for action the rest of his life. This precocious visionary set his goals, adopted a command focus, planned his strategy from which he never wavered, and embarked on a journey to a land he had never known before.

Lafayette arrived at the State House in Philadelphia, now Independence Hall, on July, 1777, and volunteered his military services to the Continental Congress. So impressed were the Congressmen with the young man's ambitions and sincerity that they gave him the commission of a major general. That evening in a meeting at the City Tavern, General George Washington interviewed Lafayette and was also impressed with the Frenchman's zeal and courage in wishing to fight for American independence from Great Britain. Washington was forty-five and had no son; Lafayette was nineteen and had no father. Immediately both men developed a father-son bond of friendship that would last the rest of their lives.

The Marquis' two profoundest influences were among the two greatest men who ever lived: George Washington, his military hero; and Thomas Jefferson, his political and intellectual hero.

Baron Johann De Kalb who journeyed to America with Lafayette and fought alongside the Americans during the war once wrote that Lafayette was a prodigy for his age because of his military judgment and courage. He had observed the young lion's bravery and dash while rallying his men in the face of the British onslaught at the Battle of Brandywine and boldly ordering a counterattack. He continued to fight even after he was shot in the leg. Eight months later, Lafayette at Barren Hill, Pennsylvania, would bring off one of the most stunning escapes in the annals of military history by outfoxing four of the ablest British generals and sixteen thousand of their men.

Everyone knew that the Marquis was one of the wealthiest men in France. Indeed, he could easily have chosen to lead a life of lavish
comfort with his wife and children at the court of the King and Queen of France at Paris and Versailles. Instead, he chose the harsh and dangerous military camp life of battlefields that stretched from New England to the deep South. Lafayette served for four years, and he risked physical disability for life, capture, exile to oblivion, or death. No wonder his men admired and respected this wealthy aristocrat who shared with them the unbearable heat of summer months and the bitter cold of winter seasons.

Valley Forge was the place where Lafayette's admiration for General Washington grew dramatically. Here, he observed the conduct of a man who faced defeat so often yet persevered in carrying out his mission as Commander-in-Chief. His fighting forces were dwindling because of starvation, desertions, disease, a recalcitrant Congress, and death. Lafayette learned how to cope with enormous pressure from one of the great military leaders of all time, and he would use this skill during the most challenging years of his life as the French Revolution would revert to the Reign of Terror.

In more than a year after Valley Forge, he received Washington's permission to return to France in an attempt to use his diplomatic skills. The French-American Alliance had just been signed. France became the first nation to recognize the independence of the colonies from Great Britain during the spring of 1778. Yet, Lafayette, well aware of Washington's military dilemma, urged the Minister of War and the King of France to honor the alliance by providing the Americans with the aid promised by France. Money, muskets, ammunition, artillery pieces, soldiers, and a navy were needed as quickly as possible. In this regard, the French-American General who proudly wore the uniform of an American in Paris played no little role in getting the aid sent over. All historians agree that without the help of France, America would have lost the war.

Throughout the remainder of the Revolutionary War, Lafayette continued to lead men on the battlefields. This remarkable warrior played a successful part of a team effort to trap the British General Lord Cornwallis at Yorktown, Virginia, where the battle ended on October 19, 1781, with the surrender of Cornwallis. As a witness to the surrender ceremonies that ended with an American victory, Lafayette savored the joy he shared with his military hero.

When he returned to France after the war, Lafayette was celebrated as the most famous man in Europe. He earned a unique title, "The Hero of Two Worlds."

France was ready for major political reforms. The King had all the power, and the people were organizing for change. Lafayette got Thomas Jefferson to help him draft a French version of the American Constitution's Bill of Rights. The most powerful man in France called it "The Declaration of the Rights
of Man," his tribute to American democracy. He presented the document to the French National Assembly during the summer of 1789 and successfully argued its passage into law. Lafayette now became a leader in another struggle for political reform: the French Revolution.

The Marquis had helped Thomas Jefferson liberalize commerce between the United States and France. As America's unofficial trade representative, Lafayette convinced his government to import tons of flour, tobacco, and corn to the advantage of the American farmer.

He was the first warrior-politician of international fame and prestige to protest vehemently the immorality of slavery. He became an active member of a society called "Les Amis du Noir," and with his wife Adrienne's valuable support they conducted an experiment first to educate slaves and then free them in the colony of French Guiana.

He championed the cause of ending the religious persecution of the French Protestants. Religious equality was quite high on his list of reforms since his Declaration of the Rights of Man became his blueprint and agenda to help the oppressed achieve equal justice under law.

Because of Lafayette's long and close friendships dating back to American Revolutionary War days with Generals Casimir Pulaski and Tadeusz Kosciuszko, he actively supported the Polish Revolution of 1830. He gave endless speeches in the French Chamber of Deputies, and he became a founding member of the Polish Committee in his battle to help the Polish people struggle against the despotic rule of the Russian monarchy.

The Marquis was not only one of the greatest Frenchman who ever lived, he was one of the greatest Americans. Congress, after all, showed its love and appreciation for this precocious visionary who helped the United States in its War of Independence by bestowing upon him the highest honor--American citizenship.

No other foreign statesman ever received as many honors as Lafayette. Places and institutions were named in his honor such as schools, roads, streets, boulevards, highways, buildings, towns, counties, parks, corporations, companies, and so on.

Lafayette College located at Easton, Pennsylvania, stands as a most appropriate memorial to this extraordinary freedom fighter whose quest for the Holy Grail of social, political, economic, and religious freedom was his steadfast mission throughout his entire life.

And it was at this college where the organization named THE AMERICAN FRIENDS OF LAFAYETTE was founded in 1932, a Society dedicated to the memory and study of a man who loved America as much as his own country and served both with great honor.
After Lafayette's spectacular visit to the United States at the invitation of President James Monroe in 1824-25, he returned home with a trunkful of earth. The old warrior died in 1834 and was buried according to his final wish—in American soil at the Picpus Cemetery in Paris. An American flag was placed at his grave and has flown at his tomb ever since that time even during the occupation of German forces during World War Two. Indeed, even the bitter enemies of France chose not to disturb the powerful symbolic spirit of friendship that Lafayette himself forged and sustained.

The more we read about the life and times of the Marquis de Lafayette, the more we learn to cherish the brilliance of our founding fathers like Washington, Jefferson, Adams, and Franklin. Along with Lafayette, they formed an alliance that charted a change in the course of history from the grim anguish of corrupt monarchies to the dawn of civilized democracies throughout the world today. The fact that Lafayette was so inspired by his American heroes and learned from their influences qualifies him as a visionary leader of the highest order.

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