

French reasons for Alliance through Yankee Eyes, 1775-1778

Trevor J. Pereira

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Abstract

This paper will examine early American diplomacy during the quest for American independence. This research will discuss why France decided to support the independent movement of the colonists, and how the French conducted their diplomacy with the American revolutionaries. To comprehend the French objectives, it is important to understand why France wished to weaken the British Empire. Moreover, French losses during the 1763 Treaty of Paris, left them wanting revenge on the British. France supported American independence, but had to support the Americans discreetly and declare neutrality in the Revolutionary War, so as to keep the British unaware of the French clandestine aid to the Americans. This paper will examine how America signed its first treaties, the Treaty of Amity and Commerce and the Treaty of Alliance with France in 1778, that was greatly advantageous to America. This research will conclude with the diplomatic engagements after the treaties were signed, just before American diplomacy shifted its focus to making peace with Great Britain.

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Introduction

One would have to say to them without doubt that Providence has marked this moment for the humiliation of England, that it has struck her with blindness, which is the most certain precursor of destruction, and that it is time to avenge upon that nation the evils which she has done since the beginning of the Century against those who have had the misfortune to be her neighbors or her rivals; one should then neglect no possible means to render the next campaign as vigorous as it can be made, and to procure advantages for the Americans. The degree of animosity and of exhaustion of the two parties which will result there-from would then determine the moment to strike the decisive blows which will return England to the order of secondary Powers, would take away from her the Dominion that she claims to exercise in the four parts of the world with as much pride as injustice, and would deliver the Universe from a greedy Tyrant who wants to devour all the power and all the riches at one time.

-Comte de Vergennes, French Minister for Foreign Affairs, March 12, 1776

During the eighteenth century, the European powers fought a series of wars over their possessions in America and the West Indies. The center point of these conflicts occurred during the Seven Years' War, also known as the French and Indian War, 1756-1763, which effectively banished France from having a presence in North America. The negotiations between Great Britain, France and Spain decided how each nation would have an influence in North America, without, of course, the consent of any of the colonists living in the areas where these European nations drew borders. Great Britain would be the clear winner during the 1763 Treaty of Paris treaty negotiations; however, Great Britain did give considerable concessions to France, in order to end the war which was bankrupting the British.¹ Great Britain's victory during the Seven Years' War put them in a position for a favorable peace. On the other hand, the French were extremely skilled at diplomacy, so they were able to make a good peace even for its military failures. Spain was not victorious during the war, and lacked a strong diplomatic presence. As a result, the Spanish got the worst end of the deal. On the other hand, Spain did get the upper hand

¹ Zenab Esmat Rashed, *The Peace of Paris, 1763* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1951), 202.

when they traded Florida in return for regaining Havana, which British historians later believed was a poor trade off. Even though France lost much land, the French people were glad of the peace, since a better peace was impossible. In the treaty, Great Britain gave France limited fishing rights in the Gulf of St. Lawrence, and off Newfoundland and restored their rights to Guadeloupe, Marie Galante, Dominica, Martinique, St. Lucia, Belleisle and Goree.² With these gains, France did not lose all their colonies in the West Indies, which meant that maritime commerce would still be influential in the Western Hemisphere.

Although France gave the huge area of Louisiana to Spain in compensation for Spanish actions during the war and ceded Florida to Great Britain, Spain was still frustrated because Great Britain destroyed their fortifications in the Bay of Honduras, and used it for logwood cutting. This allowed for Great Britain to assert its commercial dominance in the West Indies, which France and Spain, in their economic objectives, hoped to reduce British economic control. With the gain of Florida, though, Great Britain consolidated their empire that opened new opportunities of commerce. “At the same time it was recognized that France, by receiving back a share in the fisheries and her West Indian colonies, would, in the near future, again be in a position to challenge British maritime supremacy.”³ What the Treaty of Paris really accomplished was a desire for France and Spain to take revenge on Great Britain and challenge British supremacy in the near future. France, looking for an opportunity to challenge and exact revenge on the British, found an opportunity, when the Committee of Secret Correspondence of the Continental Congress in Philadelphia wrote to the Court of France and asked if France would be inclined to support the Americans in their quest for independence from Great Britain.

² Rashed, *Peace of Paris, 1763*, 208-211.

³ *Ibid*, 202.

Although Great Britain was in a more favorable position than France or Spain after the treaty, it still must be noted that the British failed in certain areas to prevent more hostilities from occurring after the treaty. For instance, British diplomacy failed because of the many battles with France and Spain over insignificant issues, but most importantly, British diplomacy failed because they were not successful in gaining a major European ally. Even though the British accomplished to take Florida away from Spain, which allowed the British to smuggle military supplies into Spanish Louisiana, and gained the majority of fishing rights in Newfoundland from the French, the British could have secured greater gains if they were able to procure a major European ally, an ally which would push for influence and territory in the Americas. In a much more dismal position, the French, losing the Canadian fur trade and valuable share of Newfoundland fishery from British conquests, settled for the tiny island of Miquelon and St. Pierre. After 1763, Great Britain and the alliance of France and Spain, fought for French fishing rights off Newfoundland, and British timber cutting in Central America. These issues, though, never led to war, but the European powers tried to gain an advantage by forcing the other to back off.⁴ Britain failed to reach the kind of alliance that France and Spain had. France and Spain were in a special position. The two nations were ruled by the same family, known as the House of Bourbon. King Louis XVI of France was the uncle of King Charles III of Spain, and their respective countries signed defensive alliances with each other, known as the Family Compacts. Britain could have reached an alliance with Russia, which would certainly have helped during the Revolutionary War. Great Britain also put itself in a disadvantaged circumstance when it was ignorant to the danger of an American rebellion, and it did not have any allies or made any compromise to its

⁴ Jonathan R. Dull, *A Diplomatic History of the American Revolution* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1985), 28-29.

enemies, and did not have military bases strong enough to thwart the Americans.⁵ Though the balance of power theory is a rational theory of international relations, France irrationally decided to aid the Americans, because France desperately wanted to exact revenge on the British for the Seven Years' War and 1763 Treaty of Paris, in an attempt to shift the balance of power to their favor and end the British monopoly on American trade.

America Looks For Foreign Help

On November 29, 1775, Congress appointed a Committee of Secret Correspondence, "for the sole purpose of corresponding with our friends in Great Britain, Ireland, and other parts of the world".⁶ John Adams sought for the adoption of a plan of treaties to be signed with France and Spain, quickly, so that when the British heard news of a potential declaration of American independence, foreign alliances could quickly come to the aid and fight off the British trying to quell the unrest.⁷ The Committee comprised of Benjamin Franklin, Benjamin Harrison, John Dickinson, Robert Morris, and John Jay. The Committee contacted an American merchant living in London, Arthur Lee, to see if other nations thought of possibly aiding Americans. The Committee also sent Silas Deane, to go to France and learn of their opinions of a potential U.S. independence and what kind of assistance France would be willing to offer America. Laura Charlotte Sheldon writes that the Committee of Secret Correspondence instructed Deane to introduce himself as a merchant to the Count de Vergennes, ask for a supply of arms and ammunition to be placed the credit of Congress, ask whether France might enter into either a commercial or defen-

⁵Dull, *A Diplomatic History of the American Revolution*, 43.

⁶Mary A. Giunta, *Documents of the Emerging Nation: U.S. Foreign Relations 1775-1789* (Wilmington, DE: SR Books, 1998), 1.

⁷Laura Charlotte Sheldon, *France and the American Revolution, 1763-1778* (Ithaca, NY: Andrus & Church, 1900), 17.

sive alliance with the Americans, and at what time France would be willing to recognize American independence.⁸ France was very interested in learning of the state of affairs in America. The French felt that they were humiliated by the terms of the 1763 Treaty of Paris and wanted to exact revenge. As a result, the French Minister for Foreign Affairs, Charles Gravier, Comte de Vergennes ordered the French Embassy in London to send Julien-Alexandre Achard de Bonvouloir to go to America to meet with the Committee of Secret Correspondence to see how Americans felt towards Independence.

Many historians write that the world of eighteenth century diplomacy centered on the theory of rational self-interest, termed, the balance of power. In Europe, this meant that each state was concerned for its security, which ensured that no one state would dominate the others, because all the states would form alliances.⁹ France feared that Britain was becoming the most powerful nation in Europe, and believed it was their duty was to stop this from happening. The loss of Britain's colonies would, by French estimates, destroy the British economy, and the European balance of power would shift in French favor. In the autumn of 1776, the Continental Congress instructed Benjamin Franklin, Silas Deane, and Arthur Lee to be Commissioners to France, and seek a treaty with France.

French Support to Americans

As the 1763 Treaty of Paris was seen as a humiliation to France by those in its diplomatic corps the French had many reasons to justify their decision to support the American independence. Joseph Matthias Gérard de Rayneval, the Under-Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs and

⁸ Sheldon, *France and the American Revolution, 1763-1778*, 31.

⁹ Dull, *A Diplomatic History of the American Revolution*, 13.

Trade wrote in *Reflections on the Situation in America* in April 1776, that, “England is the natural enemy of France; and she is a greedy enemy, ambitious, unjust, and untrustworthy; the invariable and cherished goal of her policy is, if not the destruction of France, at least her debasement, her humiliation, and her ruin”.¹⁰ Gérard believed that Great Britain had treated France unfairly, and that France must take advantage of the opportunities which Great Britain to lose their advantage over France. America’s independence would decrease the commerce and power of England and strengthen the commerce and power of France, which meant France could gain back some territory, such as fishing rights, which it lost in the 1763 Treaty of Paris.¹¹

While France certainly wanted to aid the Americans, it had to be done discreetly, so that if Great Britain discovered that France was aiding the Americans, Great Britain would immediately declare war on an unprepared France. The French needed time to build their Navy and ready it for war, and, thus, needed it to combine the Spanish Navy to compete with the powerful British Navy. Gérard wrote, “This commerce of exchange could be carried on without the Government taking part in it; it would require an intelligent merchant, faithful and discreet, in each of the ports where the American ships would call”.¹² To keep the British unaware of French aid to America, the French government set up a commercial company to conceal the French government’s involvement. Pierre-Augustin Caron de Beaumarchais, who had been successful in retrieving secret papers from possible spies in the French foreign ministry in London, first suggested to Vergennes that France and Spain could supply arms and ammunition to the Americans, under the cover of private commerce, and was chosen to head the company. This company was

¹⁰ Joseph Matthias Gérard de Rayneval, “Reflections on the Situation in America,” in *Documents of the Emerging Nation: U.S. Foreign Relations, 1775-1789*, ed. Mary A. Giunta (Wilmington, DE: SR Books, 1998), 25.

¹¹ *Ibid*, 25.

¹² *Ibid*, 25.

named Roderique Hortalez and Company, which would sell arms and ammunition to Congress on credit, for repayment in American tobacco.¹³ The French were fully committed to aiding the Americans in the form of loans, arms and ammunition, as long as their activities could be hidden from the British.

As committed as France was to aiding the Americans, the French certainly were not without their hesitations and fears for supporting the American independence. Vergennes feared essentially every possible outcome of a war with Great Britain he could think of. In a letter of Considerations, written on March 12, 1776, he considered the following outcomes: A British victory; Great Britain could reconcile with the colonies; a beaten Britain that could possibly seek revenge and punish Spain and France; a reconciliation with the Americans by offering them commerce and providing territories held by the French and Spanish; or an independent America with no ties to Britain, which can conquest sugar islands belonging to Spain.¹⁴ Vergennes seemed overly worried, but he had good reasons for his fears, since they were all possible outcomes, but in the end, he chose to take the irrational risk because France wanted to seek revenge against the British. Vergennes also wrote to the twenty-two year old King Louis XVI that it was possible that Britain and America could end their war and attack the French West Indies. He proposed sending aid to the rebels in order to keep the revolution alive, allowing France and Spain time to strengthen military defenses in their own colonies from a possible attack of an Anglo-American reconciliation. In reality, the French did not strengthen defenses for the Caribbean, because ap-

¹³ Dull, *A Diplomatic History of the American Revolution*, 61.

¹⁴ Comte de Vergennes, "Considerations on the Affairs of the English Colonies in America," in, *Documents of the Emerging Nation: U.S. Foreign Relations, 1775-1789*, 18-24.

pearing to do so was mostly to persuade King Louis XVI to grant aid so that it would appear defensive.¹⁵ Vergennes went on to state that it is the utmost importance that France and Spain appear neutral and have no intention for war, and to give no reason for the British to build their defenses, but at the same time, keep the Americans confident that France and Spain are secretly on their side.¹⁶

Spain also wanted to support the continuation of the revolution so Great Britain would be weakened by the constant fighting. Another one Spain's main worries was, once America became independent, that the Americans would want to move westward across the Mississippi River and settle in Spanish territory. To subdue these fears, Gérard wrote that both Spain and France should support American independence in spite of the possible unfortunate outcomes. He believed that the war would exhaust the Americans and they would have no desire to conquest or threaten occupying French and Spanish colonies. He predicted that once the Americans became independent, they would form a republican government, which, historically, focused on the welfare of the general public instead of conquest.¹⁷

In the summer of 1776, France feared that if they pushed for aid to the Americans before the Americans announce independence, it could result in American suspicion on France by inquiring what objectives France had in America, and the surrounding regions, particularly their colonies in the West Indies.¹⁸ This suspicion could cause America to reunite with England in pursuits against French possessions, but that outcome was unlikely, as the Colonists were very insistent on independence. Though France still feared an Anglo-American reconciliation aimed

¹⁵ Dull, *A Diplomatic History of the American Revolution*, 57-58.

¹⁶ Comte de Vergennes, "Considerations," in, *Documents of the Emerging Nation*, 22.

¹⁷ Rayneval, "Reflections," in, *Documents of the Emerging Nation*, 25-26.

¹⁸ Sheldon, *France and the American Revolution, 1763-1778*, 8.

at threatening France even though the Continental Congress announced after the Declaration of Independence that Congress would reject any peace offer from the British that did not acknowledge American independence. On the other hand, that did not stop the British from sending peace offers in September 1776, which resulted in Benjamin Franklin, John Adams, and Edward Rutledge meeting with Admiral Howe to hear his proposals. Nonetheless, Congress was firmly committed it was not going to submit to any British authority.¹⁹

Although America needed foreign assistance for military alliances in their fight for independence, their desire to exit the sphere of European influence both in the present and future made them confident they could win the war by themselves, or at least with little foreign assistance. In accepting foreign assistance, from perhaps France or Spain, the Americans did not desire to rid themselves of the British only to become subjects of another European power. The Continental Congress only realized as time went on after the announcement of the Declaration of Independence, that foreign assistance was necessary to defeat the British. As a result, they asked European nations if any nations were inclined to recognize American independence and support the Americans to defeat British forces. In December 1776, Congress offered military alliances and cooperation to Spain and France in return for Florida or the British West Indies. Though not all Americans wished to cede such valuable territory to a foreign power, and people in living in different regions were mostly concerned only with the lands near them. For instance, Southerners did not care for New England fishing rights off Newfoundland, and Northerners were not concerned with the southern and western desire for navigation rights on the Mississippi River.²⁰

While these issues would not be brought up until after the war's end, it was clear that Americans

¹⁹ Dull, *A Diplomatic History of the American Revolution*, 53.

²⁰ Dull, *A Diplomatic History of the American Revolution*, 54-55.

differed on how foreign powers would have an influence in America, and that the Continental Congress should be careful to pursue alliances with foreign powers.

Commissioners Seek Treaties with France

At the first meeting with Vergennes and the Count de Aranda, Spain's ambassador to France, in December 1776, the American Commissioners requested a treaty of amity and commerce, military supplies, and a loan of French ships. Vergennes and Aranda refused to grant all the requests, but they told the Commissioners that Spain and France would both offer a grant of one million livres each, to be paid in four installments.²¹ Immediately following, ships with ammunition and officers were sent to America. Beaumarchais, the head of the Roderique Hortalez and Company, sent nine ships financed from the 2 million livres from France and Spain, and borrowed another 3 million from wealthy merchants.²² Vergennes responded to the Commissioners that he was not prepared yet to make a treaty with America because it would have certainly force an unprepared France into the war, which is the main reason why Vergennes insisted that France must appear to be neutral. In case Great Britain accused France of supporting the rebels, than France could appear innocent by honoring treaties it had with Great Britain, by arresting an American merchant ship suspected of carrying contraband trade, just to appear as if they are honoring treaties.

By early 1777, France still told the Commissioners that they did not wish to sign treaties. The French wanted to see if their aid of arms and ammunition was making a difference in the war effort in America. France's Navy still was not fully ready to fight off the British success-

²¹ Sheldon, *France and the American Revolution*, 46-49

²² Sheldon, *France and the American Revolution*, 33-34.

fully, so they continued their secret shipment of aid to the Americans. Frustrated with the response they heard from France and on hearing accounts of England's massive preparations to end the revolution, the Commissioners insisted that it would be advantageous for France and Spain to quickly declare war on Great Britain. Hearing from Spain that they would only offer the 1 million livres to the Americans, Congress offered to Spain that they would declare war on Spain's enemy, Portugal, if a report of Portugal harming American commerce in the region proved to be true.²³ Spain rejected the proposal because they were not interested in bringing American into its quarrels with Portugal. To bring France to declare war, or at least force them into the war, the American Commissioners wrote to Vergennes on January 5, 1777, that many European nations were giving aid to Great Britain, and in order to counteract that aid, France and Spain should declare war on Great Britain, and use their mighty arsenals to defeat the British quickly. The Commissioners wrote,

But if England should on that Account declare War we conceive that by the united Force of France, Spain & America, she will lose all her Possessions in the West Indies, much the greatest Part of that Commerce that has render'd her so opulent, and be reduc'd to that State of Weakness and Humiliation, she has by her Perfidy, her Insolence, & her Cruelty both in the East & West Indies, so justly merited.²⁴

The Commissioners told Vergennes exactly what the French wanted to hear-that England would be humiliated and British commerce would be significantly reduced, which, according to the Commissioners, could only occur if France and Spain openly fought the British. Vergennes reminded them that sending aid to America in secret was already risky enough, and that sending all their military arsenals to fight the British in America would dangerously expose themselves to a British attack on the French homeland. The Commissioners wrote to the Committee of Secret

²³ Sheldon, *France and the American Revolution*, 49-50.

²⁴ American Commissioners to Comte de Vergennes," in *Documents of the Emerging Nation: U.S. Foreign Relations 1775-1789*, 31.

Correspondence to update them on the request of more French ships to America on March 12, 1777. The Commissioners wrote that France had refused Congress' request because France needed to build their own defenses. "If a War with England should take place, the whole Fleet of France would be necessary at home for her Defense..that the Fleet of France should remain entire in her Ports, since that must retain an equal Force of English at home, who might otherwise go to America."²⁵ France was working at great expense to furnish aid to the Americans, but also to prepare itself for a war against Great Britain that could take place in the European theatre. The Commissioners understood this, and wanted to give France the respect it deserved and let them tell the Americans when they were ready to sign treaties. On May 25th, 1777, the Commissioners, in one of their many reports to the Committee of Secret Correspondence-re-named the Committee for Foreign Affairs- wrote that France could not give them a time when they might expect a treaty, and that France told the Commissioners that the Americans already enjoy all the advantages that France would give to the Americans in a treaty, but that America could be assured that they would continue to be able to depend on all the resources that France gave. The Commissioners wrote that they were confident in the friendship and commerce of France and Spain, despite being not guaranteed of a treaty.²⁶

Despite the assurances of friendship and loyalty to the American cause, France became very frustrated in the summer of 1777 with the actions of American merchants, which could have threatened to uncover the actions French involvement in American aid, to the British. American merchants were selling captured British merchant ships in French ports, that could have exposed

²⁵ American Commissioners to Committee of Secret Correspondence," in *Documents of the Emerging Nation: U.S. Foreign Relations 1775-1789*, 38.

²⁶ American Commissioners to Committee of Secret Correspondence," in *Documents of the Emerging Nation: U.S. Foreign Relations 1775-1789*, 43.

French involvement. The commissioners were instructed by Congress to obtain whatever advantages they could, like the right to sell captured British merchant ships, known as prizes. Vergennes warned that American merchants could not use French ports for military actions, because it was forbidden by treaties France had with Britain. In one instance, the *Surprise*, an American warship, sailed from the French port of Dunkirk and returned with two prizes, a violation under an Anglo-French treaty that assigned Dunkirk to be a demilitarized port with a British resident commissioner.²⁷ Vergennes was not actually concerned with the treaty violation, but the British protest of American merchants, uncovering French actions, could have forced France into the war, which they were not prepared for. In another instance, in May 1777, a squadron of three American warships sailed from French ports and captured 18 prizes, and when they had the audacity to return to French ports in June, they were followed by the British Navy, jeopardizing French neutrality, which the French would not accept.²⁸ As a result, Vergennes threw the captain of the *Surprise* into jail for a few weeks to quiet British anger and appear to remain neutral by punishing those who used Dunkirk for military purposes. The Commissioners wrote on September 8th, 1777 to the Committee for Foreign Affairs to not concern themselves with the news of France imprisoning several American merchants. They wrote,

This Court continues the same Conduct that it has held ever since our Arrival-It professes to England a Resolution to observe all Treaties, and proves it by restoring Prizes too openly brought into their Ports...-To us it privately professes a real Friendship, wishes Success to our Cause, winks at the Supplies we obtain here as much as it can without giving open Grounds of Complaint to England-Privately affords us very Essential Aids, and goes on preparing for War.²⁹

²⁷ Dull, *A Diplomatic History of the American Revolution*, 80.

²⁸ *Ibid*, 81.

²⁹ American Commissioners to Committee for Foreign Affairs," in *Documents of the Emerging Nation: U.S. Foreign Relations 1775-1789*, 44.

The Commissioners knew that France had to be broadcasting different actions and positions than it actually had to the British, and were confident that their true intentions rested on the weakening of the British Empire and its commerce, and the increase of French commerce while respecting American claims to their territories.

Regardless of the position of France toward the Americans, France was still frustrated that American merchants had overstepped and threatened to uncover the secret support of France to America. France would not be forced to enter the war because a few misguided American merchants made the selfish mistake of bringing back British prizes. As the threat of bankruptcy loomed for the American Commissioners in September 1777, Congress ordered them to request from France and Spain a loan of eight million livres. Vergennes was concerned at how discouraged the Commissioners were for asking an additional large sum of aid, especially after the actions of the American merchants. Vergennes hoped to renew their confidence, and because of the harsh treatment by France toward the American merchants, he asked Spain to match the French contribution of three million livres to the Americans, in return for the Americans to not have any secret negotiations with Great Britain, although the Spanish refused to match that amount.³⁰ Vergennes also felt that the Commissioners were loyal to French demands, and with the news of the British capture of Fort Ticonderoga, Vergennes told the Commissioners in November 1777 that France would provide them with three million livres.³¹

American Commissioners and France begin Treaty Negotiations

The biggest question facing France was when they would openly aid the Colonies to provoke an open war with Great Britain. The military supplies in America could only support

³⁰ Sheldon, *France and the American Revolution*, 58-59.

³¹ Dull, *A Diplomatic History of the American Revolution*, 88.

fighting until the Americans became overwhelmed and abandoned their struggle and force a reconciliation with England. France's worst fear was an Anglo-American reconciliation which could try to punish France for its attempt to separate the colonies from their mother country. France needed to announce their aid to the Americans and sign treaties with them at the right time. Too early, the French would not be prepared to fight the war and there would be too little supplies sent to the Colonies to build their reserves, and would need Spain to join to match the strength of the British Navy. Too late and the Colonies could be reconciled to Great Britain, and then turn against France and Spain. Either way, France feared that America could be reconciled with Great Britain. Knowing that France feared a possible reconciliation, Silas Deane suggested to the other Commissioners, Benjamin Franklin, and Arthur Lee, that in order to force the French to sign treaties with them, they should tell the French that America might be forced to reconcile with Britain, if France did not sign treaties with them and enter into the war.³² Eventually, the victory of the battle of Saratoga would be enough evidence for the French to realize that the Americans would not accept any British reconciliation that did not offer independence.

As news of the victory of the battle of Saratoga spread, the Commissioners wrote to Vergennes on December 8th, 1777, to remind him that the Commissioners had been in France for over a year, and asked for an audience with him to know how France now felt towards signing treaties.³³ The victory of the battle of Saratoga gave France confidence that their aid to the Americas had made them sufficiently stronger, and that the Americans were in a good position to push the British towards preparing a peace, which the Americans would hopefully refuse, as it was doubtful the British would offer the Americans independence in a peace deal. Despite the good

³² Gerald Stourzh, *Benjamin Franklin and American Foreign Policy* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1969), 134.

³³ American Commissioners to Comte de Vergennes, December 8th 1777, in *Documents of the Emerging Nation: U.S. Foreign Relations 1775-1789*, 48-49.

news from America, Vergennes still did feared of the possibility of an Anglo-American reconciliation.³⁴ Vergennes wrote to the French ambassador in Spain that he feared they could do nothing to stop a possible reconciliation between America and Great Britain.

An accommodation would be all the more dangerous to France, since war with England now seemed inevitable. It would be best to enter on this war in alliance with the Americans; for, even if they should listen to proposals from England after they had bound themselves to France, the consequences would not be so serious... They might desert their ally, but they would hardly be so base as to attack her.³⁵

Vergennes further wrote, “For the question we have to decide is to know whether it is more expedient for us to have war against England and America together, than with America for us against England.³⁶ France needed to sign treaties with the Americans and recognize their independence before it was too late. The victory of the battle of Saratoga meant that British diplomacy could be focused on offering reconciliation with the Americans, maybe even offering independence, which the American would accept, since they long held the view that after America and Great Britain negotiated for peace, they would enter into commercial agreements, in which case, France needed to act quickly. By the end of 1777, France built their Navy to the point where they were confident that it could compete with the British Navy, and was ready to sign treaties with America, recognize American independence, and join the war.

Gérard, the Under-Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs and Trade, asked the Commissioners what would be sufficient for America to refuse English proposals for reconciliation. The Commissioners replied a treaty of commerce and alliance would be enough.³⁷ The Commissioners wrote to Congress to make no peace with Great Britain, and that France should guarantee that

³⁴ Sheldon, *France and the American Revolution*, 62.

³⁵ Vergennes to Montmorin, December 11, 1777 in, Sheldon, *France and the American Revolution*, 62.

³⁶ Sheldon, *France and the American Revolution*, 66.

³⁷ *Ibid*, 69.

all territories in possession in America and acquired during the war be recognized as belonging to the Americans, and for France to carry on the struggle until the British are forced out of the continent.³⁸ The American Commissioners wrote the Committee for Foreign Affairs on December 18th, 1777, that France was ready to acknowledge their independence and make a Treaty of Amity and Commerce. Stating the desires of France in the terms of the treaty, the Commissioners wrote, “The only Condition he should require and rely on, would be this, that we in no Peace to be made with England should give up our Independency, and return to the Obedience of that Government.”³⁹ With each nation stating their terms, they were ready to negotiate and sign for treaties.

On February 6th 1778, France and the United States signed two treaties, the Treaty of Amity and Commerce, and the Treaty of Alliance. The primary goal of the treaties was French recognition of American Independence. The Treaty of Amity and Commerce contained the provisions that the Commissioners asked for in 1776. The Treaty of Alliance held that the United States would support France in case Great Britain declared war on France as a result of the signing of the Treaty of Amity and Commerce, which was expected. The signing of the treaties did not change how France and the United States were acting at the time, but it was a guarantee for France that the United States would not accept a British reconciliation, and for the United States it meant that France publicly recognized American independence and alliance, which would help them win the war. Both nations also guaranteed by the treaties that they would contact each nation first before making peace propositions to the British. A month after signing the treaties,

³⁸ Ibid, 70.

³⁹ American Commissioners to Committee for Foreign Affairs, December 18th, 1777, in *Documents of the Emerging Nation: U.S. Foreign Relations 1775-1789*, 51.

France told Great Britain that they had signed a treaty of amity and commerce with the Americans, but made no mention of a treaty of alliance. This resulted in Great Britain recalling their ambassador in Paris, and France did the same to their ambassador in London.⁴⁰ Great Britain did not immediately declare war on France, as Lord North's government quickly sent two bills through Parliament to end the American war before France could join. The first bill repealed the Coercive Acts of 1774 as well as freedom from taxation, hoping that this would woo Congress into regretting their decision to ally with France. The second bill established a commission for peace to America, known as the Carlisle Commission. Hoping to get to America before the treaties from France arrived there, the Carlisle Commission brought a list of concessions to offer to Congress, but they were received in Congress with disdain. When the treaties with France finally arrived in Philadelphia, they were immediately ratified on May 4, 1778, and the Carlisle Commission was told to go home.⁴¹ When news reached the American public, many were surprised how France did not push for terms that would have tied America to supporting France in future entanglements, and that the terms of the treaties seemed to be equally fair. An article in the *Independent Chronicle* in Boston on April 23, 1778, said that many Americans were surprised and enthusiastic at the terms of the treaty, since many suspected France of having sinister intentions.⁴²

Even though France told Great Britain of the treaties before Congress even ratified them, Great Britain found out about the treaties accidentally from a friend of American Commissioner,

⁴⁰ Dull, *A Diplomatic History of the American Revolution*, 98-100

⁴¹ Jonathan R. Dull, "Diplomacy of the Revolution, to 1783," in *Blackwell Companions to American History: A Companion to the American Revolution*, ed. Jack P. Greene and J.R. Pole (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 2000), 355.

⁴² William C. Stinchcombe, *The American Revolution and the French Alliance* (Syracuse NY: Syracuse University Press, 1969), 16. *Independent Chronicle*, April 23, 1778.

Silas Deane. When Congress instructed Silas Deane to write to an American friend living in London, a man by the name of Bancroft, Deane met with him and discussed that the Continental Congress had instructed him to discuss with those in Europe who would be inclined to aid the Americans in their rebellion against Great Britain. After Bancroft met with Deane, Bancroft went back to London to offer his services as a spy to Great Britain, to which King George III declined his services. Although Bancroft was not received as a spy, he was the first to give the news of the treaties America made with France a few weeks after they were signed to King George III, not by Bancroft's alias as a spy, but by his alias known as Benson, who played the British stock market. The British intercepted his mail, and read a letter from Deane, who was a partner in Bancroft's scheme, which detailed the treaties that were signed in February. While it was likely that Deane was unaware of Bancroft's other job as a spy, Deane was subsequently recalled by Congress and replaced by John Adams, not because of his failure to see the double-motives of his friend, or for taking part in a scheme, but the unauthorized hiring of French generals in the Continental Army.⁴³

Legacy of the Treaties

It must be acknowledged that the treaties that France and the United States signed were an incredible diplomatic success by the Americans. Historians like Jonathan R. Dull consider that the treaties were extraordinarily generous to the Americans. The Treaty of Amity and Commerce gave the Americas most-favored-nation status while avoiding France from having commercial advantages in rich American materials that the British depended on for their wealth. In the Treaty of Alliance, France rejected any claim to Canada, promised to delay peace efforts till

⁴³ Dull, *A Diplomatic History of the American Revolution*, 64.

Great Britain recognized American independence, and assured they would forever recognize American sovereignty.⁴⁴ The Treaty of Alliance essentially guaranteed that the United States would ally itself with France if Great Britain declared war on France as a result of the Treaty of Amity and Commerce. Article 2 states, “The essential and direct End of the present defensive alliance is to maintain effectually the liberty, Sovereignty, and independance absolute and unlimited of the said united States, as well in Matters of Gouvernement as of commerce.”⁴⁵ This article meant that France would fight to protect American independence, and both nations agreed they would not enter into peace talks with Great Britain until that liberty and independence had been acquired from Great Britain. One of the most remarkable aspects of the Treaty was Article 6 which forbid France from gaining territory in North America which they previously possessed before the Treaty of Paris in 1763. Going back to 1776 when Congress realized they needed to seek foreign alliances to receive a recognition of independence from Great Britain, Congress was worried that an alliance with France would result in the French gaining back territory it lost during the Seven Years’ War. Article 6 states,

“The Most Christian King renounces for ever the possession of the Islands of Bermudas as well as of any part of the continent of North america which before the treaty of Paris in 1763. or in virtue of that Treaty, were acknowledged to belong to the Crown of Great Britain, or to the united States heretofore called British Colonies, or which are at this Time or have lately been under the Power of The King and Crown of Great Britain.”⁴⁶

The Treaty of Amity and Commerce allowed for the protection of vessels by France and the United States, and ensured a commercial alliance between the two nations. The British monopoly of trade in the Americas added greatly to the British imperial wealth. Great Britain ob-

⁴⁴ Dull, “Diplomacy of the Revolution, to 1783,” 355.

⁴⁵ “Treaty of Alliance, art. 1,” Transcript of Treaty of Alliance with France, 6 February 1778, <http://www.ourdocuments.gov/doc.php?flash=true&doc=4&page=transcript>.

⁴⁶ “Treaty of Alliance, art. 6.”

tained sugar, tobacco, rice, lumber and fish that was sold around the world, so ending that monopoly was extremely advantageous to the French, in terms of decreasing Britain's imperial wealth.⁴⁷ French policy since 1763 focused on expanding their naval fleets to match British maritime superiority. Expanding fleets was expensive though, since France was trying to pay debts from the Seven Years' War. Vergennes hoped France could weaken Great Britain by breaking Britain's colonial strength, allowing France to not have to spend so much money on its naval program and instead, focus on land resources so France could influence events in Europe.⁴⁸ This allowed for a treaty that was incredibly advantageous to the Americans, since French aim was to weaken Great Britain's monopoly in the America's so that France could build its influence on the European continent and shift the balance of power in their favor, instead of gaining back territory it lost in the Seven Years' War and 1763 Treaty of Paris.

The treaties also included the possibility that Spain could enter the alliance, would prove to be difficult. After learning that the English had no interest in giving Gibraltar and Minorca to Spain, and that Spain would have to be very loyal to Britain if they went into an alliance, Spain decided to turn to France and ask them what advantage Spain would receive from an alliance.⁴⁹ Floridablanca wrote to Vergennes about his fears with allying with France and America. He wrote that Spain would receive no benefits with American commerce, and their fleets in Mexico and South America were delayed from returning to Spain. Vergennes wrote back saying, "France's only interests were American independence and the satisfaction of Spanish desires-the

⁴⁷ Paul W. Mapp, "The Revolutionary War and Europe's Great Powers," in *The Oxford Handbook of The American Revolution*, ed. Edward G. Gray and Jane Kamensky (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 313.

⁴⁸ Mapp, "The Revolutionary War and Europe's Great Powers," 317.

⁴⁹ Jonathan R. Dull, *The French Navy and American Independence: A Study of Arms and Diplomacy, 1774-1787* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1975), 132.

recovery of Gibraltar and Minorca and the expulsion of the English from the Gulf of Mexico.⁵⁰ In another attempt to bring Spain into the alliance, Vergennes told them they could regain Florida, which they conceded to Britain in the 1763 Treaty of Paris, but Vergennes did not know what the Americans thought in regards to Florida before offering it to Spain.⁵¹

As the focus shifted to actually fighting against the British, France soon learned that even though they had spent roughly two years building their Navy in preparation for war, their Navy was still incapable of dominating the British. England had about ninety ships compared to about sixty-five French ships. France needed to pay the high price to bring Spain into the alliance to combine their Navy's against the British. Spain said that they hoped to drive the British timber cutting industry out of Central America, and recapture Florida and Jamaica. Spain also told France that in order for Spain to join the alliance, France needed to help Spain in their objectives, and agree to a joint invasion of England, so they could end the war before Spain's vulnerable colonies could be attacked. While Spain asked way too much from France, they needed to pay the price to bring Spain into the alliance. As a result, the Franco-Spanish alliance was signed on April 12, 1779, which came to be known as the Treaty of Aranjuez. In the treaty, Spain would not make peace with Britain without notifying the French, and recognized that France could not make peace until the Americans had their independence, as France promised not to make peace until Gibraltar was added to Spain's possessions.⁵²

Conclusion

With the alliance and treaty with France and a half-hearted alliance with Spain, America was ready to win the war against Great Britain. The Commissioners shifted their focus towards

⁵⁰ Ibid, 100.

⁵¹ Sheldon, *France and the American Revolution*, 62.

⁵² Dull, *A Diplomatic History of the American Revolution*, 107-109.

peace negotiations with Great Britain as well as a treaty of commerce, while French and Spanish diplomats continued to correspond, mostly concerning what each nation would receive after the war's victory. John Jay was sent to Spain to negotiate a treaty that recognized independence and join the treaty of alliance. Jay asked Spain to loan more money to the American cause, guarantee the Americans freedom of navigation of the Mississippi River, to which Spain refused. Over the next few years, the American-Spanish relations would be focused almost entirely on the belief of Spain, that Americans had no right to navigate on the Mississippi River. In a letter from France's minister to the United States, Chevalier de la Luzerne to Vergennes wrote, "That by the Treaty of Paris, we had ceded to the King of England, and not to the colonies, which could not have taken part in this Treaty, the dependencies of Louisiana to the left of the river..and that Spain in seizing them today was only exercising the right of conquest."⁵³ The Franco-American alliance would only turn sour as the years went on with Vergennes frustrated, mostly at John Adams, for preparing peace negotiations with Great Britain so quickly after the 1778 treaties were signed. America pushed for peace with Great Britain, with British recognition of Independence, which France felt that the Americas had turned their back on France. This was a result of the difference of objectives by France and the United States. France always wanted to see the power of Great Britain diminished, while America wanted Great Britain to acknowledge their independence and then sign deals of commerce with them. In the meantime, John Adams would receive Dutch recognition of American independence, a Dutch loan, and treaty of amity and commerce with them in 1782, just before he joined the peace commission. In the end, America got its independence, Great Britain and America later enjoyed a successful commerce, the British Empire's greatest

⁵³ Chevalier de la Luzerne to Comte de Vergennes, February 11, 1780 in, *The Emerging Nation: Foreign Relations of the United States under the Articles of Confederation, 1780-1789*, ed. Mary A. Giunta (Wilmington, DE: SR Books, 1996), 27-31.

days were yet to come, Spain would essentially be in the same position they were in after the 1763 Treaty of Paris, and as France was forced into bankruptcy after spending vast amounts of money during the war and incurring massive amounts of debt, which would eventually lead to their own revolution.

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Figure A.1: European claims to American continent before 1763



Source accessed: <http://www.loc.gov/teachers/classroommaterials/connections/france-america/file.html>

Figure A.2: European claims to American continent after 1763



Source accessed:

http://international.loc.gov/intldl/fiahtml/images/Treaty1763_2_en.jpg

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