DECIDING FACTOR

Did the American victory at Saratoga convince France to enter into an alliance with the United States?

Viewpoint: Yes. With the victory at Saratoga, the French were convinced that the Americans could win the war and thus deserved official diplomatic recognition and full military aid.

Viewpoint: No. The major factors encouraging the entry of France into the war in 1778 were a desire to restore the balance of power, the completion of French rearmament, and deteriorating relations with Great Britain.

As much as Patriot leaders in 1776 wanted to distance themselves from power politics in Europe, they believed that foreign assistance was vital to achieving American independence. Fortunately for the Americans, the longstanding animosities among European nations provided the United States with a good opportunity to obtain such aid successfully. To that end, Congress created a “model treaty” for their diplomats to present to European courts. Eschewing political entanglements, Congress instructed its diplomats to seek only free trade with neutral nations, not military or naval assistance. The French government, anxious to pursue a foreign policy of revanche against its enemy Great Britain, was the most obvious source of assistance.

If Congress desperately wanted French assistance, this desire did not show in the commissioners it sent to Paris—Silas Deane, Arthur Lee, and Benjamin Franklin. Deane was a Connecticut merchant who had a greater devotion to money than to the American cause. He unwittingly sold valuable information to a British spy and used his position as a commercial agent and diplomat to augment his mercantile business. Lee, although a loyal American, did more harm than good in Paris by offending his fellow emissaries and French officials with his irascible, suspicious, and jealous personality. Thus, obtaining an alliance with France fell to Franklin, who allowed himself to be deceived by the Janus-faced Deane and who was no match for his French counterpart, Charles Gravier, Comte de Vergennes. Still, the aging Philadelphian became a popular celebrity in Paris, a prominence he craftily used to further his diplomatic objective.

However, Franklin’s popularity and personal charm were not enough to produce an alliance. The French court was hesitant to recognize American independence, since doing so meant war with England. Still, it continued to risk war with its rival by surreptitiously sending loans and supplies to the Patriots. Despite this assistance, Americans grew increasingly impatient with France’s reluctance to recognize the United States. Finally, in mid December 1777 Vergennes met with the American delegation to discuss details of an alliance. Meanwhile, British officials decided to send out peace feelers to the colonials, offering everything but complete independence. Both of these acts occurred just a week after news arrived in Europe relating British general John Burgoyne’s surrender at Saratoga, New York, on 17 October.
Was the timing between the American victory at Saratoga and the signing of the Franco-American alliance just a coincidence? According to most scholars, France avoided any public commitment to the Americans until the Patriots showed signs of military success. The French court could have recognized American independence earlier but refused to do so because it did not want to go to war with Britain over an apparent losing cause (and until late 1777, American chances for success seemed dubious).

More recently, a few historians have begun to question this conventional view of the genesis of the Franco-American alliance. "If the Americans were militarily successful on their own," asks revisionist Jonathan R. Dull, "why would either France or the United States want an alliance?" Instead, other events preceding the victory at Saratoga better explain why France decided to sign an alliance with the United States. According to this new interpretation, France had been planning to join the 1778 campaign months before news of the victory at Saratoga arrived. The future U.S. ally had to wait until it completed its program of naval rearmament. Meanwhile, relations between France and Great Britain were quickly deteriorating, primarily as a result of the French court's military aid to the Rebels. When the ill-fated Carlisle Peace Commission arrived in America in early 1778, France, fearing a British-American agreement and an attack against the French West Indies, quickly pursued diplomatic recognition of the United States.

This debate on the role of Saratoga in the Franco-American alliance raises some important issues concerning early American diplomacy and political principles. Patriot leaders claimed that they pursued independence not just out of self-serving motives but also to advance a more ethical method of international relations. As a result, they sought to avoid the customary double-dealing and political entanglements of traditional European diplomacy and emphasize commercial expansion instead. This emphasis explains why Congress originally directed its diplomats to seek only free-trade alliances with European nations. In the end, Congress and its ambassadors resorted to the same Machiavellian tactics utilized by the Europeans in achieving their international objectives.

Even before the first shots were fired at Lexington and Concord, Massachusetts, in April 1775, the French had been carefully watching events unfold in the American colonies. In 1767 Johann de Kalb had been dispatched on a secret fact-finding mission to the British North American provinces. De Kalb traveled throughout the colonies, recording his observations, but he did not find widespread discontent.

With the start of the insurrection, the French Crown realized that it could not risk an open alliance with the colonials until they proved their endurance and desire for independence. If France hastily entered the war and the American colonies were defeated, Britain could then turn its full might on a French military still recovering from the debacle of 1763. Until the situation unfolded more clearly, advisers to Louis XVI recommended that France limit its involvement to sending secret aid to the rebellious colonies.

In May 1776 the French court approved the creation of a fictitious company to supply the Rebels with much-needed supplies. Pierre-Augustin Caron, a playwright who took the name Beaumarchais, supervised the covert operations of Roderigue Hortalez & Cie, and by September 1777 the company had sent the colonies 5 million livres worth of supplies. According to historian Claude H. Van Tyne in The War of Independence (1929), General George Washington's victories at Trenton (26 December 1776)
THE FRENCH DECISION

Conrad Alexandre Gérard de Rayneval, brother of French diplomat Joseph Matthias Gérard de Rayneval, recalls an 8 January 1778 meeting with American delegates Silas Deane, Arthur Lee, and Benjamin Franklin at Deane’s residence in Paris:

and Princeton (3 January 1777) were “made possible by the supplies furnished by the French or through their instigation.” Yet, these victories were not enough to convince the French. Although big morale boosters for the Patriot cause, they were relatively minor engagements; the French Crown still needed convincing.

By spring 1777 the struggle had been going on for two long years, and the American envoys in Paris, Benjamin Franklin, Silas Deane, and Arthur Lee, were poised between hope and despair. While they had met several French officials—including Foreign Minister Charles Gravier, Comte de Vergennes—these exchanges were still tentative and unofficial. Though professing interest, the French government was not yet ready to commit itself to an expensive overseas war. Moreover, many Europeans doubted the ability of colonial troops to defeat British redcoats. This view seemed confirmed by reports of American reverses, such as the loss of Philadelphia in September.

Since his arrival in France, Franklin, in addition to his official contacts, had employed his time and energies in informal efforts to win support among the aristocrats, authors, scientists, and philosophers who frequented the Paris salons. Not only could these people potentially provide funds for the American cause but they also had an influence on public opinion throughout Europe that was disproportionate to their numbers. This strategy particularly suited the wily septuagenarian, since through his many writings, inventions, and experiments with electricity his fame had spread throughout much of the Continent.

On 4 December 1777 the American emissaries received news from Boston of British general John Burgoyne’s defeat at Saratoga, and they at once notified Vergennes. The minister met with Franklin a week later, amid official protests and unofficial efforts by the British embassy to dissuade France from any involvement in the American struggle. With Saratoga, Vergennes shrewdly realized that France had its long-sought proof of American determination. Although news arrived simultaneously with word of a Patriot defeat at Germantown, Pennsylvania (4 October), that engagement only confirmed American resolve and spirit in French eyes. Spies informed Vergennes that British Parliamentary opposition to the conflict was dividing the country. Moreover, the loss of more than seven thousand troops was a severe blow to British military operations in North America. Overall, the time was ripe, and France could enter the war on the winning side. Vergennes observed: “The power that will first recognize the independence of the Americans will be the one that will reap the fruits of this war.” On 7 January 1778 the French royal council unanimously approved a treaty of amity and commerce (recognizing independence); on 6 February it authorized a treaty of alliance.

Meanwhile, news of Saratoga quickly spread throughout Europe; drawings and cartoons supporting the competing sides followed. Along with politicians and intellectuals, ordinary citizens became interested in the events. For example, Maria Anna Mozart, on tour with her twenty-one-year-old son, the composer Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, mentioned the great British defeat in a December 1777 letter to her husband, Leopold. On 6 April 1778 Leopold wrote to his wife and son, who were then in Paris, asking if France had really declared war on England and stating that they would probably see Franklin. By this time French newspapers had publicized the new alliance and Louis XVI’s reception of Franklin, Deane, and Lee at Versailles on 20 March.

Trying to circumvent French aid, British prime minister Lord Frederick North successfully guided a series of bills through Parliament that repealed the unpopular acts that had precipitated the conflict, and he offered the Americans peace if they would remain within the empire. This proposal, along with word that an official peace delegation (Carlisle Peace Commission) would soon arrive, reached the United States and was brought before the Continental Congress in mid April. The Congressmen had heard nothing from Franklin and his associates in months because their correspondence from Europe had been intercepted; however, a mail packet detailing the two treaties finally passed through the British blockade, arriving on 2 May. Congress ratified both treaties two days later. Hostilities between France and England became a reality when some of their warships exchanged broadsides off the Brittany coast on 17 June.

The French gradually tipped the balance of power, providing money, men, and munitions to the American cause, though never in the quantities that Franklin had originally hoped. The most famous members of this Franco-American connection would not include the subtle diplomat Vergennes but rather the dashing young Marie-Joseph-Paul-Yves-Roch-Gilbert du Motier de Lafayette and Admiral François-Joseph-Paul, Comte de Grasse, whose timely arrival at York Town led to the surrender of General Charles Cornwallis and his army on 19 October 1781. While York Town is the battle generally credited with ending the war, the seeds of victory were firmly planted with the defeat of Burgoyne’s army at Saratoga.

—DOROTHY POTTER, LYNCHBURG COLLEGE
AND
ANTHONY J. SCOTTI JR., MIDLANDS TECHNICAL COLLEGE
Viewpoint:
No. The major factors encouraging the entry of France into the war in 1778 were a desire to restore the balance of power, the completion of French rearmament, and deteriorating relations with Great Britain.

Conventional wisdom suggests that without the American victory at Saratoga (17 October 1777), the French would not have entered into the conflict between Great Britain and the United States. While there is no doubt that Saratoga indeed generated outright recognition of the breakaway colonies on the part of France, a closer examination reveals that other factors had already influenced the French decision to intervene. In fact, Saratoga simply allowed the French to acknowledge openly what they had been doing since the beginning of the American Revolution (1775–1783): supporting the Patriot cause to further their own policy of weakening the position of Great Britain in world affairs. The American Revolution offered the French a chance to strike a blow against their enemy, England, and reestablish France as the dominant power in Europe.

When war broke out between Britain and its North American colonies, the French viewed the conflict with keen interest. For centuries the British and French had competed for political, economic, and religious control of Europe. French fortunes declined during the eighteenth century, however, culminating with its devastating defeat during the Seven Years' War (1756–1763), in which France was forced to cede its North American empire to the British. Diplomacy in the eighteenth century was guided by the balance-of-power concept, which was defined as maintaining an equilibrium among all major powers in Europe while enhancing one’s own status. Most Frenchmen believed that British success during the Seven Years' War had overthrown the delicate balance of power in Europe, forcing France to take measures to diminish English power. French foreign minister Charles Gravier, Comte de Vergennes, declared at the beginning of the American crisis that “It is our duty . . . to seize every possible opportunity to reduce the power and greatness of England.”

The American Revolution offered one such opportunity to curb British power. In March 1776 Vergennes penned a document titled “Considerations,” which examined the impact of the Anglo-American conflict on France. He believed that England would use the conflict as an excuse to attack French interests wherever it could, including a possible invasion of the French West Indies. With this possibility in mind, Vergennes argued that the American Revolution could “be regarded as infinitely advantageous” for the French in many ways. In particular, he believed that American military successes would keep most of the British Navy and Army tied up across the Atlantic, thus weakening Britain’s position in Europe. Therefore, Vergennes argued, it was in the best interest of the French to “give the Insurgents secret Help in munitions, in money, &c.” to keep the British occupied in North America.

One month later, French intentions about the American Revolution became clearer when Vergennes’s secretary, Joseph Matthias Gérard de Rayneval, examined the conflict in his “Reflections.” Rayneval scathingly criticized England as “the natural enemy of France; and she is a greedy enemy, ambitious, unjust, and untrustworthy.” Furthermore, the “invariable and cherished goal” of Great Britain was “if not the destruction of France, at least her debasement, her humiliation, and her ruin.” Already, by spring of 1776, war with Britain seemed inevitable. Given this dark view of British relations, Rayneval believed that more-concrete action had to be taken by France to aid the American effort. He argued that military provisions should be provided to the United States through private companies based in France and the French West Indies. Loans should also be provided for matériel that the Americans could not afford. Given the poor state of the American Navy, Rayneval even suggested that “merchant vessels suitable for war” should be “sent to St. Domingue, or to such other place as would be convenient,” where they could be sold to the Americans.

Vergennes, Rayneval, and other French leaders believed that aid to the United States would keep the American effort alive while at the same time diminishing the military strength of the British. Most officials in France also held that the American colonies contributed significantly to the economic success of Britain through extensive trade. According to this theory, American independence would severely hurt the British economy while allowing the French to benefit. France might even regain lost territory and greater fishing rights off the coast of Canada. Overall, “Reflections” captured French sentiment toward the American Revolution: “It is . . . essential that France . . . must nourish the courage and the perseverance of the insurgents by giving them hope of efficacious assistance when circumstances permit.” By 1776 the French government, swayed by Vergennes, believed that any French action, no matter how peaceful, would inevitably lead to war with Britain, and in the words of Rayneval, “prudence
demands that we prepare in advance the means to wage it with success and advantage."

As much as France would have liked to help in the spring of 1776, however, the reality was that they were financially and militarily unprepared for outright war with the British. Financially, France had been devastated by their losses in the Seven Years’ War, and a decade later their treasury was still in shambles. Jacques Necker, director general of the royal treasury, warned that bankruptcy was imminent unless France could maintain peace in Europe. Controller general of France, Anne-Robert-Jacques Turgot, insisted that the government focus its attention on domestic reforms before considering war with Great Britain. Like Necker, Turgot believed that war meant bankruptcy for France. Furthermore, the merchant class of France feared that their fleets would become easy prey to the superior British Navy should war break out.

If the financial situation in France was grim, so too was the condition of its military. Although the French Army significantly outnumbered the British Army, the Seven Years’ War had shown the importance of naval superiority, and the French Navy was in a serious state of neglect at the start of the American rebellion. Several factors contributed to this decline in French naval fortunes, including serious losses of men and ships during the Seven Years’ War; an aging fleet in need of upgrading; poor officer training; and a lack of key naval stores such as masts, wood, and hemp. France began a major naval rebuilding program in 1763 in preparation for an eventual war against Britain. Government spending on the navy increased dramatically after 1775, but it was estimated that it would take several years before the French Navy would be ready for war. Until that naval superiority was achieved, the King of France refused to consider an open alliance with the United States for fear of an immediate declaration of war by Britain.

Other diplomatic factors mitigated against an early French entrance into the war. The state of affairs in Central and Eastern Europe dictated that peaceful relations be maintained to avoid French entanglements in these regions. This policy meant keeping the peace among Russia, Prussia, Austria, and the Ottoman Empire—countries that had frequently been at war. In Western Europe, tensions between Spain and Portugal also tempered French actions, as hostilities between these two countries would surely drag France and England (allies of these respective nations) into war. France also recognized that Spain, its most valuable ally because of family connections, proximity, and its navy, had to be persuaded to support the American cause.

Before France would join in the American war effort, its government wanted reassurances from the United States that no reconciliation with England was possible. The French feared that Britain would attempt to make peace with America in order to concentrate British forces against the French. In fact, historian Richard B. Morris has argued in *The American Revolution Reconsidered* (1967) that “what triggered the French alliance was the desperate fear that gripped the French Ministry that the British were about to come to terms with America.” U.S. envoy to France Benjamin Franklin quickly learned how to play the diplomatic game and on more than one occasion alluded to the possibility of reconciliation with Britain if the French failed to aid the American war effort. Vergennes and other French officials feared that if a reconciliation were to occur, the French West Indies would be the object of attack by Britain with the help of the Americans. As early as March 1776 the minister of the French Army, Comte de Saint-Germain, wrote to Vergennes of his concerns about the possible conquest of the French West Indies, claiming that “the ease of conquest” of the islands would make them virtually irresistible to the British. By aiding the United States, France would prevent any rapprochement between the two nations, thus protecting French interests in the Caribbean.

French caution toward an open alliance, however, should not be construed as ambivalence in support of the Americans. In fact, French aid to the United States was quite tangible before the Franco-American alliance was concluded in 1778. American envoy Silas Deane arrived in France in 1776 in search of arms, ammunition, clothing, and finances. His negotiations yielded three shiploads of matériel for the American cause. By the spring of 1777 the French landed twenty-one thousand muskets and more than one thousand barrels of powder in Portsmouth, New Hampshire. With money obtained from loans, thirty thousand uniforms were purchased from the French. Such matériel belied the “neutrality” supposedly practiced by France.

In addition to the military aid provided to the United States before 1778, the government of France contributed significantly to American finances through grants and loans. In early 1777, for example, the American commissioners obtained a secret grant of more than 2 million livres. In November of the same year, Comte de Vergennes guaranteed another loan of 3 million livres to support the American cause. Franklin was also successful in obtaining another 1 million livres from the French mercantile group The Farmers’ General as an advance upon the future trade of American tobacco. France even managed to persuade Spain, its closest ally, to loan the United States several million livres in spite of misgivings about the American cause. Much of this
military and financial aid was funneled through the fictitious firm Roderigue Hortalez & Cie.

The French also supported the United States in other ways. Continental Navy vessels and privateers often received permission to bring their British prizes into ports located in France and the West Indies. Historian David Ramsay wrote in *The History of the American Revolution: In Two Volumes* (1791) that Americans sold captured British ships “without any disguise” in the French West Indies. Other Americans were allowed to outfit their ships after spending months on the high seas. American captains such as Gustavus Conyngham, Lambert Wickes, and John Paul Jones became renowned for their use of French ports throughout the war. The Patriots even purchased ships in France to prey upon British shipping; U.S. diplomats authorized commissions for American privateers directly from French ports.

French military advisers actively supported the American cause before any treaty had been signed between the two nations, most notably Marie-Joseph-Paul-Yves-Roch-Gilbert du Motier de Lafayette, who served as George Washington’s adjutant in the Continental Army. Louis Lebègue de Presle Duportail became the official chief engineer for the army after Franklin managed to negotiate his hire with the French government. Deane was actually reprimanded by the Continental Congress for approving military commissions for almost four hundred French officers by November 1776. Such actions increased tensions between France and Great Britain, which in turn pushed France and the United States closer together.

If any battles swayed the French decision to join the alliance, it was the American loss of New York in 1776—along with their defeats at Brandywine and Germantown in 1777—that finally convinced the French to become more aggressive in order to prevent a major collapse of the Rebel cause. By this time French naval rearmament was nearly complete, and France could quickly man its fleet with fishermen and sailors from coastal shipping. Meanwhile, Britain was more dependent on its local shipping and had to go through the time-consuming process of impressing sailors off of homeward-bound merchantmen and therefore could only man part of its fleet. As a result French officials began devising strategy that included sending a naval squadron to attack Admiral Lord Richard Howe in North America in March 1778. Consequently, news of the American victory at Saratoga arrived at an opportune time for France. Indeed, it took less than two months after news of Saratoga to put the finishing touches upon the alliance between France and the United States because the French government had already decided upon the inevitability of war. Saratoga simply confirmed the relationship that had been building for more than two years between France and the United States; France could now openly support the American cause in order to weaken the power of Great Britain. In *The American Revolution, 1763-1783; Being the Chapters and Passages Relating to America from the Author’s History of England in the Eighteenth Century* (1898), English historian William Edward Hartpole Lecky best summed up the French contributions to the Revolutionary War before the Franco-American alliance was officially agreed upon:

The assistance of France . . . was never more valuable than in the first period of the war, while she was still at peace with England. American vessels were admitted, by the connivance of the ministers, into French ports with articles of commerce of which by law French merchants had a strict monopoly, and the American agents were soon able to inform the Congress that France gave the commerce of the insurgent colonies greater indulgences in her ports than the commerce of any other nations whatever. Privateers were sheltered and equipped; prizes were secretly sold in the French harbours. Experienced officers, trained in the French army, were sent to America with the permission, or even at the instigation, of the French ministers, to organize or command the American forces.

Thus, long before Saratoga occurred, the French had in reality become involved in the
American Revolution through their extensive support of the United States and their desire to strike a devastating blow at their enemy and rival across the English Channel.

—KEITH PACHOLL, CALIFORNIA STATE UNIVERSITY, FULLERTON

References


