



Brothers at Arms: American Independence and the Men of France and Spain Who Saved It by Larrie D. Ferreiro.

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In *Brothers at Arms*, historian Larrie Ferreiro (George Mason Univ. and Stevens Inst. of Technology) highlights the role played by Spanish and French soldiers, financiers, entrepreneurs, and politicians in America's improbable growth from colony to sovereign nation. His global perspective dispels the simplistic "creation myth that America bootstrapped itself from colony to nation, that it fought the war and gained independence all by itself.... France and Spain were present at every step, even before the Declaration of Independence" (335), in an expensive and politically exhausting quest to help America shed the yoke of British rule. Ferreiro rejects the notion that Spanish and French intervention was a quest for "revanche" after Britain's victory in the Seven Years' War (a mainstay of the historiography); instead, he argues, it was driven by a desire to check Britain's colonial imperialism and its increasing political and military power in Europe. More specifically, the French sought geopolitical influence in Europe, while Spain aimed to reclaim lost territory—particularly Florida and Gibraltar.

Ferreiro contends that the Declaration of Independence announced that America was open to international trade and cooperation with other nations. It "was not meant for King George III Nor was it primarily intended to rally the American colonies to the cause of independence. Instead, the Declaration was written as a call for help from France and Spain" (xvii). Neither country would have officially entered the war unless America promised not to negotiate a truce with the British,¹ which they saw as a precondition for a successful Bourbon alliance in continental Europe. The Declaration of Independence made it clear that America had no intention of becoming anything but a sovereign state. While this desire to make a clean break from British rule was now patent, the path to effective cooperation between America, Spain, and France was not an easy one during or after the Revolution.

The author astutely follows the money trail to explain just how a coalition of British foes managed to defeat the greatest military power of the time. Initially unwilling to commit fully to the American side against Britain, French and Spanish authorities began by sending financial aid to America. With the permission of Louis XVI, Charles Gravier de Vergennes—the prime mover of French involvement in the Revolution—funneled millions of livres to the American cause via the French entrepreneur, dramatist, and secret agent Pierre-Augustin Caron de Beaumarchais's cover firm "Roderigue Hortalez et Co."

Ferreiro next traces the flow of soldiers and sailors eager to make their mark in the "Revolutionary Cause" (139). He stresses that foreign aid, as well as French and Spanish veteran military officers and engineers, transformed American troops into a professional, well equipped and trained military force.

1. Writing of the French people's eagerness to help America, Louis Lebègue Duportail informed the French court at Versailles that "There is one hundred times more enthusiasm for this revolution in a single Parisian café than in all of the colonies combined" (143).

In its first year of “business,” Roderigue Hortalez et Co. helped import 30,000 muskets, 100,000 rounds of shot, innumerable cannon, and much needed clothing to the American war effort.²

Although the French and Spanish certainly contributed money and military aid to America on a massive scale, it is difficult to piece together precisely how foreign arms and munitions found their way to the front lines. For instance, tracking the impact of the matériel Beaumarchais provided to the allied war effort, Ferreiro states that French muskets and rifles were likely used at the battles of Monmouth and Yorktown. But he cites no hard evidence to support that supposition. He is more convincing in explicating the international events that affected the course of the conflict in America. He shows, for instance, that Spanish intervention was crucial to the containment and eventual defeat of Gen. Charles Cornwallis at Yorktown and put the British Royal Navy at a numerical disadvantage against the combined Spanish and French fleets. The British even temporarily yielded to “Spain’s dominion over the Gulf of Mexico” and the West Indies, which “gave France liberty to focus on the Chesapeake and Yorktown” (256).

Ferreiro recounts the major battles of the Revolutionary War in chronological order, detailing the decisive role of French and Spanish cooperation with American officials, soldiers, and diplomats. He shows that American victories throughout the Revolutionary War, most importantly at Yorktown, were made possible by foreign military and strategic aid. In short, the Revolution was no mere limited conflict between colony and metropole: “the American nation was born as the centerpiece of an international coalition” (336). Histories that spotlight the Marquis de Lafayette or the Baron von Steuben as the protagonists of America’s foreign alliances tell only a small part of a much larger story. Larrie Ferreiro’s correction of that distortion in the historiography makes *Brothers at Arms* essential reading for students of the Revolutionary War.

2. See further Streeter Bass, “Beaumarchais and the American Revolution,” *Stud Intel* 14.1 (1970) 1–18, available as a PDF – www.miwsr.com/rd/1713.htm.