Lafayette Papers

Remarks on the Occasion of the Dedication of the Lafayette Microfilm Collection
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"Lafayette, we are here." These were the famous words uttered by an American military officer at the tomb of the Revolutionary War hero in Paris, as the first units of the American Expeditionary Force arrived in France in April 1917 — American troops coming to the aid of a beleaguered France and her allies in World War I, some 140 years after the Marquis de Lafayette arrived from France in support of American revolutionaries in 1777. Now, some 81 years after American troops arrived in France, we stand here at Cleveland State University to welcome Lafayette to the shores of America’s North Coast in the form of a magnificent microfilm collection of his personal papers.

The pride that we all feel at having this important historical collection at Cleveland State University reminds me of a story that was told during the waning years of the Cold War, when relations between the United States and the Soviet Union were beginning to thaw but the spirit of competition was still quite evident. An American businessman drove to Kennedy Airport to meet his Russian counterpart, who was arriving as part of a cultural exchange program. As part of the program, the American was to show the Russian visitor around New York City.

As they drove past one huge office building, the Russian asked, "How long did it take to put up that building?"
"About eight months," answered the American.

"In Russia we do it in four months," the Russian commented.

A while later they were driving past a multi-storied apartment high-rise when the Russian visitor asked again, "How long did it take that building to go up?"

Getting into the spirit of things, the American replied, "I think it took six months."

"In Russia it takes three months."

At that moment they passed the World Trade Center. "That's odd," remarked the American businessman, "that wasn't there when I drove past this morning."

While the spirit of competition evident in this story is not appropriate for our purposes this afternoon, I think we all can identify with the American businessman's sense of pride — in knowing that this famous microfilm collection is available to scholars and others in only two locations in the world, the manuscript reading room of the U.S. Library of Congress in Washington, D.C. and here at Cleveland State University. The original documents remain at Chateau La Grange, Lafayette's ancestral home outside Paris, but access to them has been very heavily restricted. Over the last 45 years, only one person, the great French writer André Maurois, was given access to the papers in order to write a biography of Lafayette's wife, Adrienne. Otherwise, the collection remained inaccessible to historians and archivists until the first microfilm collection became available at the Library of Congress in 1995. It remains one of the great scholarly mysteries of the 20th century.

Why is this collection of papers historically significant? Actually, it's very difficult to say, because it will take years for historians to examine the 25,000 separate documents contained on 64 reels of microfilm. But what we can glean by taking quick looks or just by examining the
index is fascinating. And all you have to do is hook up a reel and start scrolling. It’s an extraordinary experience: letters from George Washington to Lafayette, from Lafayette to Washington, hundreds of letters from dozens of the great figures in American and European history. Much of the material is in French, so it helps if you’re able to use that language, but there’s enough in English to keep the English speaker interested as well.

Lafayette himself was an amazing and unique character. A wealthy aristocrat in pre-revolutionary 18th century France, he arrived in this country in his own boat in 1777, when he was only 20 years old, to offer his services as a high ranking officer to the American rebel cause. He was, of course, seeking a reputation, but he was also an idealist who came to worship George Washington and thought of him as a foster father — a relationship chronicled in letters available here on microfilm.

He proved to be a capable military leader, but equally as important to the American cause was the use Lafayette made of his newly-won fame in persuading the French government to support the American cause with money and soldiers — although we may be quite sure that King Louis XVI was far less interested in the ideals of the Declaration of Independence that he was in taking advantage of this opportunity to sock it to the Brits, who had humiliated the French in North America just a generation earlier in the French and Indian War (1756-1763).

I indicated a moment ago that Lafayette was an idealist who came to revere many of the ideals he came into contact with in America, as he rubbed shoulders with Washington, Jefferson, John Adams, and Benjamin Franklin. And it’s in that guise that Lafayette interests me most as an historian of France and of modern Europe. Based on the reputation he won in the American Revolution, Lafayette was elected as a representative of the liberal French aristocracy to the
Estate-General in 1789. He supported the early phase of the French Revolution in its effort to limit the absolute power of the French monarchy. Following the fall of the Bastille on July 14, 1789, it was Lafayette who led the Paris militia the dozen or so miles from Paris to the royal palace at Versailles—first to save the king and queen from the fury of the Parisian mob but then to transport Louis XVI and Marie Antoinette back to the royal palace in Paris, where their activities could be much more closely monitored.

Lafayette is also credited with authoring the original drafts of the Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen—one of the single most important political documents in French history, which remains to this day the cornerstone of the French legal structure. Let me quote to you from key sections of the Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen, adopted by the National Assembly in August 1789 at a very early stage in the French Revolution.

"Men are born and remain free and equal in rights. . . ."

"The aim of all political association is to preserve the natural and imprescriptible rights of man. These rights are liberty, property, security, and resistance to oppression.

"The principle of all sovereignty rests essentially in the nation. . . ."

"Law is the expression of the general will. All citizens have the right to take part, in person or by their representatives, in its formulation. . . ."

"No one may be disturbed for his opinions, even in religion, provided that their manifestation does not trouble public order as established by law. . . ."

Sound familiar? It should. Many of these ideals derive directly from the American Declaration of Independence. And, therefore, from my perspective some of the most historically significant documents in this microfilm collection are several of Lafayette's early drafts of the Declaration
of the Rights of Man and Citizen. By studying these drafts and comparing them with the ideas expressed in the Marquis' letters to American and European leaders, one will be able not only to chart the evolution of Lafayette's own political thought, but one can also formulate an appreciation for the continuum of a key theme in both American and European history—a theme that spawned a series of liberal revolutionary movements in the western world from 1776 to 1848.

One can also read in the Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen, and I also suspect that it's there in Lafayette's early drafts, a premonition of the Marquis' eventual disaffection with the French Revolution. The Declaration concludes as follows: "Property being an inviolable and sacred right, no one may be deprived of it except for an obvious requirement of public necessity, certified by law, and then on condition of a just compensation in advance." It will come as no surprise that a wealthy man of property with views such as these would turn away from the violent and bloody excesses of the later stages of the Revolution. He fled to Austria, where he was imprisoned for five years. He came home to his estates in France following the rise of Napoleon.

Lafayette remained an important political figure on both sides of the Atlantic until his death in 1834. He served in the French Chamber of Deputies during most of the restoration period following the defeat of Napoleon, from 1814 to 1824. He made a triumphant visit to the United States in 1824-25, where he was received with wild adulation, not only in the major cities of Philadelphia and New York, but also in such backwaters of American civilization as Cincinnati, Portsmouth, Gallipolis, and Marietta, Ohio. Ever loyal to his liberal ideals, in July 1830 he commanded the French national guard that helped overthrow the tyrannical King
Charles X and install the more liberal, constitutional monarchy of Louis-Philippe. These events, too, are richly chronicled in the microfilm collection now housed at Cleveland State University.

There is also a very personal dimension to the story of this microfilm that I would like to share with you before concluding. In 1982, my former colleague in the Modern Language Department, Bethany Oberst, and I took a group of CSU students to France for a summer study abroad experience. After reading about and discussing during the spring quarter the history and culture of the areas we were to visit, we spent three weeks in France — Provence, the region around Toulouse and Carcassonne, the châteaux country of the Loire Valley, and Paris. Two of our students on that study abroad trip were John and Florence Horton.

I think it’s probably not too much of an exaggeration to say that it was that study abroad experience that kindled John’s interest in things French and, particularly through his acquaintance with Al Oberst, stimulated an interest in Lafayette. Recently retired from the Cleveland Cliffs Company, John Horton set about completing his formal education, earning a B.A. and master’s degree in history at CSU.

During the course of his studies, he read about the trove of uninvestigated Lafayette papers stored at La Grange, the Lafayette family home outside of Paris. He struck up a correspondence with the Comte René de Chambrun, direct descendant of Lafayette, chairman of the board of Baccarat Crystal, and custodian of the Lafayette Papers. On subsequent visits to France, John made it a point to drop in to René de Chambrun’s office on the Champs Elysées in Paris and begin to establish a personal rapport. He usually arrived with little gifts — copies of articles or specially bound volumes he know would interest the Count.

In short, through a combination of persistence, cunning, and just plain old American
pushiness, John wangled an invitation to accompany Monsieur de Chambrun to La Grange and eventually persuaded him to authorize a duplication of the Library of Congress microfilm to be housed here at Cleveland State University. It is only because of the efforts of John Horton, his intellectual curiosity and his financial generosity, that we are here today to celebrate our acquisition of the Lafayette Papers. Let me ask John to stand and to receive our grateful recognition and applause.

I can’t resist taking this opportunity to remind the President of the importance of foreign study programs and of the very tangible benefits they can occasionally bring to the University.

Let me conclude by simply saying that the acquisition of the Lafayette microfilm collection is very important to the scholarly and academic life of Cleveland State University. The best way that we can honor the memory of Lafayette and the contributions of John Horton is to encourage the extensive use of these historically important materials by historians, other scholars, and by our own students.