

Diplomacy: France Recognizes U.S. Independence

In December 1775 -- seven months before the Declaration of Independence was written -- an unofficial envoy from France met with several U.S. leaders to determine the strength and tenacity of U.S. resistance to British authority. The meeting suggested that France might replace Great Britain as a trading partner for the U.S. and might provide financial and military assistance, perhaps even naval support.

In 1776 France developed an elaborate scheme to ship to the United States military clothing, muskets, gunpowder, and cannon from its huge arsenals either at very low prices, paid by a loan, or as an outright gift. French diplomats helped find neutral ports where U.S. ships could sell U.S. cargo for hard currency (silver) and use that money to buy (sometimes at French-subsidized prices) European military supplies.

In February of 1778 France signed a treaty of alliance with the United States of America. By doing so France recognized the U.S. as an independent nation and agreed to use its worldwide network of diplomats, financial connections, and military resources to help the U.S. secure its independence from Great Britain. French aid was vital to the survival of the infant nation and of its leaders, who were in danger of being hanged for fomenting rebellion against British parliamentary authority.

France already had an alliance with Spain, and when Great Britain declared war on France, Spain was drawn into the fight. The threat of invasion and combined attacks worldwide on British colonies displaced Britain's resources from the rebellion in the United States.

High-ranking French officials orchestrated eighteen months of negotiations that led to the three peace treaties that Great Britain signed separately (with the U.S., with France, and with Spain) in Paris in 1783.

Money: The Silver Labyrinth in France and Spain

A very old saying is that "Money makes the world go 'round." Every nation depends on a treasury filled from fees (on imports, transactions, or services), direct assessments, and taxes based on property. The United States began with no money in hand, no power to tax or to demand assessments, and no network of customs officials or specified custom duties. The confederation government had to depend on **donations of money and supplies from the states** -- who rarely delivered the requested amounts to support the Continental Army or other government functions -- and on **loans from U.S. residents or foreign governments.**

Printed currency was valued according to faith in the issuer's ability to redeem the paper with "**hard**" currency --- **silver or gold.** Faith in the U.S.-issued paper Continental dollar was eroded by lack of confidence in whether the U.S. would survive, the large number of notes printed by the U.S., and the even larger number of **counterfeit notes** printed by Great Britain and put into circulation by Loyalists. U.S. currency was on the verge of collapse in 1778, and by the end of the war half of the hard currency in circulation was French silver.

During 1775-1783 France loaned the U.S. about 1,000,000 écu (2 per U.S. resident) and gave the U.S. another 1,000,000 écu in silver, gold, and military supplies. Spain gave the U.S. about 300,000 écu million in silver.

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1790 French Écu (silver): Diam 21 mm, Mass: 2.26 g
about the same size and weight as a dime.



At the Sept. 2010 market price for silver (\$700/kg) a melted écu would be worth \$1.58. A treasury cask contained 25 bags of 200 coins each (5,000 total). Records were kept in livres. In 1781 one écu was recorded as six livres.

The cost to Rochambeau's army of 5,000 men for food, fodder, and officer housing for a month was 12,500 écus. This would be worth only \$20,000 today, not enough to support an army or a month.

Military Might: France and Spain Harrass the British

France sent **two military forces** (under D'Estaing and Rochambeau) to fight alongside U.S. forces and used its forces worldwide to harrass British interests. Spain supported French efforts and worked to expand Spain's holdings in America.

In 1778-9 the imminent arrival of naval and army forces under **General D'Estaing** caused the British to abandon the occupation of the U.S. capital city of Philadelphia PA, caused severe damage to British naval forces in the battle of Newport RI, and tested the British garrison at Savannah GA.

In late 1778 the French and Spanish began to mass thousands of transports for an **invasion of England**. This threat caused Britain to recall many soldiers and sailors who were deployed overseas, making them unavailable to expand British holdings in the U.S.

IN 1779-81 Spanish **General Bernardo de Gálvez** led successful sieges and attacks to open the Mississippi River for delivering supplies to the U.S. from the west. He also besieged and took from the British Mobile AL and -- aided by French soldiers and warships --Pensacola FL .

In 1780-83 an expeditionary force led by **General Rochambeau** had great success. Some 4,000 soldiers landed at Newport RI in June of 1780, a year later marched to the U.S. encampment near White Plains NY, joined with **General Washington's** army there, and both marched south (a total of 680-miles for the French) to besiege a British army under British General Cornwallis at **Yorktown VA**. In September off the Virginia coast, 25% of the entire French fleet fought off 25% of the entire British fleet, preventing relief of the British at Yorktown. On October 19, 1781, General Cornwallis surrendered after a ten-day bombardment and siege.

In 1778-1783 France and Spain fought the British in numerous naval and land battles around the world -- in the Caribbean Sea, the Mediteranean Sea, and the Indian Ocean, drawing British resources away from the United States and making all sides eager for peace. On 1783 Sept 03 in Paris Britain signed separate peace treaties with the U.S. France, and Spain.



A company of French re-enactors marches through Newport RI in 2006, commemorating the 225th anniversary of the allied march from Newport RI to Yorktown VA during June to September 1781.



On the 225th anniversary of the original march (in 2006) three men -- shown here with the lady who drove their support van -- marched the 680 mile land route at the same pace as the ailed troops in 1781 (14 miles a day). This helped publicize the route, helped the public recognize the difficulty of securing liberty, and showed the joy of completing a long march with strong friends.