

CURRENT OPINION

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FRENCH AMAZEMENT AT OUR ESTEEM OF LAFAYETTE

WHEN Pershing exclaimed at the tomb in the Picpus cemetery: "Lafayette, we are here!" France was taken by surprise. She had no idea of a greatness thus capable of surviving across the seas the oblivion that had overtaken it at home. Those among the French who knew America at all were not, however, surprised, says the Count d'Haussonville, of the French Academy, writing in the *Revue des Deux Mondes*. When a number of years ago the descendants of the army of Rochambeau were invited by the American government to take part in the Yorktown celebrations, the Count was in the big band of grandchildren, and he was struck then by the immense popularity of the very name of Lafayette in this country.

This popularity, adds the Count, had its embarrassing features for the hero's descendants to the number of six who came over here for the memorable occasion. They could go nowhere without being observed by the multitude. One of the half dozen descendants wanted a hat. He entered a store, followed by the throng, and the owner of the business refused to take any money from a descendant of Lafayette, saying that he felt sufficiently honored by the privilege of giving the hat for nothing to so glorious a customer.

There was no reason whatever for the French to suppose, the Count declares, that the Americans would so cherish the name of Lafayette that his services would be one of the decisive factors of our entry into the war. The French themselves had overlooked, if they had ever realized, how chivalrous was the action of the young Lafayette who, at the age of twenty, escaped from France despite the formal orders of the Court and the opposition of his family, leaving behind him a young and beautiful wife who was soon to become a mother and embarked for America on a ship he bought out of his private means. He braved the prospect of capture by the British cruisers, firm in his purpose to blow up his own ship before he would surrender it. Lafayette threw a characteristic elegance into the very form of the pledge he gave to Washington when he landed in America to serve the cause of the United States with all possible zeal and without compensation.

There can be no doubt that the action of Lafayette and his enthusiastic devotion to Washington and the cause for which the Americans fought agitated a powerful section of French opinion

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and carried great weight with the court at Paris. The heroic initiative of Lafayette induced the King and his advisers to come to the aid of the colonies in revolt against the British crown. The United States owed their birth as a nation unquestionably to France, says the Count, and if France went into our war of revolution and fought England for our independence, that was because Lafayette had inspired and caught the French imagination by his high-spirited action. This is the circumstance which the French in our own day had forgotten. The American people remembered it and it was the act of the United States which brought back to his own countrymen the dashing conduct of the youth they had altogether overlooked in counting over their assets as a nation.

The popularity of Lafayette in his own country remained considerable as long as the French revolution endured, or at any rate in the first stages of that episode. Later on Lafayette became involved in the controversial events of the time at home and, since no era in French history has evoked more passionate partisanship, Lafayette was attacked as furiously by some as he was defended by others. Mirabeau, who did not like him because he was a rival for popular applause, referred to Lafayette by a nickname of disrespect. Lafayette was actually denounced for leading the French mob in its acts of frenzy, crime and shame.

Critics of Lafayette have denounced his inactivity during the empire set up by Napoleon. It occurred to Sieyès to say, when they asked him what he had done under the Terror: "I survived." A similar query addressed to Lafayette might justly evoke the retort: "I kept on my feet." He was not without merit in merely standing upright, for the bright dawn of that liberty which meant a brilliant career to him was extinguished and his career was extinguished with it. The restoration of the Bourbons brought Lafayette again on the scene but this period was the most tempestuous of his varied career. He was reproached for having forgotten his comrades of the revolution at the very time the royalists were belittling him for his association with that element. He has been indicted for hesitations, for vague attitudes, for a half complicity with doubtful conspirators in more dubious plots. He had more days of triumph in 1830 but his function as chief of the national guard and his famous white horse did not win him a durable prestige in the eyes of the rising generation. After that the name of Lafayette almost faded from the memory of the French.

With what amazement this genera-

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tion of Frenchmen learned, notes the Count, that this countryman of theirs, whom they had forgotten, was a valuable national asset, a magic figure whose very name meant help when help was imperative in the only quarter that could extend it. The aid Lafayette in the dim and forgotten past afforded to the patriots in a revolutionary war must have been estimated at its true value by the Americans. France has discovered Lafayette in this age only because America never forgot him. "Following the example of the Americans," says the Count d'Haussonville, "the French have acquired a fresh curiosity, a new taste, it might even be said a tenderness, for Lafayette. Homage has succeeded homage, honors to honors, celebrations have come one after another. Wreaths of flowers have been laid at the feet of the statue somewhat tardily reared. People have gone on pilgrimages to his château of Chavaniac, which was bought up by a popular subscription. In a word, he has been put upon a pedestal and, all things considered, this was right, for he remains, despite certain weaknesses, a very elegant figure."

