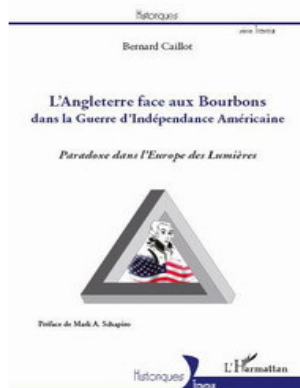


L'Angleterre face aux Bourbons dans la Guerre d'Indépendance Américaine.

Paradoxe dans l'Europe des Lumières

Préface

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It is no secret that the independence of the United States owes much to the long and storied friendship we have enjoyed with France. In addition, the birth of the United States represented the culmination of centuries of evolving Enlightenment philosophy and political ferment. It is altogether fitting that both the United States and France today should take pride in this birth and this relationship, and place the importance of values at the heart of both countries' identities. On one side, the American Dream offers life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. On the other side, Liberté, Egalité et Fraternité. However, the true value of Bernard Caillot's new book lies in peeling back the sepia-toned nostalgia to illustrate that the actual confluence of events that led to France, Spain and other European nations supporting the American Revolution was a much more complicated equation than everyday 21st century awareness presents to us. Enlightened idealism certainly played a role, but the decisions taken by French, American and European actors were far less idealistic and far more interest-based than we generally realize.

Caillot's book highlights the limits of the classical division in international relations theory between power-based Realpolitik and the liberal school which places sociology at the core of foreign policy and diplomacy. The Marquis de Lafayette, who, as the first visible sign of French military support for the revolution has become the epitome of the storied Franco-American relationship, was in fact only the tip of the iceberg, as Caillot describes him. Lafayette was the culmination of decades of political calculation, fascinating military and commercial espionage and a raw, naked Realpolitik assessment of Europe's balance of power following the end of the Seven Years' War in 1763. That war left England alone as Europe's dominant power, and left France, Spain, Holland and others more than willing to weaken England in order to revert to a more equitable balance of power on the continent. The restless American colonies – and immense natural resources – on the western side of the Atlantic Ocean offered just the right opportunity for this “perfect storm” of interests to converge.

The other truly engrossing aspect of Caillot's meticulous study of the French role in the American Revolution is the new life he breathes into the rich tapestry of characters involved in this grand adventure. For this alone, we owe Caillot a debt of gratitude, exceeded only perhaps by the gratitude owed him by the descendants of such colorful personalities as Julien Alexandre Achard de Bonvouloir, the 007 – like Pierre Augustin Caron de Beaumarchais, Jacques Barbeu-Dubourg, Baron de Kalb, and more. Even the scheming though highly respected Comte de Broglie, who grossly underestimated the Americans' ability to triumph and organize their own affairs, and who would have replaced English rule with some form of French rule with himself in a highly aggrandized role – a colonial vision that predated its British application in South Asia by decades. Interestingly, and which is personally gratifying given the profession I have chosen, Caillot illustrates the complex diplomatic challenges facing Louis XVI's Foreign Minister Vergennes in 1777, and how he deftly maneuvered around these challenges to make France the true European victor in the wake of the American Revolution. What happened next, Caillot laments, is that the French Revolution wiped out these gains, weakened French naval power and guillotined its heroes while Spain, the other Bourbon monarchy, also lost its short-term gains as its colonies in South America gained independence in the early decades of the 19th century. How might history have been different had the French Revolution gone in a different direction? One of the questions Caillot leaves with the reader is how might this Realpolitik victory in Europe, along with the new privileged economic and political relationship with the United States, have made France the dominant European power of the 19th century instead of England?

One thing remains as clear as ever through Caillot's political archeology. The French relationship is the oldest relationship the United States enjoys, a cherished and highly strategic bond based on convergent interests, and a shared desire to strive for certain values and hopefully be their embodiment in the process. The relationship is a noisy and grey one, constantly subjected to scrutiny, differences of opinion, and assessments of national interest that converge and diverge repeatedly. In this sense, Caillot suggests that the Franco-American relationship represents the most honest incarnation of the creative tension between the Realpolitik and liberal schools of international relations theory. As Pope Clement XII laments from the wrong side of history in 1738 (p. 45), the Enlightened secular ideas promoted by the evolving Freemason Lodges cause inquietude and threaten the “health

of souls.” By this, Clement meant that such revolutionary thought, in which interest, philosophy and idealism blend into one, promotes educated questioning and makes decision-making more challenging. But this challenge, this feeling of shades of grey and nuance, is precisely the indication of evolved, educated human endeavor. This discomfort and deliberation, a stubborn avoidance of simplistic categories, is honest. Nothing illustrates the true conflagration of forces both idealistic and interest-driven more than the entertaining and psycho-political account Caillot has assembled.

Our debt to Lafayette and so many of his fellow citizens was one we would repay more than once over the next 200 years, as the relationship remains as vital and nuanced as ever. It is a privilege to represent the United States in the region of France Lafayette called home, but which is also home to Bernard Caillot, a true partner and friend of the U.S. Mission in France, who rightly points out that the shoulders of the giants upon which we both stand are broader and deeper than we imagine.

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