

Review - Revolutionary Brothers

Written by Glen Segell

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GLEN SEGELL, MAR 17 2020

Revolutionary Brothers: Thomas Jefferson, the Marquis de Lafayette, and the Friendship That Helped Forge Two Nations
By Tom Chaffin
St. Martin's Press, 2019

My first glance at the cover of this book was a surprise because I didn't know about the close friendship of Thomas Jefferson and Marquis de Lafayette and the impact this had on the International Relations (IR) of the day. Jefferson was quiet and private, while Lafayette was outgoing and liked accolades, yet, as this book reveals, they were lifelong friends. Students of the American Revolution or the French Revolution should know the basics that both were involved in their own countries revolutions. Highlighted are some significances for the practices of IR, acceptable then but not today, for example a state assisting a revolt against a colonial power and then becoming involved in a foreign civil-war. Prominent in American history is that without Lafayette and the French assistance America might still be under British rule. Many American cities have parks, streets, squares, etc. named after General Lafayette. I know there were others that did their part, but you could also say that Lafayette was an honorary American in all rights for what he did and believed in! What then of Jefferson's role in French history?

Tom Chaffin goes beyond basic knowledge to capture the tale of the key roles of two men in a short but very detailed dual biography. He has written a history that reads like a novel, which makes it easy to read. We see how this dynamic duo literally made history together. They helped launch two revolutions that forged two nations, the United States of America and France, and reshaped the trans-Atlantic world and the lasting international relations between the two states. Steeped in primary sources, with reliance on Jefferson's and Lafayette's writings, along with their contemporaries, *Revolutionary Brothers* casts fresh light on this remarkable, often complicated four-decade friendship of these men. These two players in both the American and French Revolutions are shown as human with contradictions in their personalities, as well as doubts, hopes, and stress. Chaffin reveals how these personalities acted and reacted to the events of their lives without becoming bogged down in detail over specifics.

Albeit the title is slightly misleading, in that it implies a focus on a relationship that in truth was a small part of two quite remarkable lives. Nevertheless, Chaffin does a terrific job of sketching where they intersected. He is especially good at detailing Lafayette's shifting roles. He notes that cherished legends concerning both men are more familiar than the more complex, sometimes less ennobling, truths. He successfully elucidates the latter, such as Jefferson's hypocrisy regarding slavery and Lafayette's "vacillations during the French Revolution." Both domestic events being instrumental in setting the scene for each states foreign policy orientation and that would also be a role model for others for centuries. In filling many blanks in the knowledge of history, Chaffin, for example, explains why George Washington accepted with reservations aged 19 Lafayette's offers to be involved in the American Revolution. Lafayette had enormous wealth and royal connections that ingratiated himself with Washington and then he proved himself in battle. It was soon apparent that part of his motivation was revenge, for the French loss to England and the death of his own father. In 1779 France entered the war, bringing the fleet and support that turned the tide of the American Revolution.

Jefferson, then Governor of Virginia, first met Lafayette in 1781 through military campaigns. Then Lafayette returned to France and took what he learned back to help start France in its own revolution. Thereafter their friendship was

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primarily based on correspondence. As Chaffin explains, when Jefferson joined a delegation to Paris negotiating treaties with European nations three years later, speaking little French and in need of a partner, their friendship began in earnest. Lafayette was able to facilitate Jefferson's diplomatic efforts. Lafayette's wife was a childhood friend of Marie Antoinette, which assisted their access to the controversial French Royal court. Lafayette sought to bring about reform in France from inside the system, with Jefferson's moral support. Considered revolutionary by the monarchy, he set out to help resolve France's fiscal crisis of 1787, the precursor to the French Revolution. His strength was in taking a middle road, protecting the king while aiming for something between the American Constitution and Britain's arrangement by which the monarch and subject united into a single polity.

Jefferson remained a firm supporter of the French Revolution, even after he returned to America in 1789. There Jefferson learned in 1792 that the French Revolution's upheaval had rendered Lafayette a man without a country, locked away in a succession of Austrian and Prussian prisons. The burden fell on Jefferson and Lafayette's other friends to win his release. The two would not see each other again until 1824, that is the book's emotional high point, in a powerful and emotional reunion at Monticello. Here it is seen how Chaffin is strong on the international aspects, but he is less certain on the personal, including Jefferson's romantic (or semi-romantic) relationships.

A weakness of *Revolutionary Brothers* is its abrupt ending to the story. In the last chapter there is no mention of what happened to Lafayette and his family. An epilogue could have assisted the ending to emphasize what wasn't written, perhaps because by the time of the Lafayette's death in 1834, he had outlived Jefferson by almost eight years. And that his early eagerness, his interest in the American cause, and his lifelong statesmanship brought him into friendship not only with Thomas Jefferson but also with George Washington, Benjamin Franklin, John Adams, and many of the other statesmen of their generation. Yet Chaffin finds a nice spot in the level and kind of detail in this work of history. Dual biographies are always a tricky business. There is not enough space for the level of detail for each person as in a regular biography, but in this case that is an advantage. Chaffin never gets bogged down in unnecessary facts and it keeps the narrative moving along smoothly. However, as the book is restricted to a "biography of a friendship" it doesn't inform us of the role of the network of shared acquaintances, friendships, and alliances over their lifetimes.

I prefer reading the stories behind important people and events to a recitation of the detailed facts of each. For example, the International Political Economy of the day, when Jefferson is sent to France his job is to get more trade for American goods. French business will make that extremely hard. Lafayette helps as best he can. The relationship between the two men is the central point. There is no need for descriptions of trade negotiations. This makes the book an easy read. *Revolutionary Brothers* is well-written and thoroughly researched look at some of the most important alliance-building relationships of the American and French Revolutions. As a narrative both panoramic and intimate it is chock-full of action and anecdotes that opens wonderful old trapdoors connecting two great nations. Those international relations of two well established democracies, on either side of the Atlantic, have lasted to today. This worthy history will deepen lay readers' understanding of both men and their nations. *Revolutionary Brothers* is an excellent book, and I can recommend it heartily.

About the author:

Dr Glen Segell is Visiting Professor and Research Fellow at the University of the Free State, South Africa and a Research Fellow at the Ezri Center for Iran & Gulf States Research, University of Haifa, Israel.