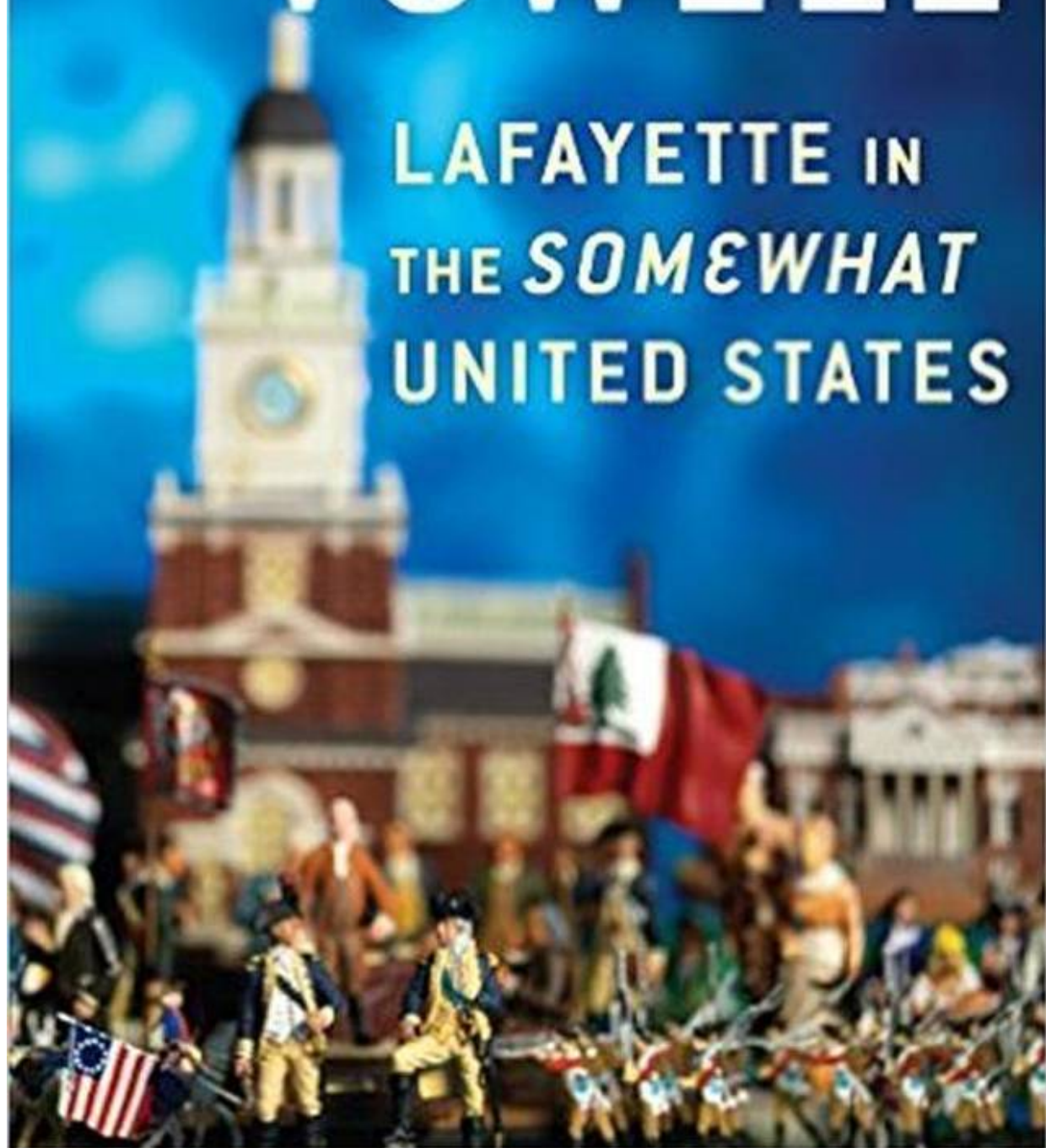


# In Lafayette's Footsteps

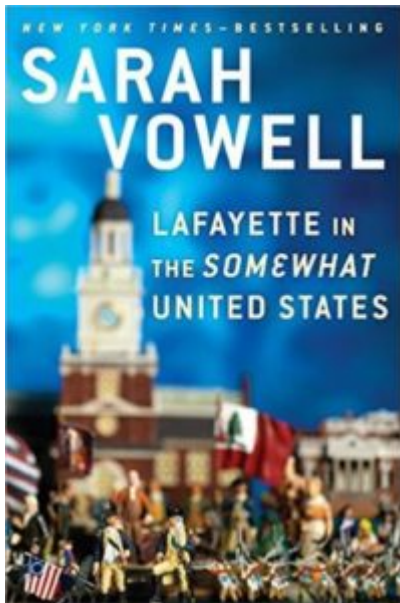
NEW YORK TIMES - BESTSELLING

# SARAH VOWELL

LAFAYETTE IN  
THE *SOMEWHAT*  
UNITED STATES



Perhaps it is fitting that in the grand panorama of the American Revolution—that revolution against patriarchal authority—the story of a rebellious adolescent looms so large.



Sarah Vowell, *Lafayette in the Somewhat United States*. New York: Riverhead Books, 2015. 288 pp., \$27.95.

When the American Revolution broke out, Sarah Vowell explains in *Lafayette in the Somewhat United States*, the teenage Marie-Joseph-Paul-Yves-Roch-Gilbert du Motier, Marquis de Lafayette, was still a teenager. He had only recently married Adrienne de Noailles, who was the daughter of the brigadier general of the king's armies, great-niece to France's ambassador to Britain. He was the scion of one of France's noblest families; his ancestors had been fighting on behalf of French kings since the Crusades. Their wedding was attended by King Louis XV himself. Lafayette's future at the Versailles Court was assured.

But the nineteen-year-old aristocrat wasn't interested. Defying orders of the French foreign minister, Charles Gravier, the comte de Vergennes, he fled to America, to what he saw as the Enlightenment struggle. Lafayette wasn't just disobeying his king or risking his fortune and his professional future. He left his two-year-old daughter and pregnant wife to cross the Atlantic and join the American cause. "Don't be angry with me," he wrote the poor Adrienne before he sailed away (66).

From a certain perspective, one might say that the United States owes its independence, at least in part, to the flights of fancy of an idealistic young liberal. Think on that, ye haters of millennials!

Lafayette's actions were a diplomatic embarrassment for the French crown, as yet reluctant to bet on the American cause. The young aristocrat, after all, had met King George in London just before planning his furtive escape.

(Lafayette would later admit that he was a little “too fond of playing a trick upon the king he is going to fight with” [66].) Few people were better connected at the Versailles court, or more likely to mobilize French public opinion on behalf of the American cause.

The Americans knew this wasn’t just any kid. Fed up as Congress was with haughty Europeans, many of them posing as aristocrats, all of them demanding exalted appointments and generous salaries, it was wise enough to know a good thing when it fell in its lap. Lafayette was immediately invited to serve on George Washington’s staff.

The boy had lost both his parents; Washington had no children. Although the American general had scraped his way up from the middling ranks of the provincial gentry, the nobleman from the French court was in raptures over Washington’s “majestic figure and deportment,” and the “noble affability of his manner” (86). “I had never beheld so superb a man,” Lafayette would later remember (185). The two quickly became surrogate father and son.

In America, Lafayette drew on reserves of wisdom little suggested by his age or previous experience. “I am cautious not to talk too much, lest I should say some foolish thing,” Lafayette wrote his father-in-law, “and still more cautious in my actions, lest I should do some foolish thing” (136). He asked for no money. He was unusually tactful—“It is to learn, and not to teach, that I come hither,” he told a grateful George Washington after reviewing his ill-clad, ill-fed troops (88). He gave good counsel. No wonder he was such a hit.

Lafayette arrived amid the darkest moments of the American Revolution, during those times that would try men’s souls at the hard winter in Valley Forge. He fought valiantly, and made friends easily. His boundless cheer, humor, and his unusual selflessness for American independence boosted American morale and helped keep the flame alive in France. “He made our cause his own,” Thomas Jefferson would later write. “I only held the nail, he drove it” (72).

After General John Burgoyne’s defeat at Saratoga—and many letters from the tireless Lafayette—Vergennes was finally persuaded to support the American cause, approving the 1778 Treaty of Amity and Commerce. Lafayette wept when he heard the news at Valley Forge. “Long live the King of France!” shouted the shoeless American troops (173). The French alliance gave new life to the rebellion, providing funding for the virtually bankrupt nation, some of the world’s finest soldiers, and, perhaps most importantly of all, a formidable navy.

It’s hard, today, to recall how different global power dynamics were in the eighteenth century. France was the great power then. The British defeat at Yorktown, when it finally came, was more a French victory than an American one. French officers persuaded Washington to fight at Yorktown, French engineers organized the siege, and the French Navy kept British reinforcements away. It was only at the insistence of Jean-Baptiste Donatien de Vimeur, comte de

Rochambeau, that the British surrendered their arms to the Americans rather than the French. Sarah Vowell does not exaggerate when she notes that “we owe our independence to the French navy” (258).

Vowell came at the idea for her study during the outbreak of anti-French sentiment following the American invasion of Iraq in 2003. If many Americans were furious at the apparent ingratitude of the French, “it seemed obvious that Americans had forgotten France’s help in our war for independence” (239). Vowell sets us straight.

Calling herself a “historian-adjacent, narrative nonfiction wise gu[y],” the author, comedian, and journalist serves as narrator and guide (147). What an entertaining guide she is! The book is as much a tour through the quirky corners of the author’s mind as it is through the Revolutionary past. She’s dug up detail and observation to amuse general readers and gratify the nerdiest of Franco-American enthusiasts. Vowell has a sharp eye for paradox, contradiction, coincidence, and most especially for hypocrisy. She delights in poking her finger into the eye of American complacency. “The Founding Fathers,” she observes, “while sticklers about taxation without representation in general, were magnanimously open-minded about the French crown overtaxing French subjects to pay for the French navy to cross the Atlantic.” Delicate readers, beware: “*Les insurgents*,” she adds for good measure, “wanted what all self-respecting, financially strapped terrorists want: to become state-sponsored terrorists” (2).

This is no dead history. America’s Revolutionary past is leavened with accounts of Vowell’s visit to a Lafayette puppet show in southeastern Pennsylvania, encounters with park rangers and historical reenactors, and tales of her Thomas Edison-loving friends. Vowell knows her history, of course, but humor is her calling card. If some of the jokes fall flat (and really, who am I to criticize?) others garner well-earned chuckles.

It’s hard to know what to call Vowell’s narrative approach, so full of digression and chronological rupture. Vowell confesses that she sees American history “as a history of argument” (112). It’s a nice formulation. Jumping back and forth from past to present and back again, she enlivens the conversations with provocative formulations: Congress was “neck-deep in arrogant boobs” wanting to serve the “transatlantic anti-monarchical punks” (51 and 62). The Moravians who attend to a wounded Lafayette don’t fare so well either, described here as “German-American Jesus freaks” (127). At times, one is reminded a little of those “Drunk History” clips on YouTube—with a little less vomiting, perhaps.

Historians will wish that recent generations of scholarship had left a bigger mark on such an intelligent writer. Vowell doesn’t much engage with the problem of slavery in the Revolution, for instance. Disagreement about slavery was, as it happens, a gripping feature of Lafayette’s relationship to the United States in general, and to Washington in particular: one of the few matters on which

the French son took strong issue with his American father. But Vowell's references to slavery mostly take the form of snarky asides. Similarly, a brief discussion of the gendered nature of revolutionary resistance relegates the homespun movement to sideshow, while grand declarations and brave fighting remain on center stage, albeit a little reluctantly.

Vowell's relentless focus on individuals has limitations that will be obvious to academic readers. This American Revolution is driven largely by quirks of personality. Lafayette's boyish enthusiasm, Washington's revanchist obsession with recapturing New York, Pierre-August Caron de Beaumarchais' charm and ambition: these were hardly irrelevant to the history of the American Revolution, of course, but they can occlude as much as they explain.

After all, the French didn't join the colonial rebellion just to appease their "national grudge," nor to "stic[k] it to the British" for their drubbing in the Seven Years' War (38, 174). There were serious geopolitical interests at stake in detaching the North American colonies from the British. With the United States established as a French client state, Britain's lucrative Caribbean colonies would be imperiled. Who knows what other fruits of empire could eventually be plucked away? In the end, the Americans' double-crossing of Vergennes and the French alliance helped maintain American independence.

But to complain about such matters may be too churlish. This book was never meant for graduate oral exams, and it offers a good response to those people who say they never much liked history: too many facts and dates. The lightness of tone provides a welcome contrast to the excessive earnestness of too much academic scholarship. We could use a little more of Vowell's wit, I daresay.

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