



Lafayette in the Somewhat United States

Sarah Vowell

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From the bestselling author of *Assassination Vacation* and *The Partly Cloudy Patriot*, an insightful and unconventional account of George Washington's trusted officer and friend, that swashbuckling teenage French aristocrat the Marquis de Lafayette.

Chronicling General Lafayette's years in Washington's army, Vowell reflects on the ideals of the American Revolution versus the reality of the Revolutionary War. Riding shotgun with Lafayette, Vowell swerves from the high-minded debates of Independence Hall to the frozen wasteland of Valley Forge, from bloody battlefields to the Palace of Versailles, bumping into John Adams, Thomas Jefferson, Lord Cornwallis, Benjamin Franklin, Marie Antoinette and various kings, Quakers and redcoats along the way.

Drawn to the patriots' war out of a lust for glory, Enlightenment ideas and the traditional French hatred for the British, young Lafayette crossed the Atlantic expecting to join forces with an undivided people, encountering instead fault lines between the Continental Congress and the Continental Army, rebel and loyalist inhabitants, and a conspiracy to fire George Washington, the one man holding together the rickety, seemingly doomed patriot cause.

While Vowell's yarn is full of the bickering and infighting that marks the American past—and present—her telling of the Revolution is just as much a story of friendship: between Washington and Lafayette, between the Americans and their French allies and, most of all between Lafayette and the American people. Coinciding with one of the most contentious presidential elections in American history, Vowell lingers over the elderly Lafayette's sentimental return tour of America in 1824, when three fourths of the population of New York City turned out to welcome him ashore. As a Frenchman and the last surviving general of the Continental Army, Lafayette belonged to neither North nor South, to no political party or faction. He was a walking, talking reminder of the sacrifices and bravery of the revolutionary generation and what the founders hoped this country could be. His return was not just a reunion with his beloved Americans it was a reunion for Americans with their own astonishing, singular past.

Vowell's narrative look at our somewhat united states is humorous, irreverent and wholly original.

From the Hardcover edition.

Lafayette in the Somewhat United States Details

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From Reader Review *Lafayette in the Somewhat United States* for online ebook

Kendra says

This was an absolutely delightful, snark-filled history of a war hero I had never heard of before *Hamilton: the Musical*. Did I read it because of the musical? You bet I did. Did I maybe enjoy it more because I was thinking of the musical or fanposts on tumblr? Absolutely. But even without that. The cast was delightful, the author's narrative voice was enjoyable, and okay I went through the whole book picturing Daveed Diggs so what.

LafayETTE!

Brierly says

Lafayette in the Somewhat United States is more than a non-fiction book; it is a history textbook, a Broadway companion, a travel guide, and political essay collection. I had the pleasure of listening to the audiobook -- I highly recommend it as it comes with an all-star cast (Nick Offerman as George Washington?!) as well as being read by Vowell herself.

As a history textbook, this was the most comprehensive history of the Revolution that I have experienced; by focusing on a single character Vowell is able to flesh out an eight year period of time with relative consistency. This book came out a few months before the Broadway show *Hamilton*, fans will see numerous references to characters within the show as well as a further exploration of Hamilton, Washington, Laurens, and of course, Lafayette.

Vowell uses her non-fiction books to set up an American roadtrip; she did this quite literally in *Assassination Vacation* and continues the tradition in *Lafayette*. Perhaps best of all, Vowell continues to contextualize boring ol' history with contemporary events, such as the Tea Party (21st century one), and closes her book with commentary on Lafayette as a location in America.

Once again, hats off to Sarah Vowell. Forever wishing she was my aunt.

Lesa says

No one but Sarah Vowell can manage to write about history with wry humor, while managing to also include references to Ferris Bueller's Day Off, Elvis Presley and Bruce Springsteen. At the same time, she brings the Marquis de Lafayette and the sometimes cranky Revolutionary War figures to life in her latest book, *Lafayette in the Somewhat United States*. And, despite her serious humor, she can still bring tears with her closing sentence; tears for a popular history book.

Vowell puts the story of the Marquis de Lafayette in context, telling the story of his world at the time of the war. He was only a wealthy nineteen-year-old when he defied his father-in-law and the powerful French men of the time, left his pregnant wife behind, and sailed to America. With no ongoing war in Europe, he was

eager to volunteer to fight against Britain, France's traditional enemy. The young man who eagerly supported the colonies' demands for freedom would become a hero to the people. When he returned to the United States in 1824, as an old man, he was the Continental Army's last living general. His thirteen-month tour of the twenty-four states became a celebratory victory lap.

In telling Lafayette's story, Vowell tells of the schemes to bring France into the war. She tells of the rebels' need for support and financial aid, ammunition and guns. Readers meet the Americans and French who supported war. And, she reveals all the problems of the Continental Army under George Washington. She introduces the politicians who didn't support him; the generals who schemed for his job; the foreigners who showed up eager for battle, and the British politicians and leaders who made so many mistakes. The story of the war is a story of petty politics.

Sarah Vowell brings an extensive knowledge of history and popular culture to her books. It's the dry comments that combine that knowledge that make her books so appealing. Take the story of the attack on Trenton. "The victory at Trenton boosted morale among the troops, the Congress, and the people to a degree possibly unwarranted by winning back a town in New Jersey, what with it being a town in New Jersey." Then, there's her comment after she relates the account of the loss at the Battle of Brandywine. "Oh, if only that was the last time in America that the extreme left and extreme right broke down and made a mess of things, leaving everyone in the center to suffer." One of my favorite lines in the book.

Vowell is a skilled storyteller, relating little-known or forgotten stories of early history. And, she hinges her historical account on a figure that was revered for generations, the Marquis de Lafayette. Lafayette was an impulsive, headstrong, at times disagreeable teenager who wanted his own way when he headed to America. This young foreigner symbolized the determined young country, and became an idol for that country. Vowell's wonderful history, *Lafayette in the Somewhat United States*, tells the story of "the best friend America ever had", a man linked forever to the Revolutionary War, and the founding of the United States.

History? Literature? Popular culture? Sarah Vowell beautifully brings it all together in *Lafayette in the Somewhat United States*.

Jenny (Reading Envy) says

I listened to this on a long drive home from DC, after seeing the statue of Lafayette in Mt Vernon Square in Baltimore. I selected it because I needed something that would satisfy both my husband and I; I had previously enjoyed a Sarah Vowell audiobook and he likes history.

It left both of us a bit ambivalent. Sarah Vowell does have a singular voice, and I wish she had made more use of the celebrity voices also on the recording (more of them, less of her.) But I knew what I was getting into in that regard. My husband won't listen to books faster than 1x speed, so for me the pace was excruciating, that's a personal thing.

It's more how the publisher blurb doesn't match the contents - it says everyone knows the revolutionary war but not how Lafayette returns to the USA right before the Civil War! ... and then proceeds to spend the majority of the book narrating Lafayette's adventures during the Revolutionary War. And not in a linear fashion, it jumps all over for no discernible reason.

Definitely not my favorite of hers!

Rachel says

I picked this up because I just read about the bromance between Lafayette, Hamilton, and John Laurens in *Alexander Hamilton* and realized I knew exactly nothing about Lafayette besides the fact that there are a lot of streets and landmarks bearing his name here in the county where Washington crossed the Delaware.

As it turned out, I *also* knew hilariously little about the scope of the role the French played in helping the United States win its freedom. Thanks, public education!

And thanks, France!

Marie-Joseph Paul Yves Roch Gilbert du Motier (!), aka the Marquis de Lafayette, left a comfortable, aristocrat's life in France to fight with the Continental Army in the US. He was like 19 years old, newly married, and driven by a "warrior" desire to find glory in battle like his ancestors. He joined fellow European exports Rochambeau, Baron von Steuben, and Tadeusz Kościuszko in supporting the American cause, quite taken with revolutionary ideals and the American character.

Although this book purports to be about the impact of Lafayette specifically, it is also very much a general view of key battles of the Revolution, followed by Lafayette's observations (if available) in letters to his wife Adrienne back home. This being a Sarah Vowell book, there are also a lot of detours for humor and her observations at present day historical sites. I found the detours to be a little more distracting here than in previous books, probably because the focus of this book is kind of broad in the first place.

There are four points of interest that I am taking away from this book:

- 1.) It really is kind of funny that Americans turn death and failure into excuses to celebrate and/or barbecue (i.e. Memorial Day, the blundering Battle of Brandywine re-enactment that Vowell visits, and my own delight at taking regular spring and fall walks at the site of the Valley Forge encampments where thousands of Revolutionary era patriots froze, starved, and died of illness). That must be the good ol' U.S. of A. optimism working for us there.
- 2.) The cost of funding France's naval and foot soldier support, which we probably couldn't have won the war without, contributed to the bankruptcy that then led to the ultra-violent upheaval of the French Revolution. Lafayette and Rochambeau were jailed during this time, and Lafayette's wife only evaded the guillotine thanks to James Monroe's intervention. Yikes.
- 3.) The immaturity of the Yorktown surrender! Cornwallis faked sick and sent his second in command to surrender in his place, so Washington refused to accept the symbolic transfer of arms and sent HIS second to do it. Some Redcoats threw their weapons down "petulantly." Definitely laughed out loud at all of this.
- 4.) The Marquis de Lafayette was a super endearing guy, loved by Americans of all ideologies and parties. He adored Washington in a "puppyish" way and seemingly bore no ill will nor vanity of pride when disagreements arose in the army. To that effect, I found the story of US Army Colonel Charles Stanton announcing the American intention to help the French in WWI with "Lafayette, we are here!" very moving.

Also, I just love how saucy he looks in most paintings, albeit a little rough for 19-20. America's favorite fighting Frenchman, indeed.

Jaylia3 says

Sarah Vowell's acerbic, insightful wit comes through loud and clear in this fascinating account of French General Lafayette and his role in the American Revolution, but it took me a while to adjust to her irreverent banter in print--as well as being an author Vowell is also known for her radio pieces on *This American Life*. This book runs almost 270 pages without any chapter breaks, and reads like the long-winded but mesmerizing stand-up routine of a highly knowledgeable, history obsessed comedian who knows how to use humor to make a point.

Lafayette was still a teenager when he left his young bride behind and snuck out of France to join the American Revolution against the wishes of his family, but he ended up becoming such a key figure in the winning of the war that cities all over the country are named for him. Vowell has a special knack for revealing the personalities of the many historical figures she writes about, their foibles, revealing quirks, and strengths. Since Lafayette had a close relationship with George Washington he features prominently in the book and I really appreciated getting a clearer picture of the man behind the myth. Vowell even manages to make battles and military strategy interesting, in part by keeping her focus on the people involved, and in part by not overlooking the missteps or ironies of the situations.

Vowell finds plenty of opportunities to relate the struggles of the Revolutionary period to American politics today, pointing out that many current ideological divisions and tendencies have an origin, or at least an analog, dating back to the founding of the country. The book also covers the aftereffects of the Revolutionary War in France and Britain, and the America of 1824, which was when John Quincy Adams and Andrew Jackson competed in a notorious presidential election and the then elderly Lafayette made a return trip to the country that was still so besotted with him that two thirds of the population of New York City welcomed him ashore. While researching the book Vowell visited historic sites in America and France and she takes readers along on those trips too, giving us her impressions of tourist destinations like Williamsburg and Valley Forge while relating what happened there in the past.

In this book Vowell manages the neat trick of being both funny and stirring. She clearly loves history, and she makes it very easy to join her in that passion.

I read an advanced review copy of this book supplied by the publisher. Review opinions are mine.

Jessica says

Everyone give it up for America's favorite fighting Frenchman!

I love Sarah Vowell. She's funny and she breaks history down into something very simple and straightforward. I don't read enough history in general and I definitely haven't read enough Sarah Vowell, but

I still love her.

How fortuitous that Sarah's written a book that so neatly ties into the buzziest theater sensation in 20 years. Despite my love of the Broadway show, I actually just wanted to read this one because I love Sarah Vowell and have been trying to make more of an effort, across the board, to read more nonfiction. The fact that she helped shine a light on the action in some of the show's songs is just a cherry on top of the whatever.

So this is actually less about Lafayette than you might think, given his prominent placement in the title. It's about the Revolutionary War on a broad scale and the French involvement with the war on a less broad scale. Lafayette was a big part of that involvement, but he wasn't the only part of it and this book reflects that. Sarah undertook a journey to visit the historical parks and monuments dedicated to the various events in which Lafayette and the French played a role, and this book is more or less a culmination of what she found or learned along that journey.

It's filled with zingers and fun facts, and it breaks complex historical events down into pretty digestible little nuggets. In short, it was a fun read and I highly recommend this, or anything Vowell writes, as a good starting point for someone interested in historical events who feels somewhat overwhelmed by more Serious, Academic Tomes.

Lafayette was pretty universally beloved in the early days of our existence as a country. People who hated each other still loved him, which you have to admit is a pretty rare phenomenon in the course of our national history. Sarah opens the book with Lafayette's triumphant return to the US as an old man in 1824, and I wish she had returned to explore that event in more detail. Her descriptions of significant events in the Revolution – ranging from the Landing at Kip's Bay to the Battle of Yorktown, and some brief snippets of French history – were interesting but often strayed pretty far from Lafayette himself. I learned a lot, but was left wanting just a little bit more.

Barbara says

First note: I am a working historian. It's my job, my life, my reason for getting out of bed every day (well, also coffee). What do I think of Sarah Vowell's work? She self-describes in this book as a "historian-adjacent, narrative nonfiction wise guy."

I love her work because she takes a historical topic - assassination, patriotism, colonialism, Puritanism and in this case, political idealism - and intertwines the subject across time. Lafayette's political idealism, which was more important to him than class, income or personal self-interest, brought him to the very feet of George Washington and to the shores of the United States. France's participation and support of the American Revolution would ultimately destroy their own government. Yet, reading Vowell's interpretation, with it's occasional dipping into the anti-French mood of the early 21st century, really alters one's preconceived ideas about American independence. We couldn't have done it alone - and more to the point, we absolutely didn't do it alone.

So, what's with US participation in World War I & II? A debt we needed to repay? Or perhaps, we helped France because that's what democracies do. The American experiment proved one that worked, but it could have easily gone the other way. I found myself, while reading, sometimes wondering how it would end, and as noted, I am a historian so I KNOW how it ended.

Not only was the brief bit of Lafayette's life (the part presented in the book) fascinating, the other 'foreign'

players in the Revolution came to life (shout out Baron Von Steuben - proof that Germans aren't the rigid hard-asses we sometimes get sold. He arrived, found a disheveled army that needed to learn military discipline without undermining its independent ideals and he worked with it. Much like my German mother. No hand wringing about their lack of skills, just 'okay, let's learn what you need to learn'. Kudos.)

I quite enjoyed this book, as I've enjoyed all of Vowell's works (except "Assassination Vacation" which I may have memorized and read annually around President's Day because it is absolutely utterly brilliant and far exceeds the word 'enjoyed'). I'll admit I got a bit lost in the later chapters as the war was winding down. This part of the Revolution is often overlooked and perhaps our collective snooze button on that period continues to induce deep sleep. It's a tough bit to make exciting.

Read this book! And I have to add that I never reviewed "Worthy Shipmates" and I should have. I live and work in New Hampshire, a stronghold of Puritan New England. I'm almost ready to forgive Sarah Vowell for abandoning the Reverend John Wheelwright into the wilderness (that wilderness is Exeter, New Hampshire - a town he is credited with founding). Wheelwright could be a book unto himself and even though I suspect he would have been a horrible roommate, he deserves a bit more inquiry.

Goodreads allows a toggle for "hide entire review because of spoilers." Spoiler alert: The Americans win their independence.

Renata says

I thoroughly enjoyed hearing Sarah Vowell read her book Lafayette in the Somewhat United States. I knew little of Lafayette's life but now I'd like to read a longer biography on this remarkable young man. She gave me an entirely different picture of George Washington than I had had. Loved her connections between past and present and her dry sardonic wit. She's a fun travel companion.

Clif Hostetler says

This book is a history of the American Revolutionary War structured around the life of Lafayette (full name: Marie-Joseph-Paul-Yves-Roch-Gilbert du Motier, the Marquis de Lafayette). This is enjoyable history that fashions a braid of past and present with sparkling prose. It's part history, travelog, political commentary, and comedy. And in spite of the writing style aimed at a popular reading audience, it's informative and really does manage to disclose some facts often missed by "serious" history literature.

With a name so long (see above) one would think he must surely be an old military man with much experience sent by the King of France to help the Americans. Instead I was astounded to learn that he was nineteen years old when he first landed in North America. He was technically AWOL from the French Army and had left his young pregnant wife and angry father-in-law without notice in order to seek adventure in the manner of a typical irresponsible teenager.

So how did Lafayette manage to be taken seriously, actually welcomed, by George Washington and his staff? Well, it turns out that he must have been blessed with the necessary social skills and charisma to be accepted. It didn't hurt that, and probably most importantly, he was heir to one of the largest estates in Louis XVI's France.

And he seems to have immediately become a most enthusiastic devotee of George Washington's. In an

environment where most of the officers in the Continental Army were jealous of Washington, the presence of an energetic and supportive friend was received quite favorably by the General. And it turns out that Lafayette performed fearlessly under fire and always approached hard times with an optimistic bias.

I found it particularly interesting to compare the tone of his letters home during the difficult times with the concurrent letters being written by others in the same circumstances. Lafayette was obviously an optimistic guy, and as it turned out he was lucky to have chosen to align with what was ultimately the winning side.

Years later his American friends saved his life when during the Reign of Terror of the French Revolution the American Embassy in Paris intervened to allow him to escape the guillotine. He lived to be an old man, and revisited the United States in 1824 at the invitation of President Monroe. He traveled to all twenty-four of the then existing states and was cheered as a hero at every stop. Consequently, it seems that every American city has a street or square bearing his name (actually Lafayette is his title, not his name).

Celia says

Sarah Vowell has a unique writing style: factual, yet fun. Example: Lafayette 'knocked up' his wife before he left for the 'New World'. Other examples abound!!

I learned the following about Lafayette:

He came to the colonies to find his fortune at the age of 19.

He was commissioned as major-general at that age to fight in the Revolutionary War

Injured at the Battle of Brandywine

Instrumental in winning the Battle of Yorktown

4 children including his son, Georges Washington (obviously named after our 1st President)

Exiled during the French Revolution (his wife was imprisoned in Paris)

I am also reading about James Monroe, our fifth president. Before Monroe was president he was Ambassador to France. Monroe's wife rescued Lafayette's wife from prison and arranged for her and Georges Washington to flee to the US.

I enjoy it when two books that I am reading provide supporting information for each other.

I listened to the audio, read by the author. I do not recommend the audio as Vowell's voice is nasally and somewhat off-putting.

I enjoyed learning about Lafayette however.

4 stars

Ashley says

Guyyyyys this book. It took me almost three months to read it, when I expected to finish it in a couple of days! I just didn't like it very much, and I'm not sure why.

It might be that it was the first Sarah Vowell book I've listened to on audiobook, but I don't think so. I listen to a lot of audiobooks, and I love Sarah Vowell's voice (not to mention the voices of her many stellar audiobook guests, including John Slattery as Lafayette, Nick Offerman as George Washington, Alexis Denisof as all the British people, and Bobby Cannavale as Benjamin Franklin). I think it might be a combination of the book not being what I expected it to be, and in my opinion, it being somewhat of a mess structurally.

Really, though, take this review with a grain of salt. It's such an outsized reaction to the way I normally feel about Vowell's books that I don't know if I can trust it. I may have to re-read in the future when I can pay it more attention and not be distracted by just wanting to listen to the Hamilton soundtrack instead. I think I checked out emotionally pretty early on and never tried very hard to get back into it.

Anyway, going in, I expected this book to be about Lafayette himself, when really it was more about the American Revolution, and Lafayette makes appearances every now and then. I expected to get a detailed explanation for just why exactly Americans were so obsessed with this French dude, and I didn't. And I expected more from the later period of Lafayette's life, when he made his return trip to America, where over 75% of New Yorkers showed up to hear him speak. That wasn't there at all, mainly some nods to the insane tour he made of America afterwards.

As always, Vowell's actual writing was great. She throws in all this sassy side stuff and smaller human stuff that most historians ignore or don't care about. And she does make clear two things that are central to the book: just how important of a role not only Lafayette but France itself played in helping America win its independence (and contrasting that with how we generally feel about the French now); and that the myth we have that all the Founding Fathers agreed with each other and the early country was this perfect utopia is absolute bunk. Americans have always disagreed with each other vehemently and loudly, and will presumably continue to do so for the rest of eternity.

Diane says

I work at a college, and one of the things I regularly hear students grumble about is that "history is boring." I disagree, of course, but sometimes it's difficult to explain to a grouchy freshman why history is actually exciting and interesting and often relevant to modern times.

Luckily, I don't have to carry that burden all by myself, because there is Sarah Vowell. (And Bill Bryson. And Nathaniel Philbrick. And David McCullough. And Erik Larson. And Hampton Sides. And Stacy Schiff. But I digress.) One of the things I enjoy most about Vowell's books is how she doesn't just tell facts and stories from history, she points out the humor in the situation and weaves in comparisons to the current era and unusual events from her travels. I have read several of her books, and they are always interesting and amusing and insightful.

In Vowell's latest book, *Lafayette in the Somewhat United States*, she recounts the life of the Marquis de Lafayette, a Frenchman who voluntarily came to America when he was 19 to fight in the revolution against the British. Vowell visits numerous historic sites and does extensive research on the celebrated war hero. The book covers Lafayette's adventures during the American Revolutionary War, and also his return to the United States in 1824, when he took a grand tour around the country and was cheered and feted wherever he went.

"As a Frenchman who represented neither North nor South, East nor West, left nor right, Yankees nor Red Sox, Lafayette has always belonged to all of us."

A good example of how Vowell mixes history and modern times was when she met with a longtime Lafayette reenactor, Mark Schneider. Schneider was portraying Lafayette in 2003, during the time when the U.S. Congress was so angry at France for not backing an American resolution for military action against Iraq that they foolishly changed the name of French fries to "freedom fries" in the congressional cafeteria. Both Vowell and Schneider put the 2003 events in context:

Vowell: If the French had forgotten America's help in World War II — and they had not; they just opposed a preemptive war in the Middle East based on faulty intelligence that most Americans would end up regretting anyway — it seemed obvious that Americans had forgotten France's help in our war for independence in general and the national obsession with Lafayette in particular.

Schneider: "I would say it was more of a challenge to tell the story, to talk about French help [during the revolution]. Quite often from my guests I would get, 'Hey, I wish they would help now!' or something to that effect. But telling the story, the truth speaks for itself. One of the greatest compliments I've ever received portraying Lafayette was from an older gentleman who listened to the story of Lafayette, with me telling the personal sacrifice that he made and then the sacrifice France made by getting involved in this war and helping us win independence. It brought him to tears, and he said at the end, 'You know, I hated the French until I came in this room. Thank you for sharing that story. I needed to hear that story. I no longer feel that way about the French. Thank you for telling me the truth and the facts about this. Now maybe I'll reevaluate my opinions on the French.' I had accomplished my goal, and that was to tell the true story of the American Revolution and the sacrifice that so many people made — the people here in America, but also those that helped us."

I enjoyed this book, and I learned a lot about Lafayette that I didn't know. It also reminded me of how much I've forgotten about the American Revolutionary War since high school history class. I had read David McCullough's *1776* a few years ago, which is a nice companion piece to Vowell's work.

My favorite way to experience a Sarah Vowell book is on audio. She assembles magnificent casts of actors to portray the various historical characters, and the *Lafayette* audiobook was especially good. John Slattery was great at portraying Lafayette, Nick Offerman was perfect as George Washington and Patton Oswalt was an entertaining Thomas Jefferson. Of course, Vowell has an extensive background in radio, so she is always an excellent narrator.

Earlier I mentioned Vowell's humor and how she includes unusual events in her narratives. About midway through *Lafayette* she had an illuminating explanation for this writing habit:

Having studied art history, as opposed to political history, I tend to incorporate found objects into my books. Just as Pablo Picasso glued a fragment of furniture onto the canvas of *Still Life with Chair Caning*, I like to use whatever's lying around to paint pictures of the past — traditional pigment like archival documents but also the added texture of whatever bits and

bobs I learn from looking out bus windows or chatting up the people I bump into on the road.

That helps explain the charm of Vowell's books. They aren't just history tomes — they're a bitchin' piece of art.

Favorite Quotes

The thing that drew me to Lafayette as a subject — that he was that rare object of agreement in the ironically named United States — kept me coming back to why that made him unique. Namely, that we the people have never agreed on much of anything. Other than a bipartisan consensus on barbecue and Meryl Streep, plus that time in 1942 when everyone from Bing Crosby to Oregonian schoolchildren heeded FDR's call to scrounge up rubber for the war effort, disunity is the through line in the national plot — not necessarily as a failing, but as a free people's privilege. And thanks to Lafayette and his cohorts in Washington's army, plus the king of France and his navy, not to mention the founding dreamers who clearly did not think through what happens every time one citizen's pursuit of happiness infuriates his neighbors, getting on each other's nerves is our *right*.

[on Lafayette becoming an orphan at 12]

Besides the money and land, Lafayette inherited a six-foot tall hole in his heart that only a father figure like George Washington could fill. According to Jefferson, Lafayette's "foible is a canine appetite for popularity." The orphaned only child's puppyish yearning for kinship is at the root of his accomplishments in America, the source of his keyed-up eagerness to distinguish himself, particularly on the battlefield. He tended to confuse glory with love.

[Vowell is chatting with various Quakers about her research on Lafayette]

One of the Friends, Christopher Densmore, says: "We understand our history as war." It is pretty clear by the way he's looking at me that by "we," he means "you," i.e., we non-Quaker Americans. The other Friends nod their heads in vexed agreement. Densmore laments, "If you go to the history section of the Barnes and Noble, it's all war."

First of all, let's not forget about *Cod*. I checked, and the book subtitled *A Biography of the Fish that Changed the World* is in stock at the two nearby B&Ns in Exton and at the Concord Mall, and for good reason — it's one of the better cod bios in print.

I do not think that there can ever be enough books about anything; and I say that knowing that some of them are going to be about Pilates. The more knowledge, the better seems like a solid rule of thumb, even though I have watched enough science fiction films to accept that humanity's unchecked pursuit of learning will end with robots taking over the world.

The most convincing if dispiriting argument for me to augment the supposedly unnecessary embarrassment of war books is that adding another one to the pile ups the odds of my fellow citizens actually cracking one open. In 2009, the American Revolution Center surveyed one thousand U.S. adults on their knowledge of the

Revolution. Among the findings: "Many more Americans remember that Michael Jackson sang 'Beat It' than know that the Bill of Rights is part of the Constitution." A bleak revelation, and yet "Beat It" did win the 1984 Grammy for Record of the Year, so the numskulls who took the test knew at least one fact about American history. Sixty percent of those surveyed correctly identified the number of children parented by reality TV personalities Jon and Kate Gosselin, but over a third did not know the century in which the American Revolution took place. More than half of them believed the American Civil War preceded the Revolutionary War (whenever that was). Based on these findings, the situation appears to be more demoralizing than Americans understanding our history as war. What if we don't understand our history at all?

I would like to see the calamity at Valley Forge as just the growing pains of a new nation. It has been a long time since the men and women serving in the armed forces of the world's only superpower went naked because some crooked townies in upstate New York filched their uniforms. But there's still this combination of governmental ineptitude, shortsightedness, stinginess, corruption, and neglect that affected the Continentals before, during, and after Valley Forge that twenty-first-century Americans are not entirely unfamiliar with ...

I'm not just thinking of the Pentagon's blunders. I'm thinking of how the noun "infrastructure" never appears in an American newspaper anymore without being preceded by the adjective "crumbling." Or how my friend Katherine, a public high school English teacher, has had to pay out of her own pocket for her classroom's pens, paper, paper clips, thumbtacks, and, she says, "chalk when I run out," chalk being the one thing her school system promises to provide its teachers for free.

It's possible that the origin of what kept our forefathers from feeding the troops at Valley Forge is the same flaw that keeps the federal government from making sure a vet with renal failure can get a checkup, and that impedes my teacher friend's local government from keeping her in chalk, and that causes a decrepit, ninety-three-year-old exploding water main to spit eight million gallons of water down Sunset Boulevard during one of the worst droughts in California history. Is it just me, or does this foible hark back to the root of the revolution itself? Which is to say, a hypersensitivity about taxes — and honest disagreements over how they're levied, how they're calculated, how that money is spent, and by whom. The fact that the Continental Congress was not empowered to levy taxes was the literal reason for the ever-empty patriot coffers. More money would have helped, but it wouldn't have entirely solved the problems of a loosely cinched bundle of states trying to collaborate for the greater good.

Before we cue the brass section to blare "The Stars and Stripes Forever," it might be worth taking another moment of melancholy silence to mourn the thwarted reconciliation with the mother country and what might have been. Anyone who accepts the patriots' premise that all men are created equal must come to terms with the fact that the most obvious threat to equality in eighteenth-century North America was not taxation without representation but slavery. Parliament would abolish slavery in the British empire in 1833, thirty years before President Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation. A return to the British fold in 1778 might have freed American slaves three decades sooner, which is what, an entire generation and a half? Was independence for some of us more valuable than freedom for all of us? As the former slave Frederick Douglass put it in an Independence Day speech in 1852, "This is your Fourth of July, not mine."

Kressel Housman says

Sarah Vowell is one of my favorite writers. She describes herself as a “historian-adjacent nonfiction narrative wise guy,” but I consider her a genuine historian and genuinely wise. Her signature style is to mix a meticulously researched account of history with snarky comments, but within her analysis come some absolute gems of political insight. This book stays true to her style.

The book begins in 1824 with the return visit of the Marquis de Lafayette to America, but it is mostly it is about the American Revolutionary War. Sarah describes Lafayette as the best friend America ever had. He was a glory-seeking nineteen-year-old when he volunteered to join the colonial army. By the end of the war, he had matured and seen enough to know to be cautious with the lives of the soldiers in his command.

If there’s one thing that this book makes especially vivid, it’s the hardships of war. Every American has learned about the cold, hard winter at Valley Forge, but Sarah brings it to life like no other author I’ve ever read. She quotes eye-witness accounts, usually Lafayette’s letters home and sometimes the writings of other soldiers. The clearest and most brutal image I now have of Valley Forge is the bloody footprints of the colonial soldiers who had to march barefoot over ice and snow. Even worse is the reason they were so ill-equipped: tax squabbles. Of course, the whole war was being fought over tax squabbles, but there’s a difference between a punitive tax policy and taxes for basic needs, like feeding and clothing the people risking their lives for liberty.

Under these conditions, it’s not surprising that there was plenty of desertion amongst the rank and file, but there was plenty of dissension in the uppermost ranks, too. Most of us think of George Washington as a celebrated hero, but in his own time, there were several attempts to sack him. Lafayette remained his loyal defender through it all.

I will admit that the sections describing military strategy made for dull reading. In general, I find military strategy difficult to follow, so there were some sections I had to re-read. At other times, my mind just wandered. I considered taking away a star for that, but I decided it was my failing, not the book’s. If anything, it proves that this is a “genuine” history book, and not “history adjacent.” As much as I love learning history, if a history book doesn’t have some dull parts, it comes across as too light-weight to me. Sarah’s books offset the dull parts with jokes, personal narrative, and forays into pop culture. Some may call that light-weight, too, but I say this is her most scholarly work yet. She really packed in the historical detail.

After painting the dreary picture of the travails of the colonial army, Sarah explains how we won: foreign aid. Other Frenchmen followed Lafayette’s lead and volunteered, as did a disgraced German officer named von Steuben, who drilled the rank and file until they could hold their own in battle. Ultimately, France provided the naval help that won the decisive battle of the war. So the book is not just a tribute to Lafayette, but to France itself.

Sarah began writing it after French fries were renamed “freedom fries” because France refused to participate in the Iraq War. Anti-France feeling was rampant then. But I happened to read this book in a week when sympathy for France was running high, the week of a deadly terrorist attack. This particular history lesson – that the United States owes its liberty to France – could not have come at a more meaningful time. So given the current climate, I recommend reading the book right away. It will make you a more grateful American.

Amy says

1.5 Stars

In full disclosure, I read the title of this book, looked at the cover, and thought this was a YA novel. Probably one with a manic pixie dream girl. I was excited.

This is not a YA novel. This is a pithy "biography" full of random tangents and author antidotes somewhat featuring Gilbert du Motier, Marquis de Lafayette, who I guess could be considered the Continental Army's manic pixie dream girl.

I've loved Lafayette for years and years and years so I figured even if I didn't get my YA novel, I could get some interesting facts about one of my favorite heroes. Unfortunately, this novel has more in common with a silly YA novel than it does a well developed biography. Actually, that is too cruel to YA novels. This book is more like a tumblr post. But less funny.

The historical aspects of this book primarily consist of flippant retellings of popular lore and basic revolutionary war history, with a few vulgar phrases thrown in for good measure (Lafayette "knocks up his wife" during his year back to France - I don't think she gets a single shout out without an adjective like "preggers" attached to it. Poor woman.)

Even these facts get buried in random tangents about politics and stories of the author's trip to different Revolutionary War landmarks. I think there might be more facts provided about her taxi driver in one section than Lafayette. The taxi driver then leads to the story about some guy who carries pictures of Thomas Edison on his phone which leads to a random tangent about Edison, history, Teddy Roosevelt, boy scouts and President Eisenhower...well, you get the idea. The whole book runs on like that.

Overall, a breezy look at one of America's lesser known Founding Fathers that left me wishing I'd just surfed Pinterest for 7 hours instead.
