

Franklin D. Roosevelt Library & Museum

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Box 5; Folder = FDR Inscribed Speeches:

Speech on the 100th Anniversary of the Death of LaFayette,
May 20, 1934

Tully Archive: Tully Papers

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Address of President Roosevelt at the Commemoration
Ceremony in honor of the One Hundredth Anniversary
of the
Death of Gilbert du Motier Marquis de La Fayette
At a Joint Session of Congress
May 20, 1934

Mr. President, Mr. Speaker, Mr. Ambassador, Members of the
Congress, Gentlemen of the Supreme Court, my friends:

A century ago President Andrew Jackson, in communicating the melancholy news of the death of LaFayette to the Congress of the United States, called it "afflicting intelligence." And so it was. It made more than one Nation mourn, none more than our own. The Marquis de LaFayette was referred to in a General Order to our Army and Navy as "the distinguished friend of the United States;" and the Congress, with rare felicity, added to this the phrase, "the friend of Washington, and the friend of liberty."

In this three-fold role of friendship we the people of this Nation have enshrined him in our hearts, and today we cherish his memory above that of any citizen of a foreign country. It is as one of our Nation's peerless heroes that we hail him, just as his beloved France enshrined him in the Pantheon of her immortal sons.

Many generations later, more than two million American boys, backed by the solidarity of a great Nation, went to France. Those soldiers and sailors were repaying the debt of gratitude we owe to LaFayette and at the same time they were seeking to preserve those fundamentals of liberty and democracy to which in a previous age he had dedicated his life.

There is no higher tribute we can pay to his memory than this we pay today. In communicating his death to the Nation, President Jackson ordered that "the same honors be rendered him as were observed

upon the decease of Washington." Jackson was moved by the tenderness of a personal friendship -- moved as he said, "by personal as by public considerations" to direct that every honor be paid "the last Major General of the Revolutionary Army."

We know the exquisite relationship which existed between Washington and LaFayette, and I am indeed pleased that the Ambassador of the French Republic has referred to this friendship. It was that of father and son. For the great Virginian the Frenchman had a veneration and love which approached homage. To him Washington was an ideal -- almost more than human.

With Andrew Jackson, the friendship bore perhaps a more personal and intimate cast, because the two were more of an age. Both were mere youngsters at the outbreak of the Revolutionary War. Jackson, a boy of ten in 1777, first saw LaFayette when he landed in Charleston and before he started northward to meet the Congress. The sight of the gallant young Frenchman was so deeply engraved in the heart of Andrew Jackson that half a century later it was as vivid as the day it was etched. Jackson himself, even in boyhood was to contribute his mite "to shake off the yoke of tyranny, and to build up the fabric of free government." And when LaFayette visited our shores again in 1824, Jackson wrote him a pean of welcome, in which he referred to the state of his "own youthful feelings" on the occasion of that first visit. His coming then, he said, "aroused every patriot from a state of despair to that of confidence in our bleeding cause, while the shout of victory or death was sung through the welkin. It inspired an enthusiasm becoming the people who had resolved to be free."

When they met here in Washington LaFayette said this to the Hero of New Orleans, "Had you witnessed my anxiety, when on a sudden all Europe was pacified, and the flower of the British Army were on their way to Louisiana, you would still better judge what I felt of relief, joy and pride on receiving the glorious account of your victory. I have long anticipated the pleasure to take you by the hand, and whatever be your future movements I will not leave the United States before I have sought

and found opportunity to express in person my high regard and sincere friendship."

This first meeting was as simple and genuine as their natures. Jackson had come to Washington for the session of the Congress, as Senator from Tennessee. He put up with his old friend, John Gadsby, at the Franklin House; and immediately learned that LaFayette was a guest in the same Inn. The Mayor of Washington had informed the President of the United States that "the friend of the people (LaFayette) must be the guest of the people, and could not stay at the White House."

It was a memorable Congress that year, the last to elect a President of the United States, and Andrew Jackson was in the thick of the storm. The two old soldiers saw much of each other during that long winter and as a member of the Senate Jackson took part in all the ceremonies held in honor of the French patriot.

It stands on the record of the day that "LaFayette was the only man who ever was, in his personal capacity, publicly received by the Senate of the United States." The record shows that they received him "as a brother, rather than a stranger, as one of a loving family, come from a distant shore, after a long and weary absence, to revisit the friends of his youth."

Senator Barbour of Virginia presented him. The President and the Senators rose from their seats, uncovered, and the General, advancing toward the Chair of the Senate, was invited to take a seat prepared for him on the right of the Chair. The Senate then was adjourned, the while the Senators flocked about their guest and gave him a warm-hearted welcome.

It was given to the House of Representatives to extend the welcome of the Nation. Exactly such an assembly as this now before me met in the Hall of Representatives, every branch of the Government fully in attendance. Henry Clay, the Speaker, in expressing what was in the hearts of the people, said, "The vain wish has sometimes been indulged that Providence would allow the patriot, after death, to return to his country, and to contemplate the immediate changes which had taken place." To LaFayette had come,

he said, "the realization of the consoling object of that wish."

"General, you are in the midst of posterity."

"No, Mr. Speaker," replied LaFayette, "posterity has not begun for me since, in the sons of my companions and friends, I find the same public feelings in my behalf which I have had the happiness to experience in their fathers."

I like to remember also the picture of the visit of General LaFayette to General Jackson at the Hermitage. When LaFayette landed at Nashville, the people stood far back and let Jackson go forward alone to greet him and to welcome him as his feet touched the shore.

At the official welcome of the State of Tennessee, a group of Revolutionary soldiers, some thirty or forty officers and men, stepped forward to greet the old patriot. He saluted each of them with animation and affection. Suddenly his eye fell on one whom he had known in France, who had come with him to America and had been at his side during the Revolution. This worn and wearied old soldier had ridden one hundred miles to see his old General, and when they met they fell into each other's arms, kissed each other as only Frenchmen can perform that act of devotion, and sobbed aloud.

The next day Jackson entertained him at the Hermitage. The people seemed to sense that history was being made and left them much to themselves. They talked about the French and American Revolutions, and much about Napoleon. Jackson took pride in showing him over the house he had built for his beloved wife. He produced a box of pistols, and opening it, asked LaFayette if he knew whose pistols they were. "Yes," said LaFayette, "they are the ones I gave to General Washington in 1778, and," he added, "I feel a real satisfaction in finding them in the hands of a man so worthy of such a heritage."

Today I have brought to show to the Congress of the United States another link between LaFayette and our country — a sword which has never yet been shown to the American people.

After the termination of the World War and the reoccupation of Alsace by the French, this sword was rediscovered. Its history is this:

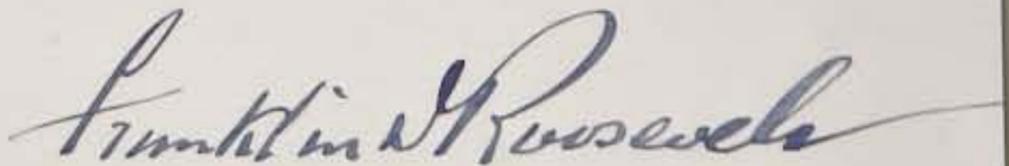
Shortly before the death of Washington his old companions in arms -- those gallant Frenchmen who had taken part in our War of the Revolution -- joined together and had this sword made by special order to be presented to their former Commander-in-Chief.

Before the presentation could be made, Washington died and 133 years later, through the fine courtesy and feeling of the present Government of France, the sword was brought to America by a distinguished descendant of General LaFayette and presented to the present President of the United States. This sword rests and will rest for all time below the portrait of President Washington in the White House.

I like to associate LaFayette and Jackson. LaFayette's last letter to Jackson was an appeal for help from the Congress for the family of a brave Frenchman who had served in our Revolutionary War. His last thoughts were of Congress and of Jackson. He instructed his son to send to Jackson, for transmittal to the Congress, "a copper plate on which was inscribed the first engraved copy of the American Declaration of Independence to be deposited in their Library as a last tribute of respect, patriotic love and affection for his adopted country."

It is a singular coincidence that Jackson's mind many years later turned to LaFayette in his last hours. When Jackson's will, signed with his palsied hand, was opened, it was found that he had bequeathed to George Washington LaFayette "the pistols of General LaFayette which were presented by him to General George Washington, and by Colonel William Robertson presented to me." These he desired sent to the son of his old friend, as his will declared, "as a memento of the illustrious personages through whose hands they have passed, his father, and the Father of his country."

Mr. Ambassador, I trust that you will inform our good friend, the President of the French Republic, the Government of France, and through them the people of France that on this Hundredth Anniversary of the death of Gilbert du Motier Marquis de LaFayette we, the representatives of the people of the United States, have assembled once more to do honor to the friend of America.



IMMEDIATE RELEASE

May 20, 1934

FOR THE PRESS

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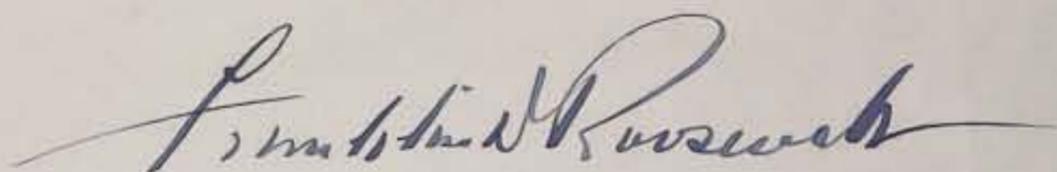
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A handwritten signature in cursive script, reading "Franklin D. Roosevelt". The signature is written in dark ink and is positioned in the lower right quadrant of the page.