INTRODUCTION

Fleeing into Captivity

A cold drizzle fell through the evening in Belgian Rochefort on 19 August 1792. Outside the town’s northwest gate, fifteen auxiliary Flemish troops under Austrian command stood guard, warming themselves over campfires.

The appearance of military routine on a peaceful evening was deceptive. For months the monarchs of Austria and Prussia had been assembling vast forces in the southern Netherlands and western Rhineland to invade France and end its Revolution. In the last hours, at no great distance from Rochefort, the Coalition’s main army had begun crossing the French frontier.¹

Sometime after 9:00 p.m., a mounted stranger in French uniform hailed the Rochefort sentries. He introduced himself as Jean de Bureaux-Pusy, recently captain of engineers in France’s Northern Army. Pusy was seeking safe passage to Holland as a noncombatant refugee. A corporal led him to the guards’ commander, Captain Count Philippe d’Harnoncourt. Pusy explained that the recent radical Jacobin coup in Paris had forced him to leave his homeland. He requested rights of transit, which other people had received in similar circumstances. Harnoncourt assured him that would be no problem. Pusy then revealed that he was not alone, that several other former officers were waiting some distance behind him. Harnoncourt extended his offer of safe passage to the entire group. Pusy returned to his companions, and around 10:00 p.m. their contingent of more than forty men rode into town.² They found armed soldiers lining both sides of the town’s single street, as it ascended steeply under a massive castle.³ Harnoncourt lodged the visitors in the Pelican Inn (Auberge du Pélican) near the southeast gate.⁴

The group’s leader was the recent commander of the Northern Army, General Lafayette. His appearance was so widely known that someone recognized him
Lafayette as commander. Engraving based on an October 1790 pastel portrait by Jean Baptist Weyler. Marquis de Lafayette Prints Collection, Special Collections and College Archives, Skillman Library, Lafayette College
shortly after he passed through the city gate. Warned of this fact and knowing that he could only gain by candor, Lafayette ordered Pusy to inform Harnoncourt of his presence.\(^5\)

Harnoncourt reconsidered. His superiors might deem Lafayette’s custody strategically necessary. He posted guards, had the Frenchmen searched, and collected arms and names. The men could not proceed, he said, without a passport from the regional commandant, Major General Johann von Moitelle, in nearby Namur.\(^6\) The travelers protested that Harnoncourt had violated his word of honor. Lafayette’s aide and friend, the volatile César de Latour-Maubourg, shouted that the Austrian captain was a scoundrel deserving a sound caning, which Maubourg would have been glad to administer.\(^7\) The men vainly composed and signed a declaration that, having renounced military status, they were no longer combatants and that they sought transit to a country at peace with their own, which they considered to be a universal human right.\(^8\)

News of Lafayette’s capture spread quickly among Coalition forces. That same evening Harnoncourt sent reports to Moitelle as well as to the cogovernor and commander of defense forces in the Austrian Netherlands (Belgium and Luxembourg), Field Marshal Duke Albert of Saxe-Teschen, in Mons. Early the following day, Harnoncourt sent Pusy with the courier to Moitelle, allegedly for the passport. On reading Harnoncourt’s words and before Pusy could explain his errand, Moitelle began shouting in glee, “Lafayette! Lafayette!” Amid further invocations of the famous name, Moitelle ordered the news sent to Teschen, the French émigré princes, and all the Austrian generals he could think of. Meanwhile Harnoncourt was writing to the commander of Austrian invasion forces, General Count Carl von Clerfayt, who was linking up with Prussian forces at Longwy in the southeast, and General Prince Louis de Bourbon, commander of French émigré troops at Brussels. From Brussels, Count Franz von Metternich, chief minister of the Austrian Netherlands, notified Vienna and asked for instructions. King Frederick William II of Prussia received word in the field at Longwy. The French king’s brothers, Counts Louis de Provence and Charles d’Artois, learned of the arrest at their headquarters in Stadtbredimus, near Luxembourg. Teschen issued a war bulletin on 22 August, and a French royalist published a Brussels pamphlet to celebrate the capture.\(^9\)

In Paris the Jacobins heard what they wanted to hear, interpreting the news to mean that Lafayette had abandoned France to join enemy forces. In the National Assembly, a deputy proclaimed: “Lafayette has just escaped the law, but he cannot escape the hatred of the nation and the horror of posterity.” Another proposed razing Lafayette’s house and erecting a pillar on the spot to commemorate his crime. The Paris newspaper *Moniteur* quoted an officer in the Northern Army as saying, “Finally Lafayette has unmasked himself; the traitor has abandoned us after having taken along with him all this mess of aides-de-camp, adjutants, gathered
from the streets of Paris. His last maneuver is the height of villainy.” Minister of Justice Georges Jacques Danton denounced Lafayette before the Jacobin Club as “this vile eunuch of the Revolution.” Mobs destroyed the bust of Lafayette in the Paris town hall; the hangman broke the die of a Lafayette medallion; and authorities seized his property.


Few of Lafayette’s contemporaries had such fame. Still known often as the Marquis de La Fayette, he had adopted a simpler, humbler surname, “Lafayette,” when the French National Assembly had abolished the aristocracy two years before. The only title he used thereafter was one he had earned through his own efforts: “general.” Some enemies saw him as a chief rebel, if not the chief of all rebels, against divinely ordained authority. Others saw him as a conspiratorial monarchist. To admirers he was an apostle of liberty, the “Hero of Two Worlds.”

Lafayette had helped to lead America’s struggle for independence from Great Britain. As a nineteen-year-old captain and one of the richest men in France, he bought his own ship to cross the Atlantic and join American forces in 1777. Desperate for foreign aid, the Continental Congress appointed him a major general. He spent a sizeable portion of his fortune to equip troops and subsidize the American cause in its darkest hour. He was wounded at Brandywine in September 1777, endured the cold winter at Valley Forge, and fought alongside George Washington at Monmouth in June 1778. He successfully lobbied the French court for funds, arms, and troops. He helped trap British forces under General Charles Earl Cornwallis in Virginia, which brought about their decisive surrender at Yorktown in 1781 and ended the American Revolution. After this time Lafayette “could call every important American figure a friend.”

Europe provided a new stage for Lafayette. He inspired and encouraged the Dutch patriots who opposed an autocratic prince of Orange in 1783–87. He assisted the Belgian Brabant Revolution of 1789–90, which arose when the Austrian emperor abrogated a charter of rights. Lafayette helped to lead the early phases of the French Revolution. He proposed a national assembly, helped to draft the Declaration of the Rights of Man, and devised the red-white-blue cockade. As commander of the French National Guard, he provided security during demolition of the notorious Bastille, and sent Washington a key to the main prison door. In 1791 he campaigned in the so-called Constituent Assembly to write a French constitution.
But in Europe, Lafayette did not have the same good fortune that he had enjoyed in America. The Prussian army suppressed the Dutch patriot movement, and Austrian troops put down the Brabant Revolution. In France, Lafayette’s role as a unifying figure dissolved in 1791–92. Conservative Royalists saw him as appeasing those who would destroy political legitimacy and shred the social fabric. Radical Jacobins despised him for supporting a constitutional monarchy and cultivating a base of personal power; they attacked him with ever greater vituperation than did the Royalists.

The French constitutional order collapsed in summer 1792. The Austrian emperor and the Prussian king planned to invade, allegedly to rescue the royal family but with confidential plans to acquire territory. Lafayette rushed to prepare his troops along France’s northeast frontier. Jacobins took advantage of the hysteria aroused by the prospect of invasion to attack the constitution and its supporters, bringing Lafayette to believe that they were conspiring with the foreign enemy. Lafayette returned briefly to the capital to denounce the Jacobins before the National Assembly. When they tried to indict Lafayette for dereliction of duty, two thirds of the Assembly voted to vindicate him. But only two days later, on 10 August, the Jacobins organized a successful coup. A mob stormed the royal palace of the Tuileries and slaughtered its defenders. The new regime arrested Louis XVI and stripped him of his functions, ended the constitution, and continued massacring suspected opponents.

An officer who had escaped the Tuileries rushed the news to Sedan. On 12 August, Lafayette wrote Minister of War Charles d’Abancourt for details, but the insurgents had already deposed Abancourt and soon murdered him.

Lafayette did not intend to obey the usurpers holding Assembly and king hostage, “armed brigands” at whose hands he could expect only death. He issued a bulletin calling on all to rally around the constitution; if necessary, to die defending it. He wrote Sedan’s council to warn of commissioners approaching from a National Assembly composed of insurgents and to call for “all measures that can support resistance to oppression, the prime duty of all free souls.” On the afternoon of 14 August, the commissioners appeared at Sedan, equipped with power to dismiss and replace Lafayette and his fellow officers. But with Lafayette’s support, the city council arrested the emissaries on grounds that they lacked constitutional authority. Lafayette tried to organize resistance among other regional authorities. He wrote officials of the Department of the Ardennes that in face of “the recent events that have soiled the capital,” he held fast to his constitutional duties. He summoned troops to join Sedan officials in affirming loyalty to the constitution and resisting the usurpers. He packed a cart and covered wagon at his headquarters villa and prepared to march.

As news of Lafayette’s defiance reached the Assembly, Jacobin deputies derided him as “an enemy of the people,” “a rebel,” “a traitor to the country,” and “the most
infamous of conspirators.” They called for his head to avenge patriots who fell in
taking the Tuileries palace. On 17 August 1792 the new Provisional Executive Coun-
cil relieved Lafayette of command and summoned him to explain his conduct. A
mob pillaged his townhouse.\textsuperscript{18}

That Lafayette was in mortal danger later became even clearer. Less than two
years after his flight, on the Parisian Place de la R\'evolution, authorities executed
twenty-seven members of the Sedan council and twelve administrators of the
Ardennes Department for alleged complicity in Lafayette’s treason.\textsuperscript{19}

In the week after 10 August 1792, Lafayette realized that rebels had undermined
his authority, that opposition was hopeless, and that he was facing certain arrest
and execution by the new regime. On 18 August he invited some aides, particularly
those in mortal danger, to escape with him to the Dutch Republic. “Come with me
tomorrow, my dear Pusy, in the whirligig I have to ride,” he wrote one of them.
“Leave Sedan for Bouillon, where you’ll have to be before noon. Have a good
horse.”\textsuperscript{20} He hoped to claim diplomatic protection from U.S. envoy Short at The
Hague and to find refuge in Rotterdam with his close friend Pieter Paulus, minis-
ter of the Dutch province of Maas (Meuse). Ultimately Lafayette hoped to retire to
England, gather his family, and possibly sail to America.\textsuperscript{21}

Lafayette rode out of Sedan early the next morning with aides, servants, and
a hussar escort. Among the company was Lafayette’s companion and childhood
friend, Brigadier General C\’esar de Latour-Maubourg. Lafayette pretended that
they were going to inspect the front beyond Bouillon, capital of a small, sovereign
border duchy under French military protection. He abandoned most possessions,
including new military equipment and much of his salary, to give the appearance
that his departure was routine and temporary. Still he carried along a handsome
sum of some twenty thousand francs.\textsuperscript{22}

That day, the National Assembly ordered Lafayette’s arrest and prohibited
the army from recognizing his authority.\textsuperscript{23} Coalition forces also began to invade
France, the largest thrust coming from Luxembourg.\textsuperscript{24}

Lafayette’s party rode into Bouillon toward noon. Four other officers met them
at an inn, including Captain Jean de Bureaux-Pusy and Brigadier General Alexander
de Lameth. Lameth had outridden two pursuers armed with an arrest order.
Lafayette sent back his escort with orders for final troop dispositions and with a
note to Sedan’s mayor and council, announcing his departure, absolving them of
responsibility, and declaring his refusal ever to “bow under any despotism.”\textsuperscript{25}

Around 3:00 P.M. the Frenchmen left Bouillon, crossed its bridge over the
Semois, turned north, and ascended into heavily forested hills. They entered the
neutral prince-bishopric of Li\‘ege, pursuing a route to Maastricht, the southern-
most town of the Dutch Republic.\textsuperscript{26} Other officers tried to join Lafayette. When
former French Assembly deputy Colonel Jean d’Averhoult could not escape his
pursuers, he shot and killed himself.\textsuperscript{27} Brigadier General Nicolas Duroure and five
aides were more fortunate. They learned of Lafayette’s route and tracked him
down, which increased the group to twenty-one officers, twenty-three servants,
and fifty-nine horses.28

Lafayette’s officers had a diverse history. Three, like him, had served in the
American War of Independence: Brigadier Generals Lameth and Jean de Laumoy,
and Captain Louis de La Colombe.29 Three—Maubourg, Pusy, and Lameth—had
served in the Constituent Assembly during the early phases of the French Revolu-
tion. Maubourg and Pusy were Lafayette’s close political allies, and coming events
only deepened their friendship. Lameth, on the other hand, had opposed Lafayette
from the left in the Constituent Assembly. Though Lameth eventually broke with
the Jacobins, Lafayette mistrusted him and never forgave his earlier opposition.30

The company rode in rain and cold through thick, hilly woods broken occa-
sionally by fields. They spotted riders whom they took to be French émigrés hos-
tile to the Revolution and did not hail them. Though their map was the best
available, their bearings became uncertain. Lafayette ordered his men to stop
threatening a peasant who refused to serve as their guide.31

As darkness fell and the horses showed signs of exhaustion, the company
captured sight of the campfires outside Rochefort, still on the allegedly neutral ter-
ritory of Liège. Lafayette sent Pusy, a German speaker, to reconnoiter and negoti-
tiate their safe passage. What awaited them was what Lafayette later called “the
imperial & royal fangs.”32

Thus Lafayette fled the Revolution for his life, only to fall captive to the Revo-
lution’s enemies. For the next five years, these enemies led him across western and
central Europe from Rochefort to Namur, Nivelles, and Arlon in present-day Bel-
gium; Luxembourg in the present-day Duchy of Luxembourg; Trier, Koblenz,
Wesel, and Magdeburg in Germany; Neisse (Nysa) in present-day Poland; and
Olmütz (Olomouc) in today’s Czech Republic.33
Lafayette’s supporters never forgot him or allowed him to be forgotten. They formed networks of assistance stretching from Philadelphia to Hamburg, London to Vienna, Paris to Milan, and Basel to Dresden. They maintained communication with him, sent him money, petitioned political authorities, plotted breakouts, and aroused public opinion. In the course of these five years, Lafayette became the world’s most famous political prisoner. Partisans eventually managed to move a more moderate French Republic to make his release a condition of European peace.