The Battle of Germantown
and the Franco-American Alliance
of 1778

Historians have long considered the Battle of Saratoga the decisive battle in the evolution of the Franco-American alliance of 1778. While this interpretation is by no means false, in any complete narrative of the events leading up to the alliance the battle must be placed in the historical and psychological context in which the French diplomatists saw it. Such a narrative would give full credit to the influence of the reports of the Battle of Germantown fought less than two weeks before Burgoyne’s army laid down its arms. Only when the surrender of Burgoyne is thus considered can one appreciate the impact that the Saratoga affair carried.

To the French diplomats observing the American Revolutionary War from across the Atlantic, the month of October, 1777, appeared to be a critical one for the American cause. The British were engaged in a large-scale, two-pronged operation to cut the heart out of the American resistance. Howe was moving to engage Washington near Philadelphia, and Burgoyne was marching south from Canada to meet Clinton’s column moving northeastward. The Revolution approached a point of crisis. “I will neglect nothing, Monsieur le Comte,” the Viscount de Noailles, French Ambassador to London, assured Vergennes, “in order to be in a condition here next Friday to render you a more detailed account of these different objects. . . .”

The following Friday Noailles kept his promise by writing more to the French Minister of Foreign Affairs about the military situation in America. In England, he said, everyone was in a state of uncertainty about what had become of General Howe. On the other hand,

it was generally believed that Burgoyne had passed Albany in his advance. Noailles added that he had "spared no pains or cares" to find out for certain what appeared to him to be doubtful; he could not believe that Burgoyne had arrived at Albany so quickly. The British general had been reported at Skenesboro, New York, on July 11, and even if he had met with no resistance, physical difficulties made such a fast descent difficult, if not impossible. Nevertheless, British opinion held that on August 28 Burgoyne had not only reached Albany, but had passed it. Moreover, it was believed that Clinton was departing by the North (Hudson) River on his secret expedition to join Burgoyne. Noailles thought that if Burgoyne had actually reached Albany he would surely winter there.2

The retreat of the Americans before the British advance had the appearance of a flight. The "insurgents" seemed to have been "struck by terror" at the advance of the royal troops. Worse still, the militia, the military institution on which most Europeans placed their hopes for American success, was said to have refused to join the army. For this reason the Americans were too weak to dispute Burgoyne's advance. Refusing to doubt the patriotism of these citizen soldiers, Noailles observed that "It appears that this defection of the militia is more the effect of indiscipline than of a discouragement which would be fatal to the American cause." Nevertheless, the insurgents were failing in their attempts to stop Burgoyne.3 The decision relative to Vergennes' late summer plan to intervene in the Anglo-American affair had to wait.

In his reply to Noailles' dispatch, Vergennes could paint no brighter picture of what was happening farther south in America. He reported that Howe had taken a position between Baltimore and Newcastle and threatened to divide the colonies in two. It was impossible to tell whether the British were going to force a battle. Such a move seemed to depend, Vergennes continued, on whether General Washington intended to fight to protect his supplies.4

For a time thereafter only rumors and contradictory reports reached the French Foreign Office. Lord Stormont, the British Ambassador to France, reported to Vergennes that Burgoyne was

2 Noailles to Vergennes, Oct. 10, 1777, ibid., f. 81.
3 Ibid., f. 86.
4 Vergennes to Noailles, Oct. 18, 1777, ibid., ff. 129-130.
master of Albany and had been joined by Clinton. The American general Philip Schuyler had suffered a crushing defeat and had surrendered with 1,500 men. The British general Barry St. Leger was master of the Mohawk River up to the Hudson. Farther south the Americans were also in serious trouble, for Howe had advanced up the Susquehanna River and debarked in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania. Vergennes, in his report of this news to Noailles, called it "pure babbling" by the British. But to a man whose foreign policy depended so heavily on the success of American arms, this "pure babbling" must have caused some anxieties.\(^5\)

While waiting for more reliable news, Noailles and Vergennes speculated on the seriousness of the events developing across the Atlantic. The distress of Washington, Noailles pointed out, would be extreme if Burgoyne managed to surmount the many obstacles in his path. Washington's communications with the south were already presumably cut by Howe, and his communications with the northern forces would be severed if Burgoyne met Clinton.\(^6\)

November brought no clarification of the confusing reports. Indeed, rumors became even more widespread and contradictory. Noailles reported to his chief that the English were celebrating the defeat of Washington, the taking of Philadelphia, and continued successes of Burgoyne. But official sources, Noailles added, gave no cause for such exhibitions of joy. Even Howe had admitted, Noailles wrote, perhaps to bolster sagging enthusiasm for the American cause, that the taking of Philadelphia would decide nothing in favor of England if the army of Washington remained intact. Burgoyne was rumored to have had minor successes against the Americans, and was reported to have been at Saratoga on August 20.\(^7\) A letter from Lisbon, Portugal, dated November 4, reported that Howe had been beaten by Washington.\(^8\) Later, Vergennes wrote to Noailles that he had heard that Washington had been defeated and Philadelphia taken.\(^9\) When Noailles tried to obtain more certain information from

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\(^{5}\) Noailles to Vergennes, Oct. 25, 1777, \textit{ibid.}, ff. 194-195.

\(^{6}\) \textit{Ibid.}, ff. 182-189.

\(^{7}\) Noailles to Vergennes, Nov. 4, 1777, \textit{ibid.}, ff. 276-284.

\(^{8}\) \textit{Ibid.}, f. 285.

\(^{9}\) Henri Doniol, \textit{Histoire de la participation de la France à l'établissement des États-Unis d'Amérique} (Paris, 1886-1890), II, 620.
Lord Weymouth, the British Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, Weymouth only repeated rumors favoring the British. Furthermore, Weymouth said these rumors "merited some belief because they had come from New York." By November 21 Vergennes was speculating on the consequences that would follow if Howe actually had defeated Washington. Finding himself in this confusion, Vergennes ordered his commercial agent, John Holker, then going to America, to find out just "what was the situation and position of the English armies," their strength and resources, as well as the number of regulars and militia troops fighting for the insurgents and their attitude toward their leaders. The news of the battles of Germantown and Saratoga arrived in France at this psychological moment.

The report of the successes of the American army was brought to the American agents in France by Jonathan Loring Austin, the secretary of the Board of War of Massachusetts. An analysis of the contents of Austin's report and of other reports based on this set of documents demonstrates that it was not the success at Saratoga alone which finally led to Louis XVI's decision to support the American cause openly. The correspondence the Massachusetts Council sent to Benjamin Franklin, Silas Deane, and Arthur Lee, translated copies of which were turned over to Vergennes, contained not only the news of Burgoyne's surrender, but also information, some of it in a letter from General Washington, concerning the position and condition of Washington's forces after Germantown.

In the Northern Department, the dispatch said, Major General Gates had surrounded the enemy, had taken their provision boats, and cut them off from their line of retreat. Burgoyne had the choice of escaping by forcing his way through the American troops, or surrendering. "It seems he chose the latter." This victory helped "inspirit" the American troops throughout the continent and intimidated and dispirited the enemy. The Northern Department would soon be secured for the American cause, predicted the Americans, because General Gates was forwarding troops to retake

Ticonderoga and forts Montgomery and Independence. The Massachusetts Council had little doubt that these positions would soon be in American hands.\textsuperscript{14}

The report of the Saratoga victory, however, did not constitute all the news. The information concerning Washington's movements indicated that there was no occasion for British rejoicing over Washington's defeat at Germantown. That battle, reported the Massachusetts's Council, was a near victory for Washington. He would have soundly beaten the British if the smoke and fog had not created disorder among the American troops. This interpretation of the battle was oversimplified, of course. There were other factors which led to Washington's retreat, such as the lack of ammunition among the forces of General John Sullivan, the disobedience of orders on the part of Major General Adam Stephen, and the lack of coordination so characteristic of this citizen army even when there was no smoke or fog.\textsuperscript{15} But the Americans were in "High Spirits" even though victory had escaped them after being so nearly within their grasp. The Massachusetts Council was in hopes that they would soon hear that Howe's army was cut off from retreat and would find itself in the same predicament as Burgoyne's before his surrender.\textsuperscript{16}

The Northern Department, then, was securely under the control of the American forces; in the central theater of war, Washington's army, far from being destroyed or beaten as had been rumored, was intact, was in high spirits, and had succeeded in placing Howe in danger of having his own line of retreat and supply cut off.

The letter in which Franklin, Deane, and Lee forwarded the news to Vergennes repeated this optimistic forecast of the military situation.\textsuperscript{17} Beaumarchais, who in his haste to report the news to Vergennes nearly broke his neck when his carriage overturned, emphasized the favorable position which Washington had achieved as a result of the engagement at Germantown. After describing in his vigorous style the success of Gates at Saratoga and predicting the early recapture of Ticonderoga, the famous author of the Marriage

\textsuperscript{14} An English translation of the dispatch appears in E. E. Hale, \textit{Franklin in France} (Boston, 1887), 159 ff.


\textsuperscript{17} AAE-cp-États-Unis, Vol. 2, f. 279.
of Figaro launched into a discussion of Washington's position. The American general, he assured Vergennes, had permitted Howe to enter Philadelphia without any opposition and then had set about to encircle him there. In order to avoid such an encirclement Howe had to leave the city, and on October 6—the battle actually took place on October 4—there had been a general engagement between the two armies at Germantown. The English, according to Beaumarchais, lost about nine hundred men, including three generals, while the American losses were only half that number. A storm, Beaumarchais continued, had forced the two armies to separate before either side gained a decisive advantage. Howe then re-entered Philadelphia, and Washington cut him off from exterior communications.\(^\text{18}\)

This latter aspect of the campaign in Pennsylvania was further developed in a letter sent to Ferdinand Grand, a broker in Paris who acted as one of the intermediaries between the American commissioners and Vergennes. This letter, dated from London on December 5, was passed on to Vergennes. The English Ministry and public were of the opinion, according to this correspondent, "that while the Americans maintained such a powerful army in the field as that under General Washington, it was idle to suppose they would listen to any terms which the [British] Commissioners might offer them." Furthermore, the attack upon British troops at Germantown was "allowed by all Howe's officers to have been secretly and ably conducted, and that if General Gray had not seasonably arrived, and with a large reinforcement supported Sir William Howe, he would have been defeated." It was also admitted, the letter continued, "that the Americans had made an excellent retreat from Germantown. . . ."\(^\text{19}\)

The French ambassador at London saw the significance of the Battle of Germantown.\(^\text{20}\) According to the news Vergennes received from Noailles on December 7, the English stationed on the Elk River had abandoned this point of communication with their navy in order to make themselves masters of Philadelphia. The American

\(^{18}\) AAE-cp-Angleterre, Vol. 526, ff. 142-144.

\(^{19}\) James Lowry to M. St. Pierre, chez M. Grand, AAE-cp-États-Unis, Vol. 2, ff. 283-286. It is impossible to say definitely who M. St. Pierre was. The name might have been another alias of Dr. Bancroft, the British spy and confidant of Silas Deane.

army had disputed the terrain every step of the way. There had been a general action at Brandywine, and the American army, reported at a strength of 15,000 troops, had retired in good order. There was no indication in the dispatch that Noailles knew how close Washington came to utter defeat at Brandywine. Nor did Noailles question the number of American troops reported engaged. Actually the British had the 15,000 troops; the American forces did not exceed 11,000.

After reporting the action at Brandywine, Noailles discussed the "second general engagement" at Germantown which had begun entirely to the advantage of the insurgents and had been more bloody than the first. The victory had been disputed for a long time, with the advantage going first to one side, then to the other. Finally, without losing a single cannon, Washington returned to camp. Noailles generalized, "the American army intact, experienced, no longer fearing to attack, or defend itself, camped 16 miles from the English army, and able to receive all sorts of aid in provision and men, while General Howe has not yet been able to arrive at establishing a free communication with his navy which must, nevertheless, be his only resource for subsisting in a position where he will soon be encircled on all sides." To add final proof that the British recognized the gravity of the situation in America, Noailles noted that there had been a sharp drop on the British stock market. He apparently considered this a sure sign of uneasiness in the nation of "shopkeepers." Five days later, Noailles redrew his sketch of the situation in America, and suggested that the time was right for the King of France to make certain decisions concerning the American war.

It is no wonder, given the information that he had, that Vergennes was enthusiastic about an alliance with the Americans. In November it had appeared that a two-pronged British attack was threatening the very existence of the American armies in the north and middle colonies by endangering the lines of communication

between these armies. Vergennes was forced to suspend plans for intervention. But in December it appeared that one of the prongs of the British offensive had been completely smashed at Saratoga, and the other—that led by General Howe—was in danger of being bottled up in Philadelphia by Washington's forces, which, contrary to earlier rumors, were very much intact and capable of meeting the British in general engagements. The Battle of Germantown had demonstrated this to the French. Vergennes was so encouraged by this state of affairs that he saw hope of Howe's being forced to submit to the same conditions as Burgoyne. "This event seems very possible," he wrote. He confessed, however, that he would not see it happen without anxiety. Should Howe surrender, France would earn all the disfavor of England, but would gain little favor from the Americans since she had contributed so feebly to the establishment of their independence.  

The possibility of an early defeat of Howe seemed likely to Vergennes because of his own ideas about the efficacy of the American militia. These troops were "everywhere," he stated in a letter to Noailles, and he judged that the "adventure of Burgoyne" would be a great encouragement to the "partisans of liberty." The Americans had, it was true, lost Philadelphia, but they had taken an army, and news from America indicated to Vergennes, at least, that the English were on the verge of losing a second one. In fact, if the British navy did not soon succeed in establishing communications with Philadelphia, Vergennes predicted that Howe would find himself in a spot from which he would not easily free himself. "All this," he concluded, "seems to bring us closer to the moment of crisis which I have always foreseen."  

On the day these words were written, Louis XVI approved Vergennes' recommendation that the American commissioners be received publicly by the French government. Circumstances seemed more favorable than they ever had for the establishment "of a closer understanding between the Crown and the United Provinces of North America."  

Meanwhile, Washington's army was settling down at Valley Forge for the winter. Half of his troops were without proper clothing,

26 Ibid., f. 183.
most of them without blankets, and a quarter of them wholly unfit for duty because of lack of supplies. The fact that during this winter at Valley Forge Washington's army dwindled to but 3,760 men fit for active service would indeed have caused some hesitations in the French Foreign Ministry if it had been known. The American army, contrary to the French estimates of it, was disorganized and demoralized. Even the Battle of Germantown itself was partly responsible for this state of affairs. The army of George Washington had actually suffered twice the number of losses in casualties and prisoners as the British, and although the British later decided to evacuate Philadelphia, it was not from excessive fear of encirclement by the feeble American forces. At any moment during the winter of 1777–1778, General Howe could have descended upon the meager, unsheltered forces at Valley Forge and destroyed what was called Washington's "army."

Fortunately for the American cause, French estimates of the American forces did not include these disturbing truths. Both Saratoga and Germantown seemed to verify all the exaggerated accounts of American military capacity. Between the time of the news of these two important battles and the actual signing of the Franco-American alliance on February 6, 1778, Vergennes received no information to destroy his favorable opinion of the military potential of his future allies. Although the hoped-for possibility that Washington would be able to bottle up Howe in Philadelphia did not materialize because Howe succeeded in establishing communications with his navy by taking Mud and Redbank islands in the Delaware,27 when the American army finished its campaign for the year, its position at Valley Forge appeared to the French to be formidable. The reports of its action at Germantown seemed to demonstrate this strength. A close study of the documents brings one to the same conclusion John Adams reached when writing to a member of the Continental Congress about the battles of Saratoga and Germantown: "General Gates was the ablest negotiator you had in Europe; and next to him General Washington's attack on the enemy at Germantown. I do not know, indeed, whether this last affair had not more influence upon the European mind than that of Saratoga. Al-

though the attempt was unsuccessful, the military gentlemen in Europe considered it as the most decisive proof that America would finally succeed.”

The Battle of Germantown thus played an important role in the making of the Franco-American alliance of 1778. The battle demonstrated to the French that the British attempt to crush American resistance during the campaign of 1777 had failed in both the northern and central theaters of the war. Also, the Battle of Germantown, as it was reported in France, reinforced French opinion of Washington's military genius and seemed to add proof to the estimates of American strength which were more than slightly exaggerated. Finally, according to Noailles' interpretation of the battle, the Americans had shown that their army was very much intact, was experienced, and not afraid to attack the British in force. It is no wonder that the hard-headed Vergennes was willing to make an alliance with the Americans. He saw their army as a substantial addition to the forces he hoped to use against Britain, France's traditional enemy.

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