



Treaty of Alliance with France, signed 6 Feb. 1778, page one (detail)

BENJAMIN FRANKLIN & THE AMERICAN COMMISSIONERS

ON THE

Treaties of Alliance & Trade with France

FEBRUARY 1788, Selections

Defining the “turning point” of a war is a valuable exercise in military reasoning if one acknowledges that, in truth, there may be no single event that turned everything on its head. Identifying a transition period, however, yields more insight to the trajectory of a war. For the American Revolution, this period centered on the successful conclusion of an alliance between France and the United States in February 1778, news of which sent Britain into a tailspin of alarmed response.

- October 17, 1777 British army surrenders after the decisive American victory at Saratoga, New York, prompting France to view the ongoing alliance negotiations with the U.S. more seriously.
- February 6, 1778 U.S. and France sign treaties of alliance and trade in Paris, alarming Britain which feared an altered balance of power in Europe and the prospect of another European war.
- March 16, 1778 Britain decides to offer a peace & reconciliation proposal to the U.S., but the proposal does not offer U.S. independence, only autonomy within the empire.
- March 17, 1778 Britain declares war against France.
- April 22, 1778 U.S. rejects Britain’s reconciliation proposal. The next day John Paul Jones leads the only U.S. naval attack on British shores during the Revolution, raiding the port of Whitehaven, England.

The American diplomats who negotiated the treaty in France—Benjamin Franklin, Silas Deane, and Arthur Lee—triumphantly predicted the surge in military strength, national morale—and British anxiety—that would result from their momentous achievement.

■ 16 FEB. 1778. American Commissioners, Paris, to the U.S. (Congressional) Committee for Foreign Affairs.

Gentlemen,

We have now the Pleasure of sending you the Treaties of Amity and Alliance with France completed after long Deliberation and signed the 6th. Instant [of this month]. This is an Event that will give our States such an Appearance of Stability as must strengthen our Credit, encourage other Powers in Europe to ally themselves with us, weaken the Hopes of our internal as well as external Enemies, fortify our Friends, and be in many other Respects so advantageous to us that we congratulate you upon it most heartily; And we flatter ourselves that the Congress will approve of the Terms and dispatch the Ratifications as soon as possible. . . .¹

By our late Advices [news] from England, the Ministers² begin to be alarmed for their Country and perhaps for themselves. Some of their Emissaries have been here to sound us [out] and endeavor to get from some of us Propositions on which to found a Treaty, which we evaded giving as not being

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¹ The Continental Congress ratified the treaties on May 4, 1778.

² The British cabinet, including the Prime Minister (not referring to clergymen).

empower'd to make any . . . Many of the Speakers in Parliament of both Houses seem to look upon a French War at this Juncture (when so much of their Force is abroad [overseas] and their public Credit so shaken) as immediate Ruin. And we are assured by the last Post [mail delivery] from good Authority that even Lord Mansfield, who in the beginning of this Business was so valiant, spoke lately in private to Lord Camden of the absolute Necessity of an immediate Coalition of Parties³ to prevent the great impending Danger to the Nation from an Alliance between the House of Bourbon [France] and the Americans, which he said he had good Information was on the Point of being concluded. We have the honor to be, with the highest Esteem, Gentlemen, Your most obedient humble Servants

B Franklin S Deane Arthur Lee

■ 27 FEB. 1778. Benjamin Franklin, Paris, to Rev. Samuel Cooper, Congregational minister, Boston.

My dear Friend,

At length our Treaties of Commerce and Alliance with France are Completed, and signed. They go over to Congress by this Conveyance [ship]. Their great Principle declared in the Preamble is perfect Equality and Reciprocity of Conditions, the advantages mutual, Commerce free, &c. [etc.] France guarantees the Independence, Sovereignty, and Liberty, with all the possessions of the United States; and they guarantee to the most Christian King⁴ his possessions in the West Indies. No monopoly of our Trade was desired; it is left open to all we choose to trade with. In short, the King has acted a noble and magnanimous part as well as a wise one, for it is undoubtedly the interest of France that this Treaty should be durable, which was not so likely if advantage had been taken of our present difficulties to exact hard terms. We are moreover liberally assisted here, and several Ships laden with supplies for our Armies have just sailed under the Convoy of a strong French Squadron, the King being determined to protect the trade of his subjects with us.

A war upon this [between France and Britain] is thought inevitable. The Treaties are not yet publicly known, but their probable Existence soon is talked of, and the English Minister, to defeat if possible this expected Union and recover the dependence of the Colonies, has brought in two Bills which he calls Conciliating,⁵ but which are a composition of artifice and uncertainty. *The Right*, as they are pleased to call it, of laying taxes on us, is still claimed. The Parliament only declares that in consideration of some inconveniences found in the exercise of it, they intend not to exercise it hereafter except for regulation of Trade; but the next Parliament may find this declaration inconvenient and repeal it, and resume the exercise of *their Right*. Commissioners are appointed to treat with any Body of men in America on *the means of quieting the disorders there*, but can do nothing definitive except granting pardons, declaring and revoking cessations of Arms, declaring a suspension of the restraining act, and revoking that declaration. I hope no American will be mean [low] enough to accept their pardons, and I am sure we shall not be so weak as to disband or disarm in the smallest degree on the faith of their declaring a cessation of Arms [end of warfare]. Believe me, the Malice of the British Court is as great against us as ever. But they are at present in a great consternation, unable to go on, ashamed to give up, and fearing a war with France and Spain which they see must ruin them. If they can divide and weaken us, or deceive us into submission, they will punish us at their leisure. The Maxim is that a Sovereign, to appease a revolt, may make promises, it being for the good of the State that the Revolters should be brought back to their obedience; but as the same good of the State requires that they should be kept in obedience and deterred from further revolts, it is the duty of the Sovereign to break these promises and punish severely the Revolters.

It is impossible to give you a conception of the Universal good will to us and our Cause throughout Europe: All Nations wish the humiliation of England and are ready to concur in it as soon

³ I.e., an influential member of Parliament, Lord Camden, urged cooperation among the parliamentary factions to address the crisis presented by the Franco-American alliance.

⁴ Louis XVI, king of France.

⁵ See timeline, p. 1.

as they dare. By returning under their government, we should have them and all Europe against us — we are now with all Europe against them: There is no hesitating a moment which to choose of these two situations. . . .

The Universal cordiality and hospitality with which Americans are received here is extremely pleasing. I hope the French meet with the same in America. Every means should be used to cultivate this new friendship and wear off ancient prejudices. I find our common people and Sailors are mighty ready to resume them here on any apparent restraints or hardships under this government. . . .

The Treaties you will see published soon, and I flatter myself they will give universal satisfaction. France has this year renewed the fifty years' alliance with the *Thirteen United States* of Switzerland, an Alliance which she has kept faithfully for 200 years — a good Omen for us. It is understood that Spain is soon to accede to our Alliance with France. These Events as soon as known must give us an appearance of stability, which will contribute much to supporting and extending our credit here in Europe while that of Britain is sinking. Adieu my dear Friend

B Franklin

■ 28 FEB. 1778. American Commissioners, Paris, to the U.S. (Congressional) Committee for Foreign Affairs.

Gentlemen, . . .

The English Parliament adjourn'd in December for six Weeks. During that time their Ministers strain'd every Nerve to raise Men for their Armies, intending to continue the War with Vigor. Subscriptions were set on foot⁶ to aid Government in the Expense, and they flattered themselves with being able to enlist 10,000 Volunteers. But whether they found this impracticable or were discouraged by later Accounts from America, or had some Intimations of our Treaties here, their Vaunts and Threats are suddenly abated; and on the 17th [Prime Minister] Lord North made a long Discourse [speech] acknowledging the Errors of their former Conduct in the War with America and proposing to obtain Peace by the means of two Bills, of which we enclose Copies.

We make no Remarks on these Bills. The Judgment of the Congress can be at no loss in determining on the Conduct necessary to be held with regard to them. And we are confident they will not answer the purpose of *dividing* in order to *subjugate*, for which they are evidently intended.

Our States have now a solid Support for their Liberty and Independence in their Alliance with France, which will be certainly followed by that of Spain and the whole house of Bourbon,⁷ and probably by Holland and the other Powers of Europe who are interested in the Freedom of Commerce and in keeping down the Power of Britain. Our People are happy in the Enjoyment of their new Constitutions of Government⁸ [and] Will be so in their extended Trade and Navigation, unfettered by English Acts and Customhouse Officers. They will now never relish the Egyptian Bondage from which they have so happily escaped. A long Peace will probably be the Consequence of their Separation from England, as they have no Cause of Quarrel with other Nations. . . .

Americans are everywhere in France treated with Respect and every Appearance of Affection. We think it would be well to advise our People in all Parts of America to imitate this Conduct with Regard to the French who may happen to be among us. Every means should be used to remove ancient Prejudices and cultivate a Friendship that must be so useful to both Nations. . . .

The Preparations for War continue in the [French] Ports with the utmost Industry, and Troops are marching daily to the Sea Coasts where three Camps are to be formed. As France is determined to protect her Commerce with us, a War [with Britain] is deemed inevitable.

B Franklin Silas Deane Arthur Lee

⁶ I.e., fundraising efforts were instituted.

⁷ Last royal dynasty of France, which at times ruled other European entities including areas of present-day Spain and Italy.

⁸ Articles of Confederation, under which the Continental Congress governed from 1777 until the end of the war.