

Beaumarchais and the American Revolution

APPROVED FOR RELEASE
CIA HISTORICAL REVIEW PROGRAM
22 SEPT 93

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French intelligence assists at the birth of the United States.

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"The King of England has long done me the honor of hating me. For my part, I have always done him the justice of despising him. The time has come to decide which of the two has shown better judgment and on which side the wind will cause the heads to fall."

It was September, 1775, the King of England was George III, and the speaker of the bold words was John Wilkes, flamboyant pamphleteer, demagogue, radical Whig, rabble-rouser, libertarian, and, since the autumn of 1774, Lord Mayor of London. He was the center of a circle of the most vociferous of His Majesty's not-so-loyal Opposition and a lodestone for all those who hated the authoritarianism of George III. He presided over a series of famous (or infamous, according to the point of view) "libertarian suppers" which were attended by radical British Whigs and equally radical Americans of strongly separatist persuasion. He gave vent to this opinion of his and his King's mutual esteem at one such supper and, on this particular occasion, one of his hearers was a Frenchman, Pierre August Caron de Beaumarchais, who the next day included it in an intelligence report he was sending to Versailles.

The King's Agent

This Beaumarchais was a remarkable man. He was well known in France as a highly popular dramatist, and equally well known even beyond the borders of France as the author of four pungent pamphlets in which he had protested an unjust judgment delivered against him by the infamous "Maupeou Parlement." His origins were humble but his talents were enormous. Born to a watchmaker in the Rue St. Denis in Paris, he was by the time he was twenty an accomplished musician, the possessor of a brilliant wit and debonair personality, and an ingenious watchmaker who had invented a new escapement mechanism which permitted the manufacture of very small watches. He had ingratiated himself at the court in Versailles, had made a watch for Madame de Pompadour small enough to fit in a finger ring, and was giving the daughters of Louis XV music lessons. From this auspicious beginning he had progressed rapidly into the ranks of the lesser nobility. He was ambitious and he took advantage of every opportunity. He was trained by the financier ParisDuverney in the ways of the business world and, by the time he was nearing forty, he had amassed a sizable fortune. He had a volatile temperament which constantly involved him in acrimonious controversy with prominent members of the nobility, some of whom resented his rapid rise in the King's favor. His vivid wit and facile pen demolished some enemies, created others, and made him, in a few short years, notorious in Paris.

Psychologically, Beaumarchais was an incurable adolescent to whom life was a continuous drama in which he played a succession of leading roles. What made him extraordinarily successful was his ability to absorb with his whole being whatever role he was playing at the moment, to the exclusion of any other. This delight in role-playing made writing for the stage the inevitable outlet for his creative urge and it provided as well the natural means of sublimating his personal frustrations. After several minor starts and two indifferent successes, he had, in the preceding February, gotten a smash hit onto the boards: "The Barber of Seville."

The role Beaumarchais was playing in London in the summer of 1775 was that of secret agent for Louis XVI. He had played the role twice before—once for the King's grandfather, Louis XV, who was always getting into scrapes, and once before for Louis XVI. In each case his mission had been to contact discreetly and neutralize on the best terms possible a blackmailer who was threatening to publish scurrilous

material on private life among the French royalty. He had been eminently successful, and now Louis XVI, who had to devote a good deal of time and effort at the beginning of his reign sniffing out and cleaning up some of the more noisome messes left behind by his grandfather, had sent him to London to seek out and negotiate a settlement with a certain Chevalier d'Eon. This man, himself one of the more colorful figures of a flamboyant age, had been an agent of Louis XV and he was now holding the new King up for a comfortable financial settlement. His leverage was the threat of revealing to the British his secret correspondence with Louis XV on the possibility of avenging the Bourbon defeat of 1765 by attacking England across the Channel! Beaumarchais was well known to Antoine de Sartines, then Lieutenant General of Police, who with the new Foreign Minister, the Comte de Vergennes, had recommended him to the King for this assignment.

Beaumarchais, whose delight in role-playing depended on getting better and better roles in each new production, balked at first. He had played this part before. But Vergennes won him over by promising him a new part. A serious crisis was brewing between England and her North American colonies. This quarrel was spilling over into British domestic politics. The left-wing Whigs, and the anti-authoritarian party generally, were becoming more vociferous and were attacking the King in daily more strident terms. Vergennes needed to know what was going on. The French ambassador in London, the Due de Guines, was reporting only what the British government was passing to him in his official capacity and this was hardly sufficient in the circumstances.

Possessed of one of the subtlest and keenest minds among the statesmen of his era, Vergennes was a staunch royalist devoted to the cause of restoring the greatness of the Bourbons. Since he was convinced that this inevitably meant another trial of arms with England, it was vital to him to know the nature and extent of Britain's differences with her colonies and the repercussions in London. He therefore enhanced Beaumarchais' role as low-level police agent in a blackmail case by adding to it that of confidential political commentator and international spy. Beaumarchais undertook the dual role with glee and performed it admirably. He induced the Chevalier d'Eon to accept a settlement so far below his expectations that he was thenceforth Beaumarchais' lifelong bitter enemy, and he kept Vergennes informed in detail by voluminous reporting on Britain's internal situation and her relations with her recalcitrant colonies.

Beaumarchais had arrived in London in April, 1775. By the first of May the news of Lexington and Concord had set London into a turmoil of speculation and rumor. Lord Rochford, whom Beaumarchais had known well in Spain some years previously, was still Lord North's Foreign Minister. He was garrulous by nature and his free tongue kept Beaumarchais well informed on the government's positions and plans. At John Wilkes' house, which he frequented for over a year, he came into close contact with the extreme left wing of the Whigs as well as with many Americans. He thus had excellent access to both sides of the question.

The Advocate of Intervention

Foremost among the liberal Americans with whom Beaumarchais came in contact was Arthur Lee. He met Lee at Wilkes' house and immediately found him a most congenial companion. He was witty, impetuous, ambitious, and consumed with a passion for complete separation of the colonies from England. The two spent hours together discussing the problems of American independence and Beaumarchais became keenly aware of the depth of the rift between the colonies and the mother country. He also became imbued with a conviction of the essential rightness of the American cause. Gradually his reporting became less objective and more biased in favor of the Americans. By the autumn of 1775 he had become an outspoken advocate of the American position and a persistent proponent of the desirability of French intervention.

Vergennes agreed. But, where Beaumarchais, the volatile idealist, felt in his heart the necessity for the liberation of a gallant people who ought to be freed from tyranny, Vergennes, the political realist, felt in his head that the most direct route to French ascendancy in Europe lay in England's military embroilment on the other side of the Atlantic. In Beaumarchais' view, there was no reason for France to hesitate to support the Americans. The more realistic Vergennes, however, saw two impediments blocking the way. One was the fact that France had not yet recovered sufficiently, either financially or militarily, from the Seven Years War to risk war with England for the present; the other was the character of Louis XVI.

Louis had been brought up to take a rigid view of the Christian admonition to love one's enemies. He stubbornly refused to take advantage of England's embarrassment to further his own ends. Vergennes, Foreign Minister for only about a year, was still cautious about remonstrating with the King concerning his moral myopia. He agreed that, if Beaumarchais would write a series of confidential dispatches, addressed either to him or to Sartines, in which the pro-American arguments would be pressed with enthusiasm and persuasiveness, he would see that these reports came to the King's attention. The fact that they had been submitted by the irrepressible Beaumarchais would presumably shield Vergennes from any undesirable consequences which might result if the same sentiments came directly from one of the King's ministers.

Beaumarchais returned to London and launched a series of impassioned dispatches imploring the King to abandon his inappropriate religious scruples and to undertake acts which were in the obvious interest, if not of himself, then surely of his subjects and nation. He continued his pleadings to Vergennes and the King on America's behalf ceaselessly throughout the winter and spring of 1775-76. At the same time he stepped up his activities among the Americans and British liberals to the point where the British authorities began to suspect that the d'Eon affair was not the real reason for his presence in London. A change of cover seemed to be in order and, at Vergennes' request, the French government gave him the assignment of purchasing on the London market Spanish and Portuguese coin, then at a premium in the West Indies trade.

In the meantime, relations between the colonies and Britain deteriorated steadily. By the end of 1775 the Americans were irrevocably engaged in an all-out struggle for complete independence_ The Continental Congress had set up the Committee of Secret Correspondence, and the Committee had designated Arthur Lee as its agent in London. Lee and Beaumarchais began serious discussion of the possibilities for French aid.

The American need was certainly critical. George III had decided to crush the rebellion with a quick and vigorous effort and, since Britain was as usual unprepared for war, had hired mercenaries in Germany to provide the necessary manpower. Most observers on both sides of the Atlantic doubted that the Americans would be able to deal effectively with a large expeditionary force of experienced European troops—

especially in view of their lack of artillery and engineers. Throughout the spring of 1776, Beaumarchais deluged Vergennes and the King with Lee's pleas for assistance, with his own pleas, and with reasoned and impassioned arguments for French interventions. By the end of March most of the cabinet had been won over. Only Turgot, the Minister of Finance, dissented. A short time thereafter Turgot resigned and was replaced. It was agreed, however, that the decision should be kept secret for the time being. Assistance would be given the Americans, but until the French armed forces were strengthened to the point of being able to deal effectively with the British in open warfare, France would be careful to maintain a sufficient semblance of neutrality.

Hortalez et Compagnie

Because of this need for secrecy, Beaumarchais was not informed of the decision. He was left in London dealing with Arthur Lee, and a Dr. Barbeu Dubourg—friend and correspondent of Benjamin Franklin and translator of Franklin's in France—was picked by the government to be the intermediary with the Americans. Barbeu Dubourg did not work out well, however. He was too old, he lacked business acumen, and—more serious in a venture of this nature—he was insecure and garrulous. Within a month Vergennes and Sartines, now Minister of the Navy, decided that Beaumarchais would be a better bet. He was summoned from London and told to submit immediately a plan for the clandestine assistance to the American cause.

Beaumarchais proposed that the Spanish and Portuguese coins he had been buying in London be used for an immediate subsidy to Congress. One million livres would be the initial amount, half of which would be sent immediately to America to support the paper money being issued by Congress and the other half used to buy arms and ammunition in the Netherlands and other European countries. These purchases would be handled by a cover firm for which Beaumarchais proposed the name *Roderigue Hortalez et Compagnie*.

The French government did not accept this proposal. Direct subsidy in support of the colonial currency came too close to overt violation of France's neutrality and France, now committed to a course which would

inevitably lead to war with England, could not afford to spend money buying arms outside her own borders. There was a better way. Preparation for war with England meant the complete overhaul of the French army which had had little attention for years. In particular the artillery needed modernization. Large numbers of perfectly serviceable guns had thus become surplus. As a matter of fact, a major of artillery named Du Coudray had already been ordered to call the French arsenals for guns and other military supplies which were to be made available to Barbeu Dubourg. Vergennes, Sartines, and St. Germain, the Minister of War, now saw a way to assist the Americans securely and replenish the French treasury at the same time. The Hortalez firm would be set up as a completely "black" operation. It would buy munitions from the French government on credit, sell them to the Americans, and then reimburse the government which would thus dispose of its surplus equipment at a tidy profit.

The government, therefore, informed Beaumarchais that he should proceed to organize his cover firm. As initial capital he would receive a loan from the government of one million livres. The other Bourbon crown, in Madrid, would supply another million. He would then raise another two million by selling stock to his personal business acquaintances and friends. The firm's *raison d'être* would be trade with the West Indies. It would purchase from French arsenals such supplies—guns, powder, muskets, blankets, shoes, clothing—as might be needed. The firm could pay outright for this materiel or replace it with equivalent articles. Beaumarchais would charge Congress a reasonable price for what he was able to deliver and accept payment in tobacco, rice, indigo, and cotton which he would be able to market in Europe. The firm would be completely self-supporting. Beyond repayment of the original loan and payment for the purchases from the arsenals, the government would have no claim on any profits the firm might make. By the same token, the firm would have to absorb any losses. It would acquire, by purchase or charter, its own shipping and would deliver its goods to transfer points in the West Indies where the Americans would pick them up in exchange for cargoes of tobacco, etc. As an added incentive, Beaumarchais, who still stood under a sentence of "*blame*" (i.e. loss of certain civil rights) at the hands of the Maupeou Parlement, was promised full restoration by the Royal Council.

Beaumarchais, fired with enthusiasm for the American cause and delighted with his new role, eagerly accepted the arrangement. On June 10, 1776 the Treasury paid him one million livres—in gold coin. With

typical theatricality, he received the money in canvas bags, had it placed in his carriage, and drove with it to his house. There he called his whole family together and, with a magician-like gesture, poured out the coins into a shining golden heap on the floor!

Two months later, on August 11th, he received another million from the Spanish Ambassador. From a group of French merchants he obtained a third million and *Roderigue Hortalez et Compagnie* was in business. He rented a large building in the Rue du Temple called the Hotel de Hollande, since it had formerly been the Dutch Embassy. Here he set up the firm's offices, moved his residence and family into the same building, and waited for Vergennes to put him in touch with a responsible American agent.

Enter Silas Deane

In March, 1776 the Committee of Secret Correspondence had named Silas Deane to be the agent of Congress in Paris. This appointment was made without the knowledge of Congress since Congress, as Franklin wryly commented, "consists of too many members to keep secrets." Deane arrived in Paris on July 5th under cover as a wealthy Bermuda merchant whose business intent was trade with the Indies. Armed with a letter of introduction from Franklin, he sought out Barbeu Dubourg and asked to be taken to Versailles. The old doctor temporized. His relations with Vergennes had, as we have seen, become somewhat strained and he was now afraid of losing his importance as an intermediary if Deane were introduced directly to Vergennes. Relying on his instructions from Franklin, however, Deane persisted and on July 17th Dubourg finally took him to Versailles where he had a two hour session with Vergennes. Gerard de Reyvenal, First Secretary of the Ministry and later the first French Ambassador to the United States, acted as interpreter. At the end of the interview Gerard mentioned Beaumarchais to Deane and immediately thereafter informed Beaumarchais that a secret representative of the American Congress had arrived.

On July 19th Beaumarchais and Deane met for the first time. They became fast friends almost immediately and throughout their association they worked smoothly together as a team. They had no

trouble arriving at mutually satisfactory terms for the delivery of the promised arms and a firm contract was embodied in an exchange of letters dated July 20th and 22nd. The contract provided that Beaumarchais would make his goods available to Congress on a one-year credit. Congress was free to pay either the value of the goods on delivery or the purchase price at the French arsenals plus insurance, shipping, and commission—whichever it desired. Payment was to be made in kind: tobacco, indigo, and other colonial goods, the shipment of which would commence immediately, as soon as shipping could be found. Deane duly reported these arrangements to the Committee of Secret Correspondence and awaited confirmation. Beaumarchais embarked on a whirlwind of activity to fulfill his end of the bargain.

For the remainder of 1776, *Hortalez & Cie.* functioned like one of Beaumarchais' own well-oiled watches. Beaumarchais seemed to be in Paris, Bordeaux, Nantes, Le Havre, and Marseilles simultaneously. Ships were purchased or chartered, provisioned, supplied with officers and crews. The weapons which Du Coudray had culled from the arsenals began to flow toward the ports. Donatien le Rey de Chaumont, *intendant* for supplying clothing to the French army, became one of Beaumarchais' partners. He gave the firm a credit of one million livres and undertook to supply enormous amounts of clothing. By the end of the year, Beaumarchais had collected 200 field pieces, 300,000 muskets, 100 tons of powder, 3,000 tents, and large amounts of ammunition. He also had a blanket, a pair of shoes, and two pairs of wool stockings for each of 30,000 men along with such miscellaneous items as buttons, buckles, needles, thread, pocket knives, and bolts of wool and silk for uniforms. Most of this material had been collected at Le Havre and was being loaded for shipment.

There were hitches, of course. For one thing, all this activity could not possibly escape the notice of British intelligence. Reports regularly reached Lord Stormont, the British Ambassador, of vast quantities of martial materials moving on the roads of France, to and through French ports, bound ostensibly for the French West Indies but in quantities wholly inappropriate to any reasonable needs in the islands. Stormont protested often and volubly to Vergennes, who at first professed complete ignorance. Vergennes also pointed out—conservative royalist that he was—that he would be the last to furnish help to the American insurgents: after all, revolution was a dangerous thing; a revolution here inevitably begot a revolution there. Stormont, to whom the already deteriorating internal French political situation was no secret, seemed

placated for the moment at least. This astute diplomat was, however, by no means convinced of the innocence of the French government. In the light of continued reporting from his agents indicating clandestine help to the Americans, his protests to Vergennes became increasingly insistent and the government finally felt constrained to issue ordinances against the smuggling of war supplies.

Beaumarchais soon found himself running afoul of these regulations and protested vehemently to Vergennes, who instructed him in what it means to operate "black." He was told that the snags he was encountering were unfortunate but inevitable. He would have to be more careful and he was not to embarrass the government by getting caught in any serious breach of the regulations.

Beaumarchais also began to have trouble with Major Du Coudray. At first, Du Coudray was invaluable to Deane and Beaumarchais. In addition to the excellent job he was doing in selecting the arms to be sent to America, he also proved a valuable assistant to Deane who was overwhelmed with a flood of volunteers seeking to enlist, or rather to become officers, in Washington's army. The problem of sorting truly useful officers from the mass of volunteers was a difficult one for Deane, who was not accustomed to dealing with Europeans. Du Coudray was particularly helpful in picking out good artillery officers and it was decided that a contingent of these should accompany the first shipment of cannon to America. By November Beaumarchais had three ships loading at Le Havre: *Le Romain*, *La Seine*, and *L'Amphitrite*. At this point Du Coudray decided that he had a golden opportunity to advance his career. He too would go to America and he persuaded Deane to give him a Major General's commission in the name of Congress. Because of his energy, efficiency, and cooperative spirit up til then, both Beaumarchais and Deane felt that they were lucky to obtain his services for the Colonists. Unfortunately as soon as he had received his commission, Du Coudray began to behave as if he were in charge of the whole operation. He left Le Havre where the three ships, now fully loaded, were awaiting only a favorable wind to sail, and went to Paris to persuade St. Germain to send him to America under his personal orders and as his personal representative.

Beaumarchais was frantic. The ships had been loaded ostensibly for the West Indies. But the artillery officers, whiling away their time in the Le Havre Cafes while waiting for the wind, were openly bragging that they were going to America. Beaumarchais complained bitterly to Vergennes.

The wind at Le Havre might turn favorable at any time but the ships could not sail without Du Coudray. Vergennes called on St. Germain, and Du Coudray was sent packing back to Le Havre. Beaumarchais followed him to be sure that nothing else went wrong. And there, after all his efforts at maintaining security, after all his complaining about security, after all his worry about the noise the artillery officers were making, it remained for him to commit the most damaging security breach of all.

In all his activity for *Hortalez dr Cie.*, Beaumarchais had used the pseudonym "M. Durand." On arriving in Le Havre he found that a local theater company was rehearsing his *Barber of Seville*. The temptation was too much for "M. Durand's" theatrical sense, to say nothing of his vanity. He attended the dress rehearsals, assisted the director, gave instructions to the actors, and all with such an air of authority that it didn't much matter what he called himself thereafter. Armed with this evidence of the involvement of a known confidant of the King and the Foreign Minister in an obvious traffic in contraband of war, Stormont stormed in to Vergennes. His representations were so bitter and his threats to break relations with France so obviously sincere that Vergennes felt he had no alternative but to prohibit the sailing of the three ships. His government was not yet ready for a showdown with England and he chose the prudent course.

When Vergennes' order arrived in Le Havre, *Le Romain* and *La Seine* were still at anchor; *L'Amphitrite*, with Du Coudray on board, had already sailed. The incredible Du Coudray, however, managed to make Vergennes' order effective anyway. When a few days out, being dissatisfied with his accommodations, he took command of the ship over the captain's head and brought her back to Lorient on the pretext of repairing storm damage. He left the ship there and returned to Versailles in order to resume his efforts to enhance his military prestige.

For another month Beaumarchais' three ships remained in port. Finally Vergennes decided that things had quieted sufficiently to allow them to depart—discreetly and by night. Beaumarchais took a gamble. Instead of sending them, as planned, to the West Indies where their cargos would be transshipped, he ordered them to make for a mainland port. His purposes were no doubt several: to confuse the British fleet; to deliver the supplies as rapidly as possible to Washington's destitute army; and partly, we must assume, knowing Beaumarchais, to achieve the maximum dramatic effect with the arrival of his first shipment. He was lucky. All three vessels eluded the British and arrived safely at

Portsmouth, New Hampshire, in April.

The supplies were delivered to the northern army under Horatio Gates, and there can be little doubt that they were vital to the success of his campaign against Burgoyne the following autumn. Vergennes, who had held off from overt intervention until there should be some clear-cut indication that the American army could deal successfully with trained European troops, delayed no longer after the news of Saratoga reached Paris on December 4th. Thus it could be said that Beaumarchais, whose constant urging had been instrumental in Vergennes' decision to support the Americans secretly, had now provided the means to the victory which brought France completely and overtly to the aid of the infant republic.

Beaumarchais continued to load and dispatch vessels throughout the summer of 1777. In fact he continued to do so throughout the war, although after overt French intervention, the importance of his contribution became relatively minor. His usual route of delivery was via the West Indies, the transfer points being either Cap Francais in Haiti, Santo Domingo, or the Dutch island-colony of Statia. The deliveries in 1777 and early 1778 constituted almost all of the military goods reaching the Colonies during those critical months. It is perhaps not too much to say that Beaumarchais and Deane, by their own efforts, brought the infant United States through the most critical period of its birth.

The Inspector General

Beaumarchais' assistance to Deane was not limited to the supply of materiel. The volunteers who flocked to the American Commissioners in Paris were, as has been noted, something of a problem. Those who came in the fall of 1776 when the American cause was in perilous straits were young and eager French officers filled with idealistic enthusiasm for the birth of freedom in the New World. But many of these idealists became problems in America. They insisted on high command positions; they could speak little or no English; and they were unfamiliar with American conditions as well as the personality and psychology of the American soldier. Before long, Congress was sending frantic appeals to Paris to hold down the number of commissions being granted.

In the spring of 1777 the military situation had altered considerably from that prevailing in late 1776. Washington had succeeded in holding his army together, and had won at Trenton and Princeton, and Howe had failed to take Philadelphia. France was beginning to show signs of serious intent to intervene and all indications pointed to a long war. In Europe no military events of significance had taken place since the end of the Seven Years War and unemployed soldiers were everywhere in evidence. Many offered their services to the Commission in Paris and Beaumarchais was of invaluable assistance in sorting out the riff-raff from the competent soldiers.

His most spectacular coup was von Steuben. Baron Friedrich Wilhelm von Steuben had served as a captain of infantry in the Seven Years War. After the war he had been discharged more or less under a cloud. He tried to find service in Denmark where St. Germain—later to become Louis XVI's Minister of War—was reorganizing the army. He failed to find a suitable post. He became Hofmarschall to the Prince of Hohenzollern-Hechingen who gave him the title of Baron but could afford him very little pay. He tried unsuccessfully to achieve a career in the armies of France and Austria and in the service of the Markgraf of Baden. In the spring of 1777 he found himself in Paris where he renewed his acquaintance with St. Germain who recommended him to Vergennes for service in America. Vergennes sent him to Beaumarchais.

Beaumarchais liked him, gave him a room in the Hotel de Hollande, and took him to Deane and Franklin who were impressed with his credentials but were under strict instructions from Congress about hiring any more foreign officers. If he would, like Lafayette, consent to serve as a private and without pay, he could be accepted, otherwise not. Von Steuben was not in a financial position to permit himself such a luxury. He renewed his efforts to find a suitable post in Europe but again without success. August of 1777 found him again in Paris and in even more desperate straits. Again Beaumarchais took him into the Hotel de Hollande and racked his brains as to what to do. He came up with a typically Beaumarchaisian solution. He dressed von Steuben in the uniform of a Prussian lieutenant general and launched him upon Parisian society accompanied by an aide and a military secretary—both paid by Beaumarchais. In due course Deane and Franklin were able to write Washington: "The gentleman who will have the honor of waiting on you with this letter is the Baron Steuben, Lieut.Genl. in the King of Prussia's service." Beaumarchais then lent von Steuben sufficient money for the trip and sent him off to America in one of his own ships. Later he sent

Steuben's two nephews to join him.

Beaumarchais had no regrets. In December, 1778 he wrote his correspondent Franey: "Remember me often to my friend M. le Baron de Steuben. I congratulate myself, from what I hear about him, on having given so great an officer to my friends, the free men, and having forced him, in a way, to follow that noble career. I am not by any means uneasy about the money I lent him for his voyage. Never did I make an investment that gave me so much pleasure, for I put a man of honor in the right place. I hear that he is Inspector General of all American troops. Bravo! Tell him that his glory is the interest on his money and that I do not doubt that, on these terms, he will repay me with usury." Von Steuben's glory turned out to be not only interest but also principal as far as any repayment to Beaumarchais was concerned. Among the unpaid bills found in his files after his death was one: "*A Steuben, pour avances faites en particulier pour passer en Amerique, et a ses neveux pour aller le joindre, 5997 francs, 2 sols, 7 deniers.*"

The Ineffable Arthur Lee

This debt was not, by any means, the only unpaid bill deriving from Beaumarchais' assistance to his "friends, the free men." From the beginning of the operations of *Hortalez & Cie.*, until September 1777, he sent five million livres worth of goods to America and received nothing in return. This total lack of performance by his countrymen of the contract he had made was a source of acute embarrassment to Deane vis-a-vis Beaumarchais, and to Beaumarchais vis-a-vis his stockholders. Three times in 1777 Beaumarchais had to appeal to the Foreign Ministry for aid to avoid bankruptcy and three times Vergennes bailed him out with loans totalling over a million livres. In September he sent a personal emissary, Theveneau de Francy, to America to investigate the situation firsthand and report directly to him.

The reasons for this unfortunate state of affairs were many and complex. The new nation was in the kind of administrative turmoil which could only result from an attempt to govern by legislature alone. Until the ratification of the Constitution in 1789 the only authority was Congress—a legislative body trying, with a predictable lack of success,

to perform simultaneously legislative, executive, and judiciary functions. It was government by committee with a vengeance, and it did not work. In the summer of 1777 Congress was financially and militarily near disaster. There was no money in the treasury, Howe took Philadelphia and Congress fled to Lancaster and then to York. Gates won at Saratoga, but immediately thereafter the "Conway Cabal" plunged the army and Congress into more confusion than ever. In the circumstances it is perhaps not too surprising that Deane's appeals on behalf of *Hortalez & Cie.* went unheeded.

But far more damaging to the fortunes of Beaumarchais was the behavior of Arthur Lee. Following his recall to Paris in May, 1776, Beaumarchais drastically curtailed his contact with Lee. He did write him in June that he was preparing to send materiel for "your friend" to Cap Francais where the "friend" could pick it up against cargos of tobacco. However, the arrival of Deane, and Vergennes' demand for secrecy, put a stop to any further dealing with Lee. In August Lee heard that Deane had supplanted him as the chief agent of Congress for soliciting aid in Europe and he rushed to Paris in a fury. He got nowhere. Neither with Deane who treated him with a distant coldness, nor with Beaumarchais who was cordial but evasive, nor with Vergennes who refused to see him. He returned to London and immediately sent Philadelphia a message to the effect that any supplies shipped to America by the firm *Hortalez & Cie.*, were really a free gift of the French crown and that no reimbursement was expected! From then on Lee never ceased to deliver, in letters and memoranda to his brothers and their friends in the Lee-Adams faction of Congress, charges that the *Hortalez* supplies were gifts, that the *Hortalez* firm was a blind behind which Deane and Beaumarchais were engaging in illicit war-profiteering, and that Congress was the victim of all sorts of undercover machinations at their hands.

On September 26, 1776, Congress appointed Franklin, Deane, and Thomas Jefferson Commissioners to try to negotiate a treaty of recognition with France. Jefferson declined the appointment and Arthur Lee was named in his place. Franklin arrived in Paris in mid-December, informed Deane of his new status, and summoned Lee from London. This was of no help to Beaumarchais whatever. Franklin resented Beaumarchais' ascendancy over his *cher bon ami*, Barbeu Dubourg, and, while not actually hostile, was cold and distant. Lee, of course, was still furious at Deane and Beaumarchais and threw all sorts of impediments in their way. Deane remained friendly and cooperative but was totally

unable to enlist the other Commissioners in trying to get Congress to honor its obligation to *Hortalez & Cie*.

In the midst of this state of affairs, Beaumarchais' agent, Francy, arrived in America armed with documents intended to prove Beaumarchais' good faith. He was referred to the newly-created Committee of Commerce which carefully examined the documents, decided that they were in order, and agreed to sign a definite contract. This contract, duly signed, specified in detail how the *Hortalez* goods were to be delivered and with equal detail the conditions of payment by the United States. Francy wrote Beaumarchais that their troubles were over. Beaumarchais continued to ship his goods without interruption. But they both had much to learn about the nature of the American Congress. This body could still not bring itself to ratify the contract made in its name by its own committee.

By the end of 1777 the discontent in the army over the commissions granted to foreign officers by Deane, the confusion over the *Hortalez* payments, and the insinuations of Arthur Lee regarding Deane's competence and honesty culminated in a decision by Congress to recall Deane and to send John Adams in his place. Deane returned to face Congress in August, 1778. He felt the atmosphere loaded with antagonism and responded by showing the worst aspects of his character: haughtiness, aloofness, disdain. He brooded over his grievances, and the association with Benedict Arnold which ruined the rest of his life began at this time.

The controversy in Congress over Deane and Beaumarchais polarized the Jay-Livingston and Lee-Adams factions into pro- and anti-French groups—a fact which disturbed the new French Ambassador, Gerard de Reyvenal. It also disturbed Vergennes and he authorized Gerard to deliver officially, at a time which he thought most appropriate, a statement of the true nature of the *Hortalez* firm to Congress. The storm of public and private polemic raged throughout the autumn with now one faction in the ascendancy and now the other. The pro-Deane, pro-French, faction achieved a victory on December 8th when it forced the resignation of Henry Laurens as President of the Congress and replaced him with John Jay. A week later Thomas Paine published a blast in support of Arthur Lee. Finally, in early January, Gerard felt that the time had come to intervene. He forwarded an official communication to Congress in which he stated categorically that the supplies sent by Beaumarchais had been sold to him by the King's Ministry of War and

that he had given his obligation to pay for them. They were not, in any way, gifts of the King to the Americans.

Congress confessed itself abashed and authorized John Jay to write Beaumarchais and apologize in its name and to promise fulfillment of the contracts. With vast relief Beaumarchais received this official acknowledgement of the justice of his claim from the highest quarter of the American government and redoubled his efforts to send supplies. But, then as now, politics was the order of the day in Congress; new problems arose, new squabbles claimed the attention of the delegates, and Beaumarchais was again forgotten. No remittances came.

The War Profiteer

With the recognition of France of the United States on February 6, 1778 and the open outbreak of war with England, the contribution of *Hortalez & Cie.* became a drop in the stream of troops and materiel which poured across the Atlantic. But Beaumarchais was not merely an adventurer looking for a quick profit. He was an idealist and he continued to send his cargos even though they were now relatively insignificant and even though there was no indication that he would ever be reimbursed. He now undertook new measures to try to put his cover company on a paying basis.

With the end of France's neutrality her ships became legal targets for British warships and commerce raiders and soon the prices of sugar and other products of the French West Indies were sky-rocketing.

Beaumarchais continued to send his supply ships to the United States but, instead of trying to get cargos from Congress, he ordered them to return via the West Indies and load sugar. This trade proved extremely profitable for the first time since its inception, *Hortalez & Cie.* got itself out of the red. Georges Lemaitre in his biography, *Beaumarchais*, gives the following summary:

"From its foundation in 1776 until its dissolution in 1783, the *Hortalez* firm engaged in business transactions involving over forty-two million livres, a truly enormous sum in those days. A close

study of the balance sheets shows a total of 21,095,515 livres received while in the same period the general outlay was 21,044,191 livres. Thus the profit amounted to 51,324 livres—or only slightly more than two-tenths of one percent. In other words, Beaumarchais just managed to keep his enterprise on an even keel. His gains and losses, however, were very unevenly distributed. While the firm's private trade account showed an extremely favorable balance, the account with the United States was deeply in the red. Would the United States ever pay their debt? If they did, Beaumarchais would be a very rich man. If they did not, he would just about break even."

So in the end, Beaumarchais did become something of a war-profiteer, although hardly in the sense nor to the extent that Arthur Lee had claimed.

In 1783, as part of the negotiations for a loan by the French government to the United States, a determination was made by the American Consul General in Paris, Barclay, that the sum recommended by Deane in 1780 was substantially correct. However, a suspicion arose in Congress that Beaumarchais had been dishonest in that he had apparently received one million livres from the French government as initial capital without telling anybody. The idea that this might have been a loan that he was expected to repay seems not to have occurred to Congress; in any case, payment was again deferred.

In 1787 Beaumarchais wrote Congress in stinging terms reminding it of its obligations. Congress responded by appointing, of all people, Arthur Lee to examine Beaumarchais' claims. Lee explored the matter and came up with a stunner: Congress did not owe Beaumarchais anything at all. Rather, Beaumarchais owed Congress 1,800,000 livres!

In 1793 Congress, impelled by some sort of guilty urge, gave Alexander Hamilton the task of once more evaluating Beaumarchais' claim. Hamilton's results showed that America owed Beaumarchais 2,280,000 francs. Further investigation, however, revealed that what had been a suspicion in 1780 was actually a fact: Beaumarchais had indeed received one million livres as initial capital from the French treasury. Again, no one bothered to point out that this was a loan. Congress decided that, since Beaumarchais had received one million from the king, this should be deducted from the amount Hamilton showed as due him. They further decided that Beaumarchais owed the United States interest on

this million since it was, *in effect*, a gift to the United States and Beaumarchais had held it all this time. Congress further decided that the interest due it on the one million approximately equalled 1,280,000 francs—the amount still due Beaumarchais—and that, therefore, Beaumarchais and the United States were quits!

On April 10, 1795 Beaumarchais made a final effort. He wrote the American people at large: "Americans, I have served you with indefatigable zeal and I have received, throughout my life, only bitterness as a reward for my services. I die your creditor. Allow me therefore, now that I am dying, to bequeath you my daughter, that you may endow her with a portion of what you owe me. ..." His last appeal went, of course, unanswered.

A footnote of Lemaitre sums up the ending succinctly:

"America's debt to Beaumarchais was finally settled, after protracted and complicated negotiations, in 1835. That year, Congress gave Beaumarchais' heirs the choice of accepting 800,000 francs as full settlement of the claim or getting nothing at all. The heirs took the 800,000 francs."

But Beaumarchais had died in 1799.

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Posted: May 08, 2007 08:27 AM