The Marquis de Lafayette was an improbable leader in the American Revolutionary War. Born into the French aristocracy in 1757 and orphaned at age 13, Lafayette was left with a vast inheritance and estate. At only 14 years old, he joined the Royal Army, following in the footsteps of his family’s prestigious military history. Two years later, he expanded his wealth and ties to French nobility by marrying Marie Adrienne Francoise de Noailles, a relative of the King.

And yet, despite his wealth and high standing in French aristocracy, Lafayette was not content. During a stay in Paris, he learned of the American colonists’ revolt against the British. He began to attend and participate in sociétés de pensée (philosophical societies) with other intellectuals who sympathized with the colonists and their goal of independence. He was also accepted into the Masonic Military Lodge, where he could speak freely about the ideas of revolution and setting up a Republic.

At these meetings, European intellectuals, academics and philosophers discussed the rights of man, the abolition of slavery, and the principles of the American movement, emphasizing the importance of equality and liberty. These principles were heavily influenced by the Enlightenment philosophies introduced a few decades before the American Revolutionary War. Enlightenment thinkers stressed reason, rationality, and individualism. They challenged ideas rooted in tradition and religion, such as superstitions, and inherited wealth and privilege. Instead they suggested reform through intellectual study and scientific method. Among their philosophies was the idea that citizens should be granted equality and individual freedoms.
At the time, France was a monarchy, which means a king or queen ruled the country. The king or queen inherited this position from birth. Members of the royal family and other privileged-by-birth aristocrats controlled power and wealth within the country, while peasants and other poor people paid extremely high taxes, which were levied in order to support the extravagant lifestyles of the rich.

In the decades before Lafayette was born, Enlightenment philosophies had inspired the belief that it was possible to change society and the structure of government. Most Enlightenment thinkers believed such reform was essential for progress. And now, in the echoes of news about the American Revolutionary War, it seemed that this was not only possible, but actually happening.

For many French citizens, the American Revolutionary War began to represent ideas of equality and freedom, and the idea that it was possible to reorganize the structure of government. The American colonists were fighting against unfair taxation. They were also under rule of a monarchical government. Seeing the colonists fight against the monarchy inspired many French citizens. The idea that change was possible—and happening—was an especially important belief for the poor people of France, who were paying much higher taxes than the rich.

The goal of equality and freedom together with the widespread resentment of the British after the Seven Years’ War was a catalyst for many Frenchmen to join the colonists’ cause. Likewise, Lafayette, enchanted by the idealism and bravery of American soldiers, vowed to support the colonists’ struggle.

This would not be easy for Lafayette to do. He was born into a noble family and class. Ironically, he was a member of the class that seemed to benefit most from the current structure of government in France. Joining the American cause had the potential to both alienate him and disgrace his family. But Lafayette was determined to help the American cause. After secretly negotiating with like-minded French rebels, he signed an agreement to enter the American service and persuaded several other French soldiers to accompany him to America.

In 1777, Lafayette embarked on his ship La Victoire and sailed for 54 days across the Atlantic to arrive in South Carolina. At this time, he spoke only a few words of English that he learned on his journey. Even more astounding, Lafayette was only 19 years old!

As he expected, leaving France had not been easy. Before his rushed departure, on orders from his father-in-law, Duc d’Ayen, the king had issued a letter de cachet (or a signed
order) forbidding Lafayette from joining the war. Punishment for disobeying such an order was imprisonment, something Lafayette knew he would face if he returned home.

In America, colonist leaders greeted Lafayette warmly. However, Congress initially declined his services. But Lafayette was so eager to help and contribute to their cause, he volunteered to serve free of charge. The colonists’ leaders were so impressed with his commitment to the cause, as well as his noble standing in France, they awarded him the rank of Major General in the Continental Army.

Over the course of the next two years, Lafayette fought against the British in a series of battles. In his first battle, The Battle of Brandywine, he was shot in the leg but recovered within two months to rejoin the efforts of the colonists. During his commission with the Continental Army, he became a close confidant and long-time friend of George Washington.

In 1779, Lafayette was granted leave from the Continental Army to return to France. His goal was to secure additional aid from the king to help the American colonists fight the British. Because Lafayette had left France against the orders of the king, he knew he would need to seek the king’s forgiveness. His father-in-law went to see the king’s minister on Lafayette’s behalf and learned that Lafayette would need to undergo a period of detention before he could return to the king’s court. Lafayette was placed under house arrest for eight days.

However, after his detention, Lafayette was received warmly by the king. The king also congratulated him on his service in America. While in France, Lafayette was also honored by the Congress of the United States with a sword.

In France, Lafayette worked hard to deliver funds and additional French troops to the American cause. He was rewarded in his quest: France sent additional supplies and troops to America, and from his own account, Lafayette purchased other needed supplies. Soon after securing French aid, Lafayette returned to America and fought in several more battles. He was involved in the pivotal battle of Yorktown, where he helped corner the British lord Cornwallis. The British defeat helped ensure victory for the Americans.

When he returned to France in 1781, he was honored as the “Hero of Two Worlds.” It was clear that Lafayette’s time in America had reinforced some of his beliefs that had encouraged his service there in the first place. His experience in the American Revolutionary War would continue to inspire Lafayette throughout his lifetime.
Lafayette was an enthusiastic proponent of freedom, equality and liberty. Historian Louis Madelin described Lafayette’s outlook by writing, “He wanted to free everybody from their hateful bonds: plantation, negroes, French Protestants – black and white after the red....”

He also sought to reform the organization of the government so that it mirrored the ideals he learned from the American Revolutionary War. He believed in a representative government instead of a monarchy. In a representative government, people elect officials to represent their beliefs or aims in the government. Power is shared equally among these officials. This might seem like an odd outlook for someone born into a position of power, but Lafayette was inspired by what he had seen in the colonies. Change was possible, and reformation was often an effective way to deliver such change.

In 1789, with the help of Thomas Jefferson (an American envoy to France, the principal author of the Declaration of Independence, and the third President of the United States), Lafayette helped draft the Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen. This document declared the sacred rights of man and citizens and caused the National Assembly of France to recognize, among other principles, the freedom and equality of rights, and equitable distribution of taxation.

The Declaration of Independence, written years before in America, heavily influenced Lafayette’s document. Like that statement, the ideals of the Enlightenment—freedom, equality, and liberty—are echoed in the Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen. The desire for freedom and equality expressed within this document would inspire millions in France to eventually revolt against their monarchical government.

Though tasked with caring for the Royal family, Lafayette was one of the most important Frenchmen to spread the ideas of representative government throughout Europe. For his part in the Revolutionary War, Lafayette was considered a hero. His legacy continues in America today. In his honor, a number of towns, parks, ships, and even a college have been given his name.
1. How old was Lafayette when he joined the Royal Army?

   A  19  
   B  13  
   C  14  
   D  21  

2. The passage describes the sequence of events in Lafayette’s life. What happened two years after Lafayette joined the Royal Army?

   A  He married a French woman who was a relative of the King.  
   B  He embarked on a trip for South Carolina that took 54 days.  
   C  He was orphaned and got a large inheritance and estate.  
   D  He drafted the Declaration of Rights of Man and the Citizen.  

3. The passage states that Lafayette joined the Masonic Military Lodge, “where he could speak freely about the ideas of revolution and setting up a Republic.” Based on this evidence, what conclusion can be made?

   A  Lafayette did not have any strong ideas about the revolution.  
   B  Everyone in France had the same views on revolution as Lafayette did.  
   C  The idea of revolution wasn’t of interest to anyone who was in France.  
   D  Lafayette could not speak freely about these ideas everywhere.  

4. Based on the passage, how can France’s relationship with Britain during the American Revolutionary war best be described?

   A  friendly  
   B  tense  
   C  close  
   D  hostile  

5. What is this passage mainly about?

   A  the French aristocracy of the 1700s  
   B  the King of France and all his different relatives  
   C  the full history of the French Revolution battles  
   D  Lafayette’s role in the American Revolution
6. Read the following sentence: “The goal of equality and freedom together with the widespread resentment of the British after the Seven Years’ War was a catalyst for many Frenchmen to join the colonists’ cause.”

As used in this passage, what does the word “catalyst” mean?

A something that causes action  
B something that scares people  
C something that prevents action  
D an unimportant occurrence

7. Choose the answer below that best completes the sentence.

__________ Congress initially declined Lafayette’s services, he was eager to help, so he volunteered to serve free of charge.

A For instance  
B In summary  
C As a result  
D Although

8. Why did Lafayette decide to fight in the American Revolution?

______________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________
9. Why did joining the American cause have the potential to alienate Lafayette and disgrace his family?

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10. “Improbable” means that something is unlikely to be true or to happen. Why can Lafayette be considered an “improbable” leader of the American Revolution? Use evidence from the passage to support your answer.

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Teacher Guide & Answers

Passage Reading Level: Lexile 1120

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8. Why did Lafayette decide to fight in the American Revolution?

**Suggested answer:** Students should indicate that Lafayette decided to fight in the American Revolution because he supported the ideas of equality, freedom, reorganizing the structure of the government, and fighting against unfair taxation that the American Revolution began to represent. The passage also notes that Lafayette was “enchanted by the idealism and bravery of American soldiers.”

9. Why did joining the American cause have the potential to alienate Lafayette and disgrace his family?

**Suggested answer:** Students should note that Lafayette was born into a noble family and class and that he was a member of the class that seemed to benefit most from the current structure of government in France.

10. “Improbable” means that something is unlikely to be true or to happen. Why can Lafayette be considered an “improbable” leader of the American Revolution? Use evidence from the passage to support your answer.

**Suggested answer:** Answers may vary and should be supported by the passage.

Students may explain that Lafayette was a Frenchman and therefore would not have been expected to fight in the revolution of another country’s colonies.

Students may also note that, as a member of the nobility, he benefited from the current structure of the monarchical government. Thus, fighting in a war that embodied a change in the structure of government may be perceived as ironic considering the benefits he may have enjoyed from his noble position.

Students may also explain that, by deciding to go to America to fight in the war, Lafayette would be punished with imprisonment upon his return to France. He was willing to sacrifice many things in order to fight for the cause of American colonists.