A small and relatively isolated country, distant from the centers of world power, struggles to establish independence and self-government—despite a critical shortage of up-to-date weapons and materiel. A great military power steps in and provides badly needed training and war supplies, and even troops and naval support, so that victory is no longer an elusive goal but a probable outcome.

Are we describing United States intervention in the Middle East? Or Asia? No. We are looking through the lens of history at our own nascence as an independent nation among nations and the story of French and Spanish support for our cause.

Larrie D. Ferreiro’s recent book, “Brothers at Arms: American Independence and the Men of France and Spain Who Saved It,” examines the role of the French, aided and abetted by the Spanish, in securing this country’s independence by their intervention in our Revolutionary War and expansion of that conflict into other theaters. Our European
allies supplied critically needed weapons (muskets and cannons) as well as ammunition, gunpowder, uniforms, and the naval forces that proved decisive in bottling up Lord Cornwallis’ troops at Yorktown, Virginia—leading to the British surrender there. The 464-page book ($30 per copy) was published by Alfred A. Knopf, New York, in November 2016.

At the time of our War for Independence, the British Colonies of North America primarily were agrarian societies, and their largest exports (usually through Britain, as required by law) consisted of raw resources: cotton, tobacco, hemp, furs, rice, indigo, dried fish, and a circular trade of rum and molasses involved in the Caribbean sugar islands’ slave trade.

Most Americans are taught as schoolchildren of poorly outfitted Continental soldiers, armed perhaps with hunting weapons and fighting with their feet wrapped in rags, the winter at Valley Forge, and Washington crossing the Delaware to surprise Britain’s Hessian troops and win victory at Trenton, New Jersey. But while it also is learned that European officers such as the French Generals Rochambeau and Lafayette, the Polish Generals Kosciusko and Pulaski, and the Germans de Kalb and von Steuben afforded great help to the American cause, little usually is said about the general and dangerous shortage of weapons and ammunition or how the Revolution would likely have failed without material help from foreign nations. This was a critical problem despite the thousands of miles of ocean separating the Americans from their Colonial master, the preeminent naval power of Europe.

There were skilled gunsmiths in the Colonies, but each could produce perhaps only one musket per month. However, the major arms manufacturers of Europe could churn out battle-ready weapons by the thousands. As one visitor to Britain’s industrial heartland noted, the factories of Birmingham alone produced “a prodigious amount for exportation … annually above a hundred fifty thousand muskets”.

But France, still smarting from its defeat at the hands of its longtime British rivals and the resultant loss of Quebec in the Seven Years’ War little more than a decade earlier, saw an opportunity to redress the balance of power in its favor by intervening in the American war. Spain, allied dynastically with France, saw a ready-made opportunity to secure its own New World possessions against Britain’s rising power.

Ferreiro contends that the primary purpose of our Declaration of Independence in 1776 was to enable America to secure French and Spanish support that would likely not have been forthcoming in a mere civil war between the Colonies and Mother England over the specific acts of Parliament. And the French, for their part, had anticipated such a revanchist opportunity would open for them in the New World even before the Americans fully embraced the idea of independence.

The Founders believed they could not expect the French and Spanish to deal with them as a sovereign people until they had definitively proclaimed themselves as such. John Adams, no fan of foreign entanglements, admitted, “Foreign powers could not be expected to acknowledge us, till we had acknowledged ourselves as an independent nation.” And Thomas Jefferson noted that “a declaration of independence alone could allow European powers to treat with us.” It also is Ferreiro’s belief that, despite the significant outlays in support of the Americans, including up to $50 billion in fiscal aid in addition to weapons and supplies, our War of Independence was not the decisive element in the French fiscal crisis that led to their own Revolution shortly after ours. That crisis had long been brewing because of the deep indebtedness of the French state.

Ferreiro’s book was a finalist in contention for the 2017 Pulitzer Prize in history and is an excellent read. Congratulations, Dr. Ferreiro.

Ferreiro is a naval architect and historian and holds a Ph.D. from the Imperial College in London, England. He teaches history at George Mason University and has written and edited several books on naval history. He also is research director at the Defense Acquisition University (DAU) and executive editor of Defense AT&L’s sister publication, DAU’s Defense Acquisition Research Journal.

This article was compiled by the editors of Defense AT&L magazine.