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The Revolutionary Career of Louis Philippe de Ségur: Caught Between Tradition and Reform

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A Thesis presented to the Graduate Faculty
of the College of William and Mary in Candidacy for the Degree of
Master of Arts

Lyon G. Tyler Department of History

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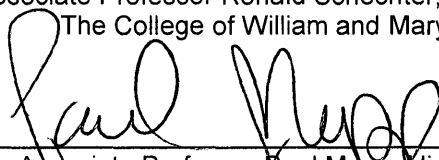
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ABSTRACT

This thesis explores the intellectual and social atmosphere of the American Revolution as experienced in France by a select group of young French nobles. The French sword nobles, longing for a war in which to prove themselves, saw the American Revolution as a chance to reassert their traditional role in society. More than that though, they saw the American Revolution as an integral part of the new enlightenment culture and a chance to experiment with the ideas of Montesquieu, Voltaire, Locke, and Rousseau on a new stage across the Atlantic. Additionally, they relied on past applications of ancient philosophers and French history as a whole to explore how the past could influence their own future.

By exploring the memoirs of Louis Philippe de Ségur, this thesis argues that sword noble support of the American Revolution was the product of an ideology shaped by both new and old ideas. At the time of the Revolution, nobles remained committed to two modes of thought, that of the enlightenment and that of tradition. Rather than simply one part leading to action, the combination of old and new ideas was what led to noble support for a rebellion against a monarchy, something that sounds, on the surface, incongruous with their traditional social position. By exploring this dichotomy of old and new, a deeper understanding of noble ideology emerges that helps to explain the apparent contradiction of a privileged order fighting in a Revolution expressing the merits of liberty and equality.

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The Revolutionary Career of Louis Philippe de Ségur: Caught Between Tradition and Reform

Introduction:

During a visit to Spa, one of the principal gathering places of eighteenth-century intellectuals, a young man heard some surprising news. Across the ocean, a group of colonists were in a state of rebellion against their mother country: Britain. This young man later remarked, “the first cannon shot, fired in that hemisphere, in deference of the standard of liberty, resounded throughout Europe, with the rapidity of lightening.”¹ Additionally, “Their daring courage electrified every mind, and excited universal admiration, more particularly amongst young people, who always feel an inclination for novelties, and an eagerness for battles.”²

This young man was in fact a young nobleman and the son of a prominent member of the French court. His name was Louis Philippe de Ségur, and he is the emblematic young sword noble of the eighteenth century, caught between the tradition and status of the second estate and the new excitement over reform. Writing in 1824, he recalled, “I was very much struck on observing the unanimous burst of so lively and general an interest in the rebellion of a people against a sovereign.”³ This essay seeks to explain the conundrum Ségur expresses, arguing that in fact the interest in the American Revolution arose as

¹ Count Louis Philippe de Ségur, *Memoirs and Recollections of Count Louis Philippe de Ségur: Three Volumes in One*, published 1824, ed. Harmon Tupper and Harry W, Nerhood (New York:Arno Press & The New York Times, 1970), 75.

² Ségur, *Memoirs and Recollections of Count Louis Philippe de Ségur*, 75.

³Ségur, *Memoirs and Recollections of Count Louis Philippe de Ségur*, 75.

part of both a long tradition of rebellion and current intellectual trends.

Sword Noble support of the American Revolution was the product of an ideology shaped by both new and old ideas. At the time of the Revolution, nobles remained committed to two modes of thought: that of the Enlightenment and that of tradition. Ségur saw this dichotomy particularly among the young sword nobility.

With respect to us, the young French nobility, we felt no regret for the past, no anxiety for the future, and gaily trod a soil bedecked with flowers, which concealed a precipice from our sight.... We enjoyed the advantages which old institutions had handed down to us, together with the liberty which new customs had introduced.⁴

Rather than simply one part of this atmosphere influencing these young nobles, the combination of old and new ideas led to noble support for a rebellion against traditional power relationships - something that sounds, on the surface, incongruous with their traditional social position.

In order to understand this apparent contradiction, one must put oneself in Ségur's place and look at the American Revolution not as part of the longer story of the French Revolution, but rather as its own distinct moment. Ségur himself even supports this methodology, writing:

Perhaps we can, with difficulty, comprehend, at this period, the nature of such an impression [as the one I had of Voltaire]; we have been witness to so many events, - to such a succession of men and things, that we are rendered almost indifferent to everything; and to conceive what I then felt, it would be necessary to breathe the atmosphere in which I lived.⁵

Recent historians have begun to debate how to pursue this methodology. Robert Darnton argues in his interpretation of folklore in the mid eighteenth-century for

⁴ Ségur, *Memoirs and Recollections of Count Louis Philippe de Ségur*, 25-26.

⁵ Ségur, *Memoirs and Recollections of Count Louis Philippe de Ségur*, 164-165.

an approach that understands the past as a separate entity. Darnton writes, “when you realize that you are not getting something – a joke, a proverb, a ceremony – that is particularly meaningful to the natives, you can see where to grasp a foreign system of meaning in order to unravel it.”⁶ Participation in the American Revolution by a social group that derived its very existence from monarchy seems alien and surprising. The colonial Americans’ reaction against monarchy, however, did not appear that way to Ségur and his contemporaries in 1776. In fact, Ségur’s memoirs are a carefully-worded refutation of the idea that the nobles knew they were, in essence, digging their own graves. Darnton’s idea became an important inspiration for this project as I sought to move beyond the French Revolution to an appreciation of the American Revolution as its own distinct entity.⁷

Much of the historiography of France in the eighteenth-century is devoted to the study of an age of revolutions. R.R. Palmer’s canonical work on the subject argues that the American Revolution was the climax of the age of the Enlightenment, suggesting the ideas of the Enlightenment might be put into practice.⁸ For Palmer, the American Revolution was part of a larger challenging

⁶ Robert Darnton, *The Great Cat Massacre and Other Episodes in French Cultural History* (New York: Basic Books, 1984), 78.

⁷ For more information on the social causes of the French Revolution and the aristocracy see William Doyle, *Aristocracy and its Enemies in the Age of Revolution* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009); William Doyle, *Origins of the French Revolution*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988); and Jay M. Smith, *The Culture of Merit: Nobility, Royal Service, and the Making of Absolute Monarchy in France, 1600-1789* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1996). For more information on the nobility and the tensions between different segments of the noble population see Guy Chaussinand-Nogaret, *The French Nobility in the Eighteenth Century*, trans. William Doyle (Cambridge, London, New York and Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 1985) and Patrice Higonnet, *Class, Ideology, and the Rights of Nobles During the French Revolution* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981).

⁸ R. R. Palmer, *The Age of the Democratic Revolution*, vol. 1, *The Challenge* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1959), 239.

of monarchical authority and a larger moment of conflict involving the aristocratic order throughout the west. Certainly Palmer deals with the ramifications of the American Revolution and a number of its causes, but he is focused on telling a much larger story than just that of the French nobility's involvement.

Within the French historiography, there is also a large body that argues for revenge and desire for military conflict as the main impetus for support of the American rebellion. Simon Schama discusses Lafayette's dissatisfaction with the long period of peace between France and England. Schama argues that Lafayette's inability to fit in at court led to his initial fascination with the American rebellion. Lafayette had a greater understanding of military life than of court polish, preferring the "company of the wooden sword" composed of likeminded young sword nobles to the intrigues of court.⁹

Schama's interpretation echoes Ségur's memoirs from time to time with Schama even including a quote from Ségur's memoirs as ammunition for his argument. Speaking of his boredom with the long peace, Ségur wrote:

The clash of arms [between the colonists and the mother country]...had given an additional stimulus to the warlike inclinations of our youth. We were irritated at the tardy circumspection of our ministry; we had become weary of an irksome peace, which had lasted more than ten years, and every heart beat with the desire of retrieving the disgrace of the last war, of taking the field against England, and of flying to the aid of America.¹⁰

Like many of his contemporaries, Ségur saw military glory as an integral part of the noble ethos and longed for a chance to receive the same admiration as his father. Fighting during the Battle of Lauffeld in 1746, Philippe Henri the marquis

⁹ Simon Schama, *Citizens: A Chronicle of the French Revolution* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1989), 25.

¹⁰ Ségur, *Memoirs and Recollections of Count Louis Philippe de Ségur*, 102.

de Ségur had sacrificed an arm in defense of his country's honor.¹¹ Louis XV is even said to have remarked to Louis Philippe de Ségur's grandfather Henri-François, "Men like your son deserve to be invulnerable"¹² and then stated that as long as men like Philippe Henri defended it, France itself would remain invulnerable.¹³ Raised in a tradition of noble glory and taught about the impressive exploits of his father and other noble Frenchmen, it is unsurprising that Ségur too would jump at the chance for military action to prove his worth.

In reading his memoirs, it becomes obvious that Ségur does embody this idea of noble lust for battle to an extent, but at many instances, Ségur's writings also problematize this simple explanation. This essay argues for a more diverse motivation for action rooted in a complicated dichotomy of old and new ideas that the young nobility tried, not always successfully, to combine into a single ideology. This is not to say that there were not those who sought opportunities for valor and revenge, simply that there is more to the story.

The point of this essay is not to discredit previous historians but instead to add to the dialogue. Yes, the sword nobles were motivated by revenge, by a desire for glory, and by a desire to be part of something new, but these motivations came to be precisely because of the combination of new ideas and traditional societal roles. It is important to look at men like Ségur specifically because they defy the simple molds of revenge, economic motivations, or a desire for military glory. He fits within a category of both sincerity and selfish

¹¹ For more information on the military exploits of Philippe Henri de Ségur see Leon Apt, *Louis-Philippe de Ségur: An Intellectual in a Revolutionary Age* (The Hague, Netherlands: Martinus Nijhoff, 1969), 2.

¹² Ségur, *Memoirs and Recollections of Count Louis Philippe de Ségur*, 8.

¹³ Apt, *Louis-Philippe de Ségur*, 2.

interests, which relied on a combination of old and new ideas about the position of the noble in the eighteenth century. For these men, tradition and progress melded together into a new ideology that encouraged support for the American Revolution as a means of involvement in the creation of a new republican experiment. This experiment itself would be based on the new ideas put forth as part of the Age of Enlightenment and the tradition of classical thinkers.

While it is certainly true that man rarely behaves in absolutes or thinks only in terms of specific modes of thought, for the purposes of clarity and to echo Ségur's own separation of thoughts, this essay draws a distinction between the collection of ideas that indicate new methods of thought, and those relying on traditional classifications of place in a broader societal context. The first part of this essay is concerned with defining the nobility in question with the following two sections dealing with the intellectual atmosphere and the historical role of the nobility, respectively. Within each section, the reader will see a complication of the dichotomy of old and new as the young sword nobles sought to pull from both tradition and progress in order to justify their support for the American Revolutionaries.

For the young sword nobles, the American Revolution fell into a long line of rebellions including the *ligue* and the *fronde* where despotic authority was challenged. Moreover, the intellectual currents of the time created an atmosphere that encouraged a reinterpretation of the past. The nobility read history by pulling from Enlightenment and classical ideas, but also increasingly included the history of France, projecting this new intellectual sphere back on

their history. Historian Edward Hallett Carr stated in a series of memorable lectures that the telling of history is the telling of the moment in which it is written.¹⁴ Ségur, though writing a century and a half earlier, subscribed to this view in his memoirs. By looking at his interpretation of French history and classical thinkers, the historian can detect a broader trend of a melding of innovation and tradition into a noble ideology that could support the American rebellion.

At this point, it is necessary to acknowledge memoirs are inherently biased and include justifications and reinterpretations the author finds necessary to their own goals for the project. The memoirs of Louis Philippe de Ségur are the memoirs of an old man who wished to tell the story of a remarkable time. His recollections stretch from his early childhood under Louis XV through the French Revolution and on to the restoration of the monarchy. Published in 1824, almost 50 years after the beginning of the American Revolution, the historian by necessity must remain skeptical of the memoir's veracity. However, despite the chronological disparity, Ségur's earlier comments as well as those of his contemporaries underscore the inner turmoil present in Ségur's later recollection. Since it is this inner turmoil that is the subject of this essay, Ségur's memoirs remain a useful asset for delving into the mindset of a young sword noble on the brink of the Age of Revolutions.

¹⁴ Edward Hallett Carr, *What is History?*, The George Macauley Trevelyan Lectures Delivered at the University of Cambridge January – March 1961 (New York: Vintage books, 1961), 5.

Who Were the Nobles?

Eighteenth-century France included a number of different segments of nobility, but this essay will focus on one particular group: the young sword nobility. A number of historians have addressed the different subdivisions of the nobility as a whole including R.R. Palmer, Jay Smith, Doina Harsanyi, Guy Chaussinand-Nogaret, Patrice Higonnet, and William Doyle. The French nobility consisted of the robe nobility and the sword nobility more generally, but these two segments were further divided into young and old as well as those who were newly ennobled and those who considered themselves noble from time immemorial. According to Harsanyi, the nobility as a coherent group was not conceptualized as such until Sieyès wrote “What is the third estate?” in 1789.¹⁵ At the time of the American Revolution in 1776, there was a greater discord between different segments of the nobility than there was between the “people” and the nobility. This essay is primarily focused on the young sword nobility, those who served as officers in the army, rather than the nobility of the *parlements* or of the provinces. These young sword nobles had a different conception of their place in society than other members of the second estate, one that was based on the notion of service to the state through warfare.

In order to understand the nobility’s reaction to the American Revolution, one must first understand how they defined themselves. Much of the scholarship on the nobility in the eighteenth century has focused on the state of the class in the days before the outbreak of the French Revolution. For William

¹⁵ Doina Pasca Harsanyi, *Lessons from America: Liberal French Nobles in Exile, 1793-1798*, (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2010), 4-7.

Doyle, the nobility defined itself in opposition to those who lacked the privilege granted to this elite class: exemption from certain taxes. Doyle saw the latter half of the eighteenth-century as the beginning of increased challenge to previously held beliefs about the supremacy of a hereditary class and movement towards greater involvement by those previously excluded.¹⁶ The nobility itself took part in this contesting of the traditional social order. Doyle argues the nobility saw themselves as so entrenched in the structure of French society that they felt their position safe despite rumblings of trouble.¹⁷ R.R. Palmer and Leon Apt echo this argument, suggesting the nobility could act with sincerity and confidence because they felt their position was safe.

In his memoir Ségur said much the same thing, that the situations seemed different at the time and that reform could potentially strengthen the noble position rather than destroy it.

We were thus pleased at this petty war [between reform and tradition] although it was undermining our own ranks and privileges, and the remains of our ancient power; but we felt not these attacks personally; we merely witnessed them. It was as yet but a war of words and paper, which did not appear to us to threaten the superiority of existence we enjoyed, consolidated as we thought it, by a possession of many centuries.¹⁸

Doyle, however, sees the differences between newly noble and immemorial nobility as playing the dominant role in struggles within the second estate, something Ségur is far less troubled by. The young sword nobles, like Ségur, were far more concerned with warfare and new intellectual attitudes to worry about the other members of the second estate.

¹⁶ William Doyle, *Aristocracy and Its Enemies in the Age of Revolution* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 7.

¹⁷ Doyle, *Aristocracy and Its Enemies in the Age of Revolution*, 7.

¹⁸ Ségur, *Memoirs and Recollections of Count Louis Philippe de Ségur*, 39.

These issues between different segments of the nobility certainly affected the inner workings of this class, but Ségur saw a change in the years leading up to the American Revolution. This could be, however, because he witnessed an equality manifesting itself in the nobility long before it took root in the third estate.¹⁹ For Ségur, the people with whom he interacted shared his status and his *raison d'être*. He admitted there were tensions between the young noblemen and the middle class, but stated, “the spirit of equality, introduced by the increase of knowledge, had begun to spread through the nation.”²⁰ He also felt, “it generally happened that there was less cause of complaint against the higher nobility or persons attached to the court than against the country nobility, who were poor and unenlightened.”²¹ In Ségur’s own experience, the conflict was less between the new and old nobility and more between the poor and the rich. At times, Ségur argued this sense of equality among nobles of his own stature led to greater support for the enlightened Americans.

In addition to discussions of privilege, other scholars have addressed the obligations of the nobility and its impact on noble pathology. In her analysis of the nobility in the wake of the French Revolution, Doina Harsanyi traces the noble post-revolutionary ethos back to its origins in an eighteenth-century noble ideology. For Harsanyi, noble privilege was not necessarily a privilege at all, but instead was a list of obligations. Nobles must “put honor before life,... conquer fear and surpass human limitations in times of war,... keep alive immemorial

¹⁹ Ségur, *Memoirs and Recollections of Count Louis Philippe de Ségur*, 79.

²⁰ Ségur, *Memoirs and Recollections of Count Louis Philippe de Ségur*, 67.

²¹ *Ibid*, 67.

traditions in times of peace, and ...protect the weak at all times.”²² Some nobles looked to combine these ideas of tradition with new values relating to learning, professional competence, and reform.²³ Noble officers saw their role as exemplifying bravery and chivalry - hallmarks of ideal noble leadership.²⁴

Harsanyi sees this preoccupation in Noailles who, “as a gentleman and an officer...was imbued with the ethos of service, patriotism, and merit.”²⁵ Ségur, a close friend of Noailles, shared his opinions. Much of Ségur’s lineage consisted of men who had exhibited superior bravery on the battlefield. His own father, at the Battle of Raucoux in 1745, continued to fight for a French victory despite incurring stomach wounds.²⁶ In 1746 at the battle of Lauffeld, Philippe-Henri de Ségur received a shot in the arm that required amputation, yet he remained in command until the end. This legacy dominated the younger Ségur’s understanding of noble duty. With the American Revolution, he longed for the chance to live up to the demands for service and merit, something achievable under the banners of philosophy and the noble devotion to classical heroes. This devotion will be handled in greater detail later in the essay.

Despite the appearance of some semblance of unity within the ranks of the high nobility, there remained an important division between young and old. Ségur discussed the discrepancies of age in his memoirs, stating many differences in philosophy related to differences in age. He suggested youth and

²² Doina Pasca Harsanyi, *Lessons from America: Liberal French Nobles in Exile, 1793-1798*, (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2010), 6.

²³ Harsanyi, *Lessons from America*, 6.

²⁴ *Ibid*, 31.

²⁵ *Ibid*, 31.

²⁶ *Apt, Louis-Philippe de Ségur*, 2.

ambition led to involvement in revolutionary ideas. Speaking of the young high nobility, Ségur wrote, “we only thought of amusements; and, led on by pleasure, we gaily ran our course in the midst of balls, fêtes, field-sports, plays and concerts, without foreseeing our future destinies.”²⁷ At this moment, it is important to remember Ségur’s purpose in writing his memoirs. As one of the nobles involved in the French Revolution, Ségur at times seems to hold himself responsible for its outcome, blaming his youth for the inability to grasp future ramifications. He goes on to suggest one facet of the young nobles’ fascination with new ideas was their abhorrence of older generations.

Impeded in [our] light career by the antiquated pride of the old court, and the irksome etiquette of the old order of things, the severity of the old clergy, the aversion of our parents to our new fashions, and our costumes which were favorable to the principle of equality, we felt disposed to adopt with enthusiasm the philosophical doctrines professed by literary men remarkable for their boldness and their wit.²⁸

For Ségur and the other young nobles, part of the allure of these new ideas was the displeasure of the older generation. This theme of acting in opposition to one’s elders continued in their desire to become involved in the American conflict later.

Conceptions of chivalry and glory also proved highly motivating for the young sword nobles. The desire for military glory came in part from the young sword nobility’s longing to equal the achievements of their fathers and ancestors. Here, historians must note the contradictions of the relationship between young and old, where previous generations are simultaneously reviled and revered. As noted earlier, Simon Schama points to Lafayette’s father as a major motivating

²⁷ Ségur, *Memoirs and Recollections of Count Louis Philippe de Ségur*, 38.

²⁸ *Ibid*, 38.

force behind Lafayette's joining the American cause.²⁹ He argues, however, that Lafayette's desire for revenge led to his involvement far more than a quest for glory. As proof of this, Schama offers the fact that Lafayette tracked down the commander of the battle where his father was killed to exact vengeance.³⁰ Ségur, however, seems motivated more by glory than a sense of vengeance. Perhaps this impulse stems from the fact that his father lived, and he thus felt no personal tie to the Seven Years War. In writing about the experience of warfare in his family, Ségur instead discusses the tactical genius and glory of his father, sharing the comment of Louis XV to Ségur's grandfather that, "men like your son deserve to be invulnerable."³¹ The deeds of his father, like with Lafayette, drove Ségur to desire his own chance to prove himself on the battlefield.

In his memoirs, Ségur suggests similar ideas were at play for both groups, young and old, but that underlying desires differed depending upon one's age and position in this noble society. For men like Ségur, youth was an important qualifier. "We, more young and ardent, only enrolled ourselves under the banners of philosophy, in the hope of distinguishing ourselves in the field, and of reaping honors and preferments; in short, it was in the character of heroes of chivalry that we displayed our philosophy."³²

Simple glory was certainly a factor in these young nobles' desire to involve themselves in America, but education and noble ideology also played a role. The following section argues that the Enlightenment culture was so pervasive, and

²⁹ Schama, *Citizens*, 24-25.

³⁰ *Ibid*, 25.

³¹ Ségur, *Memoirs and Recollections of Count Louis Philippe de Ségur*, 8.

³² *Ibid*, 128.

the noble education so rooted in classical ideas of chivalry, that the two concepts became connected in noble minds to form a new ideology. Lafayette himself was drawn to America in part because of the opportunity to paint himself as the gallant knight, the chivalric hero, an interest cultivated by his education in the heroic deeds of his ancestors.³³ For Ségur, “Reared up...from our childhood, in the maxims of ancient chivalry, our imagination regretted those heroic and almost fabulous days.” These nobles may have seized upon an opportunity for battle, but they did so in part because of the picture they had of America. As Palmer argues, for the young nobles, the American Revolution served as encouragement, proving ideas of the “Age of Enlightenment” could be put into practice.³⁴ I contend, however, that Palmer’s argument is only one half of a larger story. In order to truly understand the young sword nobles’ mindset, it is necessary to examine also their classical education and historical perspective. Often times, these nobles saw themselves as flying to the defense of America, taking on the demeanor of the ancient and French heroes they studied. Ideas about struggles between the orders and a desire for war with England, or war more generally, are important, but the young sword nobles’ support for America was more complex and involved tension within the dichotomy of old and new and a struggle to reconcile these seemingly conflicting aspects of eighteenth-century society.

The Enlightenment and Education:

The creation of a distinct sword noble ideology depended heavily on noble

³³ Gottschalk, *Lafayette Comes to America* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1935), 6.

³⁴ Palmer, *The Age of the Democratic Revolution*, 239.

education concentrated on the classics and French history on the one hand and new intellectual endeavors on the other. The Enlightenment represented a new way of thinking supposedly in conflict with traditional social structures and sense of belonging within an extremely hierarchical society. Many nobles, however, saw Enlightenment thought as a way to recapture the ideal French society through reform from within. Rather than simply challenging the old, the Enlightenment could provide a new way of looking at the world. In order for this reform to be possible, nobles also used traditional conceptions of morals and ancient teachings. History, and ancient philosophy in particular, represented old forms of knowledge that continued to influence the ideology of these young nobles. Men like Ségur were caught between these two ideas of progress and tradition. Far from being problematic, however, this dichotomy instead allowed for greater flexibility and support of the American cause since both conceptualizations provided compelling reasons to back the rebels.

The Enlightenment was one of the most important intellectual movements of the eighteenth century, predicated on a reevaluation of concepts of reason and epistemology. Rather than a single set of principles, the enlightenment consisted of a loose conglomeration of ideas venerating a devotion to questioning existing knowledge. Within this new intellectual framework, philosophes proposed a number of theories relating to government, economics, science, and religion. The Enlightenment came to symbolize ideas of progress and human rights as well as a cosmopolitan attitude. In order to arrive at these new ideas, however,

one first had to question everything.³⁵ As Diderot wrote:

We [the philosophes] dare to raise doubts about the infallibility of Aristotle and Plato, and the time has come when the works that still enjoy the highest reputation will begin to lose some of their great prestige or even fall into complete oblivion.... Such are the consequences of the progress of reason, an advance that will overthrow so many idols and perhaps restore to their pedestals some statues that have been cast down. The latter will be those of the rare geniuses who were ahead of their own times.³⁶

More than anything, the Enlightenment was about the overthrow of tradition and the canonization of new intellectual heroes. In order to know anything at all, the intellectual first had to experiment for himself.

Before the onset of the enlightenment, the educated elite began by questioning established scientific knowledge. This Scientific Revolution formed the basis of the questioning attitude that came to characterize the Enlightenment and served as an important precursor to the intellectual culture of the eighteenth-century.³⁷ It also formed the basis of the enlightenment's methods of thought and reasoning. Descartes epitomized this attitude in his "Discourse on Method," in which he wrote that in order to know anything, one must first doubt everything. In his work, Descartes pioneered a deductive method³⁸, where conclusions must be proved through reasoning. Descartes proposed that man had the capacity to

³⁵ For a general overview of enlightenment ideas and a timeline of important works see Isser Woloch and Gregory S. Brown, *Eighteenth-Century Europe: Tradition and Progress, 1715-1789* (New York and London: W.W. Norton & Company, 2012), 181-212.

³⁶ Denis Diderot, *The Definition of an Encyclopedia*, in *University of Chicago Readings in Western Civilization: The Old Regime and the French Revolution*, ed. Keith Michael Baker (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1987), 77.

³⁷ For more information on the Scientific Revolution see Steven Shapin, *The Scientific Revolution* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1996).

³⁸ The inductive method on the other hand, proposed by Francis Bacon, called for experimentation and observation to gain knowledge. Both methods, however, had one thing in common: the rejection of the idea of the past as the bastion of all knowledge. Instead of relying on ancient wisdom, the enlightenment suggested modern man possessed the capacity to think and discover things for himself. This attitude of questioning and quest for knowledge permeated all castes of society, including the sword nobility.

discover truth by moving from doubt and skepticism to certainty. By throwing out everything gathered through senses, impressions, and opinions one would end up with doubt, which Descartes saw as a form of thought and reason. In turn, this ability to think led to a connection with the mind and an ability to understand the universe. Descartes' ideas represented a radical break with tradition, according to which the church and ancient philosophers were regarded as the only sources of knowledge.³⁹

Galileo's work also proposed that the ancient philosophers were not all knowing. In expressing radically new ideas about the workings of the solar system – and the presence of sunspots in particular – Galileo launched an attack on the Aristotelian model of natural philosophy, which saw the heavens as inviolable and radically different from earthly bodies. This philosophy had characterized scientific thought from Aristotle, through the Middle Ages and the renaissance, and up to the time of Galileo.⁴⁰ Ultimately, Galileo represented profound optimism for human capacity to gain knowledge, an attitude that was developed further during the enlightenment in the eighteenth century.

This new explosion of knowledge gradually moved from the realm of the scientific to that of government and experience in society. Historians have long regarded Montesquieu's *Persian Letters* as one of the first true enlightenment texts. Writing in 1721 in the wake of the absolutist reign of Louis XIV, Montesquieu told the story of life in France through the eyes of two Persian travelers. Their letters offer a commentary on French customs, government,

³⁹ For more information on Descartes' ideas see Shapin, *The Scientific Revolution*, 68.

⁴⁰ For more information on Galileo's challenge to traditional interpretation see Shapin, *The Scientific Revolution*, 15-17.

society, gender relations, and a multitude of other subjects as contrasted to the “other,” in this case the seraglio.

While certainly not as detailed as his later work, the *Persian Letters* does offer a critique of absolute monarchy and the risks of despotic rule.

Montesquieu, under the guise of Usbek, wrote of how the *parlements*' weakened state can be attributed to the fact that, “they have yielded to time, which destroys everything, to moral corruption, which weakens everything, and to the supremacy of the central authority, by which everything has been laid low.”⁴¹ For Montesquieu despotic authority remains dangerous, especially when a central authority has done away with all other forms of power and representation. This idea had distinct reverberations across the Atlantic where the American colonists drew on Montesquieu's ideas of the danger of despotic authority, as well as his later writings about the separation of powers, as a basis for rebellion.

Séguir's thoughts on absolute government followed in the tradition of Montesquieu. His memoirs feature attacks on the absolutism of Louis XIV and the weakness of Louis XV. Séguir's initial enthusiasm for Louis XVI, however, is strikingly similar to the optimism for the early reign of Louis XV present in Montesquieu's *Persian Letters*.⁴² In speaking of the death of Louis XV, Séguir remarked:

A change of reign is the best antidote to court illusions; they cease

⁴¹Montesquieu, *Persian Letters*, trans. C. J. Betts (London: Penguin Books, 2004), 174.

⁴² Séguir was not the only one who looked to Montesquieu for inspiration for his attack on the current French monarchy. The marquis d'Argenson compared the court under the direction of Madame de Pompadour to the seraglio described by Montesquieu. For more information about criticism, particularly gender-based criticism in the old regime, see Mita Choudhury, “Women, Gender, and the Image of the Eighteenth-Century Aristocracy,” in *The French Nobility in the Eighteenth Century: Reassessments and New Approaches*, ed. Jay M. Smith (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2006), 186-187.

altogether: the heart loses its disguise; the deceased king is no longer more than a man, and is often considered less than one. No scenic representation conveys a stronger morality with it, or one that gives rise to deeper reflection.⁴³

Here, the death of Louis XV allowed for greater reflections on his character and the removal of the veil that obscured the new truths. Using a rhetorical similarity to Montesquieu following the death of Louis XIV, the death of the king for Ségur meant his failings might be laid bare and then replaced with optimism for the new reign. For Ségur:

Everything now appeared to justify such a hope: the throne was occupied by a young Prince who was already universally known by the goodness of his heart, the correctness of his mind, and the simplicity of his manners...Averse to ostentation, to luxury, to pride, and to flattery, it seemed as if heaven had modeled this King not for his court, but for his subjects.⁴⁴

Here, Ségur expressed a similar optimism to that of Montesquieu following the death of Louis XIV, but like Montesquieu, Ségur found himself later disillusioned. However, the fact that he would phrase his defense of his youthful folly like this highlights the influence of Montesquieu on Ségur's own intellectual pursuits.

In France, Ségur recalled, "Nobody dreamed of a revolution, although it was rapidly effecting itself in public opinion. Montesquieu had brought to light once more the titles of nations to their original privileges, which had so long remained involved in darkness."⁴⁵ The fascination with England in particular influenced all segments of the sword nobility regardless of age. "The laws of England were studied and envied by men of a mature age, English horses and jockeys, boots and coats after the English fashion, could alone suit the fancy of

⁴³ Ségur, *Memoirs and Recollections of Count Louis Philippe de Ségur*, 33.

⁴⁴ *Ibid*, 33.

⁴⁵ Ségur, *Memoirs and Recollections of Count Louis Philippe de Ségur*, 21.

young men.”⁴⁶ Through the Enlightenment, England became a mythical example of a form of government desirable to the nobility who had been largely ignored since the rise of absolutism. While a monarchy, for the French nobility the English government appeared free from the shackles of the strict control exercised by the absolutist monarchs of France. Later disillusionment thus struck deeper and evoked greater outrage at the shattering of said illusion.

By drawing on Montesquieu as an important influence, Ségur also exhibits an affinity for the American colonists struggling against what was seen as a despotic authority, that of a corrupt Parliament. Ségur wrote:

This impulse of feeling [the support for the Americans by people under the rule of various European monarchies] was a remarkable forerunner of the mighty convulsions that were about to shake the whole world; and I was very far from being the only one whose heart then beat at the sound of liberty just waking from its slumbers, and struggling to throw off the yoke of arbitrary power.⁴⁷

Descriptions present during the Enlightenment, particularly by Montesquieu, of arbitrary power resonated with men like Ségur and continuously influenced their reasoning. Because of men like Montesquieu, they were more inclined to support a rebellion in America that sought to reconcile a perceived gross injustice. At the time, they saw Louis XVI as a promise for a better future and so instead turned their gaze to the Americas as a locus of despotic authority. Later of course, they would rebel in their own country, but for the moment at least France seemed safe.

The *Encyclopédie* edited by Diderot and d’Alembert became another canonical Enlightenment work. Published in seventeen volumes of text and

⁴⁶ Ségur, *Memoirs and Recollections of Count Louis Philippe de Ségur*, 21.

⁴⁷ Ségur, *Memoirs and Recollections of Count Louis Philippe de Ségur*, 75-76.

eleven volumes of plates, the combined twenty-eight volumes of the *Encyclopédie* became one of the best sellers of Old Regime France. In fact, even though the *Encyclopédie* carried a price tag of 1,500 livres, the original run of 4,000 copies sold out. The smaller runs costing 200 to 400 livres sold almost 16,000 copies.⁴⁸ The work was published in Paris between 1751 and 1772 and included different entries written by a number of experts in their individual fields. Entries covered topics across numerous disciplines including technology, moral philosophy, social sciences, and economics.⁴⁹

Diderot himself also wrote an essay defining the *Encyclopédie*. In it, he states the reason for its compellation writing, “when we are beginning to shake off the yoke of authority and tradition in order to hold fast to the laws of reason, there is scarcely a single elementary or dogmatic book which satisfies us entirely.”⁵⁰ Diderot’s essay does more than simply describe the aim of the collection of volumes he and d’Alembert edited; he also states the intention of the enlightenment itself as seen by one of its participants. For Diderot, the point of this new movement was the veneration of reason above all else. Writing during the height of this new mode of thinking, Diderot saw himself and his contemporaries “beginning to shake off the yoke of authority and tradition,”⁵¹ challenging the authority of the ancient philosophers and calling for the works of new authorities to take their place. The philosophes were doing something

⁴⁸ This widespread publishing effort generated almost 1 million livres in profit and exposed a willingness to spend large amounts of money for multi-volume sets. For more information on the commercial success of the *Encyclopédie* see Woloch, *Eighteenth-Century Europe*, 187.

⁴⁹ For more information about specific topics and selection of authors included in the *Encyclopedia* see Woloch, *Eighteenth-Century Europe*, 185.

⁵⁰ Diderot, *The Definition of an Encyclopedia*, 77.

⁵¹ *Ibid*, 77.

entirely new and untried by focusing on reason rather than custom. Challenging authority marked these intellectuals as radical, branding them as possible traitors to the doctrine of absolutism and religious authority. These intellectuals sought to create a revolution in thinking, suggesting man might achieve a deeper understanding of truth and natural law through reason. In describing the aim of the *Encyclopédie*, Diderot claimed that the Enlightenment intended to inspire “a revolution in men’s minds to free them from prejudice.”⁵²

Diderot’s ideas about dispelling prejudice resonated with his intellectual followers. While speaking of Voltaire, one of the principle contributors to French intellectual culture, Ségur wrote, “no head of a party ever combated and vanquished at the same time, without appearing to mix in the controversy, a greater number of enemies, till then supposed invincible, of errors long consecrated by time and prejudice deeply rooted by ancient customs.”⁵³ Ségur himself recognized one of the main goals of the Enlightenment, as articulated by Diderot in the introduction to his famous *Encyclopédie*, to dispel prejudice and force men to think for themselves rather than relying on uncontested ancient wisdom. The use of the word “prejudice” to describe these long held beliefs suggests Diderot’s influence on Ségur’s own work and supports the thesis that these young nobles were deeply influenced by this new intellectual culture and sought to emulate their philosophe heroes.

Séгур again used the word “prejudice” when describing a number of the

⁵² Quoted in Woloch, *Eighteenth-Century Europe*, 189. Woloch argues that by using the word prejudice, Diderot was specifically attacking the dogma of the Catholic Church and calling for an end to the uncontested authority of clerics. The word prejudice came to symbolize, however, the rejection of all previously uncontested beliefs and was used quite often in enlightenment thought.

⁵³ Ségur, *Memoirs and Recollections of Count Louis Philippe de Ségur*, 160.

great thinkers of the Enlightenment. He wrote, "all prejudices were assailed at once by the keen and sparkling wit of Voltaire, by the eloquent logic of Rousseau, by the encyclopedian stores of d'Alembert and of Diderot, by the violent declarations of Raynal."⁵⁴ Following this statement glorifying the work of the philosophes, Ségur goes on to contrast this expelling of prejudices against the continued splendor of court and the nobility's obsession with visual manifestations of its power. For the nobility, the philosophe's ideas were mixed with old ideas of noble splendor and the physical representations of power and legitimacy. For men like Ségur, new philosophical ideas blending with old notions of nobles' historical role led to a confusion of old and new and a desire to reconcile ideas of the Enlightenment with traditional roles.

Additionally, Ségur described the French court's infatuation with Diderot and d'Alembert writing, "We began to despise the power of Versailles, and paid our court to that of the encyclopaedia."⁵⁵ Here, for Ségur, the Enlightenment principles became the authority with the nobles moving away from Versailles both physically and mentally. Ségur saw, "A word of praise of d'Alembert and Diderot, was better received than the most signal mark of favor bestowed by a prince. Gallantry, ambition, and philosophy, were all intermixed and confounded together."⁵⁶ This mixing of ideas had profound effects on noble perceptions of the American cause and their role in it.

Ségur and other young nobles recognized the power Enlightenment philosophy held over their ideology, particularly with regard to their support of the

⁵⁴ Ibid, 21.

⁵⁵ Ségur, *Memoirs and Recollections of Count Louis Philippe de Ségur*, 141.

⁵⁶ Ibid, 141.

American Revolution. Recalling when American deputies such as Silas Deane and Arthur Lee arrived in Paris, Ségur wrote:

This unexpected apparition [the arrival of the American emissaries in France] produced upon us a greater effect, in consequence of its novelty, and of its occurring precisely at the period when literature and philosophy had circulated amongst us an universal desire for reforms, a disposition to encourage innovations, and the seeds of an ardent attachment to liberty.⁵⁷

Acceptance of the American revolt became particularly widespread precisely because the rebellion seemed to capture the spirit of reform and reason propagated by the Enlightenment. The roots of support for rebellion could be found not only in a desire for vengeance or glory, but also in deep-seated intellectual beliefs and interest in putting Enlightenment promises into practice.

So, how did this new intellectual culture influence Ségur and impact his relationship with the idea of America? The simple answer is that the Enlightenment as a broad intellectual movement was everywhere and permeated elite culture in the late eighteenth century. The new concepts of reason and a culture of questioning established doctrines led to an exploration of new ideas of government, the introduction of separation of powers, and a veneration of the English system in its ideal state.

Admiration of English culture by important philosophes had numerous ramifications within the ranks of the young sword nobles. Voltaire in particular wrote extensively about the English political system suggesting, albeit subtly, that it was the perfect form of government. These writings led to his exile from France and contributed to his status as rebel, only increasing his popularity among the elites. As mentioned before, Ségur and his fellow nobles tried to

⁵⁷ Ségur, *Memoirs and Recollections of Count Louis Philippe de Ségur*, 102.

imitate English behavior by dressing in the English fashion. Ségur wrote, “English horses and jockeys, boots and coats after the English fashion, could alone suit the fancy of young men.”⁵⁸ Everywhere, there was a fascination with all things English and a desire to see England as the ideal. When the country failed to live up to this expectation and the colonies revolted, the French sword nobles like Ségur were quick to come to the defense of the ideal so celebrated by men of the Enlightenment. Speaking of his initial interest in the conflict in America Ségur wrote:

The young officers of the French army...were constant in their attendance on the American envoys, and urged their inquiries on the situation of affairs, the forces of Congress, the means of defense, and the various intelligence regularly received from that great theater, on which liberty was maintaining so valorous a combat against the tyranny of Great Britain.⁵⁹

When the English Parliament appeared to have strayed from its ideal state into despotism, young French nobles began to use Enlightenment principles that spoke out against tyranny to defend colonial actions.

The opportunity to demonstrate military prowess and win glory certainly motivated the young nobles as well, but the memoirs of Ségur, among other documents, suggest a deeper inspiration. Concepts of intellectual justifications and a desire to put enlightenment principles into practice, as one of the experiments advocated by this new culture of questioning and discovery, motivated these young sword nobles. Ségur wrote, “Literature and philosophy had circulated amongst us an universal desire for reforms, a disposition to

⁵⁸ Ibid, 21.

⁵⁹ Ségur, *Memoirs and Recollections of Count Louis Philippe de Ségur*, 103.

encourage innovations, and the seeds of an ardent attachment to liberty.”⁶⁰ For young nobles like Ségur, the intellectual environment at the time of the American Revolution produced a greater infatuation with the colonist’s cause and impacted their interpretation of the unfolding events. Because of this new intellectual culture, the American Revolution became a symbolic representation of the Enlightenment rather than simply a rebellion.

This deep-seated devotion to intellectual currents stemmed from Ségur’s introduction to Enlightenment participants during the reign of Louis XV. From an early age Ségur interacted with a number of intellectuals, philosophes, and likeminded nobles. His mother, the Marquise de Ségur, ran an influential salon in Paris that hosted great names like Voltaire, Diderot, and D’Alembert.⁶¹ In this way, the Marquise was responsible for Ségur’s early education and introduction to Enlightenment ideas. In fact, Ségur shared an anecdote about Voltaire’s return to Paris in his memoirs. Upon arrival in Paris, Voltaire paid a visit to Ségur’s mother. Ségur recalled, “[He] had not forgotten her, he instantly entreated that he might see her, and although she had hardly sufficient strength left to behold, to hear, and to answer him, she did not hesitate to receive him.”⁶² This memory illustrates the prestige of the Ségur salon - that Voltaire would call upon the marquise de Ségur upon her deathbed - and the devotion to the intellectual atmosphere of the salon that the marquise herself felt and thus instilled in her son. Additionally, the early poetry of Ségur himself demonstrates the influence of

⁶⁰ Ségur, *Memoirs and Recollections of Count Louis Philippe de Ségur*, 102.

⁶¹ Apt, *Louis-Philippe de Ségur*, 3.

⁶² Ségur, *Memoirs and Recollections of Count Louis Philippe de Ségur*, 164.

the philosophes.⁶³ Leon Apt even argues that Ségur's love affair with literature and his later career as a man of letters might have been fostered by his early interaction with the great intellectuals of the eighteenth century.⁶⁴ While difficult to prove conclusively, Ségur's fond memories of these philosophes years later show his continued admiration and the profound impact their teachings had on his life.

Voltaire in particular captured Ségur's imagination and esteem. For Ségur, Voltaire was, "the prince of poets, the patriarch of philosophers, the glory of his age and country."⁶⁵ Ségur elevated Voltaire to the status of some mythical incarnation of knowledge, taking on an almost saint-like quality. His admiration for Voltaire, however, did not remain merely superficial. For Ségur, Voltaire represented one of the greatest minds to express Enlightenment philosophy. In 1824, almost fifty years after their first meeting, Ségur recalled that, "Perhaps no single writer ever produced such important changes as Voltaire, in the opinions and manners of his times."⁶⁶ Ségur's obvious admiration for Voltaire permeates his memoirs.

Upon finally meeting his idol, Ségur recalled, "I was transported with pleasure and admiration, I felt like one suddenly permitted to be borne back into distant times, - who might behold Homer, Plato, Virgil, or Cicero face to face...It was that of exultation in a high degree."⁶⁷ As a product of an education system that prized the classics above all else, Ségur's praise of Voltaire as the equal of

⁶³ Apt, *Louis-Philippe de Ségur*, 3.

⁶⁴ *Ibid*, 3.

⁶⁵ Ségur, *Memoirs and Recollections of Count Louis Philippe de Ségur*, 160.

⁶⁶ *Ibid*, 160.

⁶⁷ *Ibid*, 164-165.

the great philosophers of antiquity becomes all the more powerful. For Ségur, an admirer of both the classics and the Enlightenment, Voltaire represented the future as well as the embodiment of the past. Thus, with his description of Voltaire, the reader can see his internal struggle, as Ségur remained trapped between two interpretations of right and reason. Ségur represents the conflict between Enlightenment thought and classical admiration. This idea will be elaborated on at a later point in this essay, but Ségur's relationship with Voltaire is important to note.

Since Ségur's memoirs were published years after the fact, it is easy to wonder whether he was as much of an intellectual as he claimed. In fact, Leon Apt argues that the Enlightenment remained more of a game for these young nobles than a true avocation. He saw the "young noblemen's adherence to the spirit of the Enlightenment [as] more apparent than real," arguing their interest came less from a genuine interest and more from a desire to be on the cutting edge of new intellectual currents.⁶⁸ For this to be true, men like Ségur would have to have only a cursory understanding of the concepts the Enlightenment thinkers proposed. Luckily for the historian, fellow travelers in America remarked upon Ségur's character in journals written during the revolution. One such acquaintance, Clermont-Crèvecoeur, expressed admiration for both Ségur's demeanor and mental capacities. He wrote:

During the short time he was with us the Comte de Ségur appeared to us a most courteous and amiable nobleman; his conversation was very animated and witty. He has a vast amount of knowledge but it is not superficial like that of many other noblemen. He reasons with the convincing air of one who really knows. He has devoted much of his time

⁶⁸ Apt, *Louis-Philippe de Ségur*, 9.

to literary pursuits.⁶⁹

While he was certainly invested in this salon culture and exploration of Enlightenment ideas, retrospectively Ségur echoes Clermont-Crèvecoeur's observation that many saw the Enlightenment as a way of antagonizing the older generation and the clergy.⁷⁰ Here, however, Clermont-Crèvecoeur's comment proves relevant to understanding Ségur's avocation. Clermont-Crèvecoeur specifically wrote, "He has a vast amount of knowledge but it is not superficial like that of many other noblemen. He reasons with the convincing air of one who really knows."⁷¹ The wording of this entry is extremely important. While he certainly acted as a member of this fashionable society, Clermont-Crèvecoeur's passage suggests Ségur possessed a deep understanding of ideas being discussed and that he had the capacity for reason indicative of an intellectual, a sign of elevated status in the civilized world. Rather than simply an actor playing at knowledgeable pursuits, Ségur seems to have grasped the core concepts inherent to the Enlightenment and this new culture of reason. This same deeper understanding can be seen in other young sword nobles like Lafayette and Noailles who were among the first to volunteer for American service. These young nobles sought to be more than simply the idle nobility of Versailles.

In addition to direct contact with enlightenment ideas in France, Ségur saw the influence of the Enlightenment in America through conversations with men

⁶⁹ Jean-Francois-Louis comte de Clermont-Crèvecoeur, *Journal of the War in America During the Years 1780, 1781, 1782, 1783*. In *The American Campaigns of Rochambeau's Army 1780, 1781, 1782, 1783: Volume I: The Journals of Clermont-Crèvecoeur, Verger, and Berthier*, Trans and Ed. Howard C. Rice, Jr. and Anne S.K. Brown (Princeton and Providence: Princeton University Press and Brown University Press, 1972), 97.

⁷⁰ Ségur, *Memoirs and Recollections of Count Louis Philippe de Ségur*, 38.

⁷¹ Clermont-Crèvecoeur, *Journal of the War in America*, 97.

like Franklin and Silas Deane. Just as in France, Enlightenment principles permeated early American political and intellectual culture, with men such as Jefferson even putting the ideas of John Locke into the American Declaration of Independence with phrases such as “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.” Joanne Freeman argues that Enlightenment thinkers exercised a profound effect on the founder’s understanding of the world and their ability to enact positive change. As support for this hypothesis she puts forth a story about a dinner hosted by Thomas Jefferson and attended by John Adams and Alexander Hamilton. As the dinner progressed, conversation turned to the portraits Jefferson displayed on the wall of Bacon, Newton, and Locke. When asked by Hamilton as to their significance, Jefferson responded, “they [are] my trinity of the [three] greatest men the world had ever produced.”⁷² For Freeman, this episode articulates the pervasive influence of the Enlightenment on men during the Revolution. The work of Bacon, Newton, and Locke encouraged exploration of new ideas of rights, resistance, and later rebellion. Their work created a new “intellectual atmosphere” in America in the same way it did in France. Bacon suggested mankind could tap into reason to discover truth, Newton allowed for reason to explain nature, and Locke allowed for the laws of nature to be applied to government.⁷³ By basing resistance in Enlightenment principles, the Americans, as members of a new global intellectual community, connected with a world network that shared a devotion to these philosophies.

⁷² Quoted in Freeman “American Revolution.” Spring 2010. Yale Open Courses (iTunes U, Audio Recording, 25 lectures).

⁷³ Freeman, “Jefferson’s Dinner Party and the Influence of Enlightenment Thought on the Colonists” in “American Revolution.” Spring 2010. Yale Open Courses (iTunes U, Audio Recording, 25 lectures).

The Enlightenment's exploration of ideal states of nature, as discussed in particular by Locke⁷⁴ and Rousseau, led to an increased interest in America as a representation of "natural man."⁷⁵ Men such as Dêmeunieur wrote of the American Indians as an exhibition of man in his natural state, free from the corrupting influence of the so-called civilized world.⁷⁶ This writing reflected a broader trend among the philosophes of seeing civilization not as the ideal to be sought, but instead as a moral failing. For Rousseau in particular, civilization robbed man of his natural freedoms and restricted instinct by imposing arbitrary laws.⁷⁷ Doina Harsanyi argues that this interest in America as housing the natural man led to increased noble interest in America, something Ségur's memoirs support. Harsanyi, a proponent of the virgin soil hypothesis, argues that French intellectual elites saw America as an opportunity, specifically an opportunity to export the virtues of civilization without the vices.⁷⁸ Benjamin Franklin capitalized on this conception of America, playing the part perfectly while at court. Harsanyi describes Benjamin Franklin's effect on French society saying, "Recalling Franklin's personality [of 1767], French thinkers also bestowed on the typical white American settler enough knowledge of the sciences and of the arts to permit him to grow into the ideal type of regenerated European, an

⁷⁴ In *The Second Treatise on Government: Of the State of Nature*, Locke outlines the natural state of man as opposed to that which government requires him to enter into. In nature, man possesses the capacity to make decisions about his life and possessions for himself, and exist in a state of equality with other men. For more information on Locke's theories of man in a state of nature see Locke, *The Second Treatise on Government*, in, *University of Chicago Readings in Western Civilization: The Old Regime and the French Revolution*, ed. Keith Michael Baker (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1987), 488-489.

⁷⁵ Harsanyi, *Lessons from America*, 40.

⁷⁶ Harsanyi, *Lessons from America*, 40.

⁷⁷ *Ibid*, 40.

⁷⁸ *Ibid*, 41.

enlightened human being in harmony with natural law.”⁷⁹

Séгур certainly fell into this category of French thinkers, seeing the American colonists as simplistic in dress and manners, but well versed in Enlightenment doctrines, the ideal natural man. For Ségur:

Nothing could be more striking than the contrast between the luxury of our capital, the elegance of our fashions, the magnificence of Versailles, the still brilliant remains of the monarchical pride of Louis XV, and the polished and superb dignity of our nobility on the one hand; and, on the other hand, the almost rustic apparel, the plain but firm demeanor, the free and direct language of the envoys, whose antique simplicity of dress and appearance seemed to have introduced within our walls, in the midst of the effeminate and servile refinement of the 18th century, some sages contemporary with Plato, or republicans of the age of Cato and Fabius.⁸⁰

America represented a virgin soil unspoiled by the luxury and vice of court. Instead, the colonists were part of the early stages of civilization, particularly reminiscent of the ancient republics. Benjamin Franklin and others may have simply been playing the part of the coonskin-capped rustic, but young sword nobles who thirsted for a chance to enact Enlightenment experiments could never have known this. Instead, we must put ourselves in their position and see the world through their eyes at the time, not through the lens of hindsight. At that moment, for these young French sword nobles, the Americans really appeared to be the manifestation of the Enlightenment’s possibilities.

At the same time as new forays into Enlightenment thinking dominated the social sphere, noble education continued to rely on the classics, representing a continued veneration of past ideas. The Enlightenment movement might have encouraged a rejection of ancient and church wisdom as the backbone of

⁷⁹ Ibid, 42.

⁸⁰ Ségur, *Memoirs and Recollections of Count Louis Philippe de Ségur*, 101.

knowledge, but the noble education still relied heavily on these traditional ideas. The church, and particularly the Jesuit order, controlled education until the 1760s, but following the expulsion of the order, educational reform continued to stress ancient history and saw the introduction of the so-called canon of great Frenchmen as a means of showcasing a more current example of classical thinking.⁸¹ The young sword nobles, in turn, took these lessons and applied them to their understanding of the world. For the nobility in the eighteenth century, history was far from static and instead represented a chance to envision a course for the future. Plutarch's lives continued to be a canonical text intended to inspire emulation and the development of virtue.⁸² Men like Ségur looked to the ancient philosophers to provide guidance as well as knowledge. The nobles looked to the philosophers to understand the role of moral citizens in society.⁸³

The noble education might have been steeped in a classical tradition, but the eighteenth century saw advances in the study of French history. Education reform, while rooted in old ideas, represented a combination of new and old philosophies that dominated the noble place in the world. The French nobility began to see the benefit of a strong education in both the classics and the history of France, particularly in the wake of the Jesuit expulsion. Previously, the church

⁸¹ For more information on this concept of the canon of great Frenchmen as providing a more current example see David A. Bell, *The Cult of the Nation in France: Inventing Nationalism, 1680-1800* (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 2001) and Smith *Nobility Reimagined: The Patriotic Nation in Eighteenth-Century France*, (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2005).

⁸² Smith, *Nobility Reimagined*, 32.

⁸³ Many historians have made this claim including Julia Osman who sees the role of the ancients as guides for behavior. David Bell and Jay Smith also take this view, seeing new ideas about a citizen's role in the new political atmosphere being worked out using the writings of ancient philosophers on the subject. This same sort of attitude can be seen in Ségur's memoirs and later writings in history.

had seen to the propagation of knowledge, a knowledge heavily rooted in notions of church authority and devotion to classical thinkers who were co-opted by the church to represent knowledge prior to salvation. Jay Smith argues that this vacuum created by the lack of a strong church presence in education led to the introduction of a greater emphasis on French history and the moral duties of the citizen. Later, these new pedagogical developments led to an increased devotion to the *patrie* and republicanism, noted particularly during the French Revolution.⁸⁴ This intertwining of new pedagogical techniques and emphasis on French history, when combined with the study of classical antiquity, led to a greater admiration of republicanism and devotion to the ideal French state. Later, when the American Revolution began, young French sword nobles, brought up in this newly remodeled curriculum, saw the opportunity to witness Rome and the ideal France of history reimagined in the modern era – albeit across the Atlantic.

Séгур's life continually saw an interlacing of the new and old, something that greatly influenced his sense of self. While Ségur's memoirs offer tantalizingly few details of his education, he did study at a college dominated by the nobility and one that certainly followed the new doctrine of emphasis on French history while still maintaining a focus on the classics. Ségur saw this education as directly responsible for his and other young nobles' fascination with the American Revolution. In defending this so-called ardent attachment to liberty, Ségur wrote:

⁸⁴ For more information about Smith's interpretation of the development of love of the *patrie* in education see *Nobility Reimagined*, 186-189. For more about the effect of educational reform on conceptions of honor see 186-205.

How could the monarchical governments of Europe wonder at the enthusiasm for liberty which was manifested by young men of ardent minds, who were every where instructed to admire the heroes of Greece and Rome...and who were taught to read and to reflect by constantly studying the most celebrated republicans of antiquity?⁸⁵

Looking back, Ségur saw his education and instruction in the classics as integral to his new fascination with America. This traditional classical education mixed with new ideas of the Enlightenment fostered increased interest in the possibility of seeing a new republican experiment enacted across the Atlantic. For Ségur and others like him, tradition and intellectual progress became entangled to form a sincere support for the American cause.

Julia Osman analyzing military reform in the eighteenth-century argues that writers looked to the Greeks and the Romans not just to criticize the French monarchy, but also to provide an example for how to behave as good citizens. This held particular resonance for the young noble officers who were taught to admire both the toughness and valor of the French military. Later, when newspapers and other descriptions compared the American soldiers to those of Greece and Rome, these same sword nobles saw an opportunity to become a part of a glorious struggle.⁸⁶ Ségur's memoirs support Osman's claim. Ségur wrote, "the Congress strongly resembling the ancient senate of Rome, deliberated with coolness, and enacted wholesome laws in the midst of the tumult of arms."⁸⁷ The comparison to the senate of Rome is certainly an

⁸⁵ Ségur, *Memoirs and Recollections of Count Louis Philippe de Ségur*, 76.

⁸⁶ See Julia Osman, "Ancient Warriors on Modern Soil: French Military Reform and American Military Images in Eighteenth-Century France," *French History* Vol. 22, Issue 2 (June 2008), 175-196. Palmer also explores the comparison to ancient struggles, suggesting Europeans saw Great Britain as the new Carthage. For more on this subject see Palmer, *The Age of the Democratic Revolution*, 248.

⁸⁷ Ségur, *Memoirs and Recollections of Count Louis Philippe de Ségur*, 150.

important motivation for Ségur, but so too is the invoking of a sense of rational deliberation by the congress. This dual admiration demonstrates a conflation of the ideas of reason associated with the Enlightenment and a veneration of republican ideals associated with ancient Rome. Again, America represented a chance to explore the application of both doctrines, rather than a strict adherence to one or the other.

Later, Ségur realized the excesses of his feelings of admiration but at the time much like the subject of Osman's analysis, was too inspired to recognize the difference. Ségur wrote, "the rising generation, above all, taught, by a singular contrast, in the midst of monarchies, to admire the great writers and heroes of Greece and Rome, carried to an enthusiastic excess the interest with which they were inspired by the American Revolution."⁸⁸ While later Ségur recognized a difference between America and ancient times, what is important here is to recognize Ségur's feelings during the moment of the American Revolution. With America as the new Rome, how could the young French sword noble resist the allure?⁸⁹

In addition to the American soldiers being styled as the incarnation of "ancient simplicity," the French themselves saw a continuity between the modern Frenchman and the ancient citizen. Patrice Higonnet argues that the French saw the ancient republican principles of virtue and restrained individualism passed down from antiquity to the French population, but ultimately forgotten by the

⁸⁸ Ibid, 100.

⁸⁹ In addition to comparing the Americans to the Greek states or to Rome, many intellectuals began to see Paris and France as the new Athens. They arrived at this conclusion because of the proliferation of enlightenment texts and ideas in Paris during the eighteenth century.

corrupt state.⁹⁰ It was assumed that the Americans had managed to correct the imbalance between personal gain and the good of the public, which in turn led to a greater fascination with the American cause in France. Higonnet argues, “For the French, America was a promised land where politics were a model that all might follow.”⁹¹ Men like Ségur suggest that the nobles’ education based on classical authors allowed for this environment to form and the connection between antiquity and modernity to take shape.

The education of the young sword nobility, both formal and informal, did not maintain a strict separation between innovation and tradition. Instead Enlightenment ideas became intertwined with ideas of French history and classical philosophers to create a new kind of ideology – one that relied on both new and old conceptions of government, philosophy, and thought. Men like Ségur found themselves caught up in these contradictions as they sought to reconcile tradition and progress. Here, America offered a chance at an experiment, a way to put ideas of the Enlightenment and ancient republicanism into practice. As Ségur himself wrote, “How could the monarchical governments of Europe wonder at the enthusiasm for liberty” when everywhere they were confronted with both the Enlightenment and antiquity?

Reinterpretation of the Past:

The intellectual atmosphere created by the combination of the Enlightenment and contemporary noble education led to a reinterpretation of

⁹⁰ Higonnet, *Class Ideology and the Rights of Nobles During the French Revolution*, 24-26.

⁹¹ *Ibid*, 27.

history and a restructuring of the nobility's perceived cultural status.⁹² In addition to ingrained thoughts about chivalry and honor, nobles relied on knowledge of historical events, drawing from the precedents of the *ligue* and the *fronde*, as a means to explain their fascination with the American Revolution. Ségur and others began to use history for a new purpose: to justify their present actions.

With the introduction of French history into the education of young nobles came an increased fascination with the perceived glory of the "historical" France. In particular, young nobles became fascinated with medieval notions of chivalry. Jay Smith argues that a number of writings on the topic defined chivalry in terms of a larger reintroduction of moral obligations seemingly lost to the modern Frenchman. Chivalry in these works was "a coherent and admirable system of morals that had made true heroism possible and that ought to shame the increasingly effete morals of the civilized eighteenth century."⁹³ Young nobles in particular became entranced by the possibility of the glory of knighthood.⁹⁴

Recollections of medieval chivalry play a dominant role in Ségur's memoirs. In explaining his experience in the garrisons where he served as an officer Ségur wrote:

I there saw [in the garrisons] another picture, and other traces of our ancient chivalrous customs. Chance placed me in a situation in which agreeably to the manners of the age, and in obedience to the old prejudices which were mixed up with the new ideas, I was obliged to have an affair of honor.⁹⁵

⁹² For a more detailed discussion of the changes in historical thought during the period of the enlightenment see Johnson Kent Wright, "Historical Thought in the Era of the Enlightenment," in *A Companion to Western Historical Thought*, Ed. Lloyd Kramer and Sarah Maza (Malden and Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2002), 123-142.

⁹³ Smith, *Nobility Reimagined*, 157.

⁹⁴ For more information about the proliferation of writings about chivalry in the eighteenth-century see Smith, *Nobility Reimagined*, 156-166.

⁹⁵ Ségur, *Memoirs and Recollections of Count Louis Philippe de Ségur*, 63.

By affair of honor, Ségur meant a duel, a gothic practice that continued well into the eighteenth-century. Ségur saw his own duel as “exhibit[ing] a singular mixture of vivacity, courtesy, and levity which characterized the French manners of that period.”⁹⁶ For the nobles, a duel represented a defense of one’s honor, which in turn displayed the remnants of medieval chivalry. While later opponents attacked the noble propensity to duel, from the writings of men like Jacques-Antoine Dulaure, historians are able to see the nobility’s multiple motivations, including a desire to use duels to fight their subjugation by Louis XIV.⁹⁷ Additionally, Jay Smith argues the duel functioned as a visible display of character and an opportunity to be inspected by others. In particular, the duel presented an occasion to receive recognition for “veracity and valor in the presence of witnesses.”⁹⁸ This same craving for visibility would later motivate Ségur and his contemporaries to fight on behalf of the Americans.

In addition to dueling, the sword nobles looked to military service as an outlet for their desire to emulate the old heroes. In describing the motivations of his young contemporaries, Ségur wrote:

We, more young and ardent, only enrolled ourselves under the banners of philosophy, in the hope of distinguishing ourselves in the field [of battle], and reaping honors and preferments; in short, it was in the character of the heroes of chivalry that we displayed our philosophy.”⁹⁹

By the time of the American Revolution, the young sword nobles had grown

⁹⁶ Ségur, *Memoirs and Recollections of Count Louis Philippe de Ségur*, 64.

⁹⁷ For more on the noble reaction against Louis XIV in the form of dueling and a more detailed analysis of the writings of Jacques-Antoine Dulaure, see Smith, “The Makings of an Aristocratic Reactionary,” in *The French Nobility in the Eighteenth Century: Reassessments and New Approaches*, ed. Jay M. Smith (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2006), 272-274.

⁹⁸ Smith, *The Culture of Merit*, 40.

⁹⁹ Ségur, *Memoirs and Recollections of Count Louis Philippe de Ségur*, 128.

bored with peace and yearned to fight their own war. Ségur in particular had a family lineage full of military heroes - his great grandfather, grandfather, and father had all distinguished themselves on the battlefield – and thus he longed for a chance to prove himself.¹⁰⁰

Even the dress these young nobles chose to adopt displayed this devotion to chivalry. Ségur wrote, “The various costumes we [the young nobles] assumed seemed to us, as graceful, as noble, and as picturesque as the modern French dress appeared to us ridiculous. We searched for the costume most befitting a knightly, a gallant, and a warlike court.”¹⁰¹ For the young sword nobles, their clothes became a visual symbol of their inner desire to return to an age when the nobility, rather than being ornaments at court, were useful and powerful.

Additionally, history taught the nobles to value a culture of chivalry despite the supposed taming of the nobility at Versailles.

Reared up, however, from our childhood, in the maxims of ancient chivalry, our imagination regretted those heroic and almost fabulous days; and the first combat fought between the old and young courtiers consisted in an attempt on our part to bring again into fashion the dresses, customs, and entertainments of the courts of Francis I, Henry II, Henry III, and Henry IV.”¹⁰²

Because of the creation of Versailles, the nobility lost the majority of its power and influence.¹⁰³ Ségur was not advocating a return to feudalism, but his contemporaries did hope to regain some of their lost prestige, using the above visual images to express dissatisfaction with an idle life at court. Ségur

¹⁰⁰ For a more detailed explanation of Ségur's lineage see Apt, 1-2 and Ségur, *Memoirs and Recollections of Count Louis Philippe de Ségur*, 5-11.

¹⁰¹ Ségur, *Memoirs and Recollections of Count Louis Philippe de Ségur*, 41.

¹⁰² *Ibid*, 40.

specifically mentions the reigns of kings before the creation of an absolutist state, during which the nobility had been far less ornamental and far more capable of enacting reforms. In those reigns, the court was a warlike court, not a flippant one. When fighting broke out in America, these same young nobles saw a chance to escape the frivolity and instead participate in a meaningful expression of chivalry, thus becoming the heroes they so idolized.

For the young sword nobles, America represented a chance to put chivalry into practice. Chivalry relied on the notion of courage, something Ségur saw the Americans as displaying in spades. “The courage displayed by these new republicans procured for them, throughout Europe, the esteem and good wishes of every friend of justice and humanity.”¹⁰⁴ In fact, the American cause was made all the more appealing because of the continued reversals and the continued assurance by American deputies that help was needed. Ségur recalled:

What added considerably to our esteem, our confidence and our admiration, was the good faith and the simplicity with which the deputies, disdaining all diplomatic artifice, made us acquainted with the frequent and successive reverses experienced by their yet undisciplined troops.¹⁰⁵

The American conflict remained engaging precisely because of the perceived distress of the deputies and the young troops. When Silas Deane and Arthur Lee requested the help of the young French officers, they tapped into an ethos of service and defense of the weak rooted in the medieval chivalric code.

The rebellion in America also represented a chance to defend French honor, something that had been damaged greatly by the losses of the Seven

¹⁰⁴ Ségur, *Memoirs and Recollections of Count Louis Philippe de Ségur*, 100.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid*, 103.

Years War. David Bell argues that it was not hatred of England that served as a chief motivation, but instead a desire to defend the French nation. Ségur's memoirs support this thesis.

The clash of arms, moreover, had given an additional stimulus to the warlike inclinations of our youth. We were irritated at the tardy, circumspection of our ministry; we had become weary of an irksome peace, which had lasted more than ten years, and every heart beat with the desire of retrieving the disgrace of the last war, of taking the field against England, and of flying to the aid of America.¹⁰⁶

Bell argues that because of the involvement of men like George Washington, a chief “barbarian” in the Seven Years War, the anti-British rhetoric was necessarily toned down.¹⁰⁷ Instead, the deeds of heroic Frenchmen were emphasized. This suggests that Ségur's last thought is the most important: the aid of America. For these young nobles, fighting in the American Revolution was less about revenge and more about protection of the afflicted. Rather than having its roots only in eighteenth-century intellectual developments, noble support could be traced to the medieval code of chivalry. Again, the support for the Americans represented the conflicting forces of the past and modernity, with the nobles creating an ideology that combined these two seemingly opposing viewpoints into a defensible model of action.

In addition to adding to the honor of France, these young sword nobles wanted to take their place in history and on the battlefield, but needed this fight to be for a noble cause. Jay Smith argues the allure of armed combat was a chance “to be seen and judged worthy by others.”¹⁰⁸ Historically the nobles

¹⁰⁶ Ségur, *Memoirs and Recollections of Count Louis Philippe de Ségur*, 102.

¹⁰⁷ Bell, *The Cult of the Nation in France*, 99.

¹⁰⁸ Smith, *The Culture of Merit*, 39.

sought opportunities to fight in mercenary armies, in the crusades, and in other religious wars of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. When it came to the war in America, the young sword nobles tapped into this precedent.

Sanctioned by the authority of long usage, and by the memory of our ancestors, who, whilst our kings maintained a national peace, had often gone forth in search of adventures and military employment, and had displayed their valor, at one time in the Spanish and Italian service against the Saracens. At another, in the armies of Austria, against the invasion of the Turks, we now eagerly sought the means of transporting ourselves, individually, across the Atlantic, to be ranged under the banners of American freedom.¹⁰⁹

The sword nobles based their status in society on warfare and longed for a chance to set themselves apart on the battlefield. In fact, as Jay Smith argues, much of the eighteenth-century was spent trying to work out the noble place in a new absolutist state where the king, not the nobles, conducted war.¹¹⁰

In order to carve out a place in the new political structure, many young nobles drew from past episodes, particularly those that showed nobility engaged in warfare. This is not to say that the sword nobility wished to return to the feudal state where lords conducted their own wars, merely that they longed for a chance to distinguish themselves on the battlefield to gain admiration and honors at court. The move from corporate polity to monarchy had distinct reverberations within the second estate. Because of the newly ennobled bourgeois families and the powerful robe nobles in the *parlements*, the sword nobles felt the need to push back and reclaim part of their traditional role in society. As Chaussinand-Nogaret argues, the nobility's existence depended on conquest and inherited

¹⁰⁹ Ségur, *Memoirs and Recollections of Count Louis Philippe de Ségur*, 102.

¹¹⁰ Smith, *Nobility Reimagined*, 27.

virtue. The “heroic worth” of its founders gave the nobility its authority, something the newly ennobled members lacked.¹¹¹ Thus the old nobility, the sword nobles, needed military glory and conquest to recapture this authority they sensed being lost. To accomplish this, they pulled from past episodes but saw these past episodes through a modern lens. They were not calling for a return to feudalism but were instead pulling from instances where the nobility acted independently of the state under the authority of an honorable cause such as defense of religion. In the eighteenth-century, however, religious warfare gave way to discussions of liberty, despotism, and questions of authority fueled by the Enlightenment culture as well as a focus on antiquity.

History remained very much alive in the eighteenth-century. All segments of noble society conjured images from history, particularly of the *ligue* and the *fronde*, to justify actions. Ségur wrote:

The parlements, by braving absolute power though adhering to respectful forms, had unsuspectingly become almost republicans; they were giving the signal for revolutions, whilst they conceived that they were only following the example of their predecessors, at the time of their opposition to the concordate of Francis I, and to the fiscal despotism of Cardinal Mazarin.¹¹²

I argue that like the members of the robe nobility, the sword nobility too sought to emulate their predecessors, calling on the image of the *ligue* and the *fronde* to justify their support for the American Revolution.

David Bell argues in *The Cult of the Nation in France* that the long eighteenth-century saw the development of patriotism and the replacement of religious fervor with that of love of the *patrie*. This secularization of the state and

¹¹¹ Chaussinand-Nogaret, *The French Nobility in the Eighteenth Century*, 23.

¹¹² Ségur, *Memoirs and Recollections of Count Louis Philippe de Ségur*, 23.

the monarchy permeated all aspects of society. I argue that this replacement of the religious with the secular also affected young French nobles' perception of history, particularly that of the *ligue*. Later memory of the *ligue* compelled young sword nobles to lend support to the American cause as they tried to emulate these great Frenchmen and act out ideas of the *ligue* across the ocean.

The French wars of religion¹¹³ began with the unofficial rule of Catherine de Medici who dominated her weak sons. Fear of the spread of Calvinism in France and the strength of the Huguenots led to a Catholic backlash that erupted into an all-out dynastic struggle. The initial hostilities continued for ten years until the St. Bartholomew's Day Massacre on August 24, 1572 where at least 3,000 Huguenot's were executed and Prince Henry, the future king Henry IV, was forced to declare himself a Catholic. In the provinces, at least 10,000 people were also killed. Despite this atrocity, the warfare continued and the leadership of the Valois monarchs, under the control of Catherine de Medici, grew weaker until finally Henry IV ascended the throne. Henry IV became king after the Catholic *ligue* vowed to put the Duke of Guise on the French throne leading the Huguenots and other less radical Catholics to revolt and to publish a tract outlining the idea of a social contract, according to which a tyrannical king could be overthrown.¹¹⁴ This idea of the social contract had a marked influence on the young sword nobles of the eighteenth century who could use this episode of the *ligue* as a precedent for rebellion against despotic authority.

¹¹³ For a more detailed explanation of the French Wars of Religion see Richard S. Dunn, *The Age of Religious Wars, 1559-1715* (New York and London: W.W. Norton & Company, 1979), 30-40.

¹¹⁴ For more information of *Vindicie contra tyrannos* see Richard S. Dunn, *The Age of Religious Wars*, 36.

Henry IV finally came to the throne following a series of rebellions and assassinations. The Duke of Guise, the monarch of the Catholic *ligue*, assumed virtual control over the state by overcoming the current king, but the guards of Henry III eventually assassinated him. Henry III then formed an alliance with Prince Henry, who he recognized as his heir, and marched on Paris. Unfortunately for Henry III, retribution for his assassination of the Duke of Guise was not far behind, and a monk murdered him in July of 1589. By this point, war had been raging since 1562, and many began to long for peace. Finally in 1598 peace was declared when Henry IV and Phillip II, the new catholic champion following the death of the Duke of Guise, came to terms. With the edict of Nantes, Henry IV declared Catholicism the official religion of France but allowed for toleration of protestant worship. Richard Dunn argues that while the conclusion of the war did not lead to a complete victory for either Catholics or Huguenots, it did represent a victory for the state. The wars proved a strong, centralized authority was necessary to maintain stability and suppress rebellion, something Dunn sees as having lasting effects well into the eighteenth century.¹¹⁵

Following a cessation of hostilities Henry IV took on a mythic, heroic status leading the young sword nobles of the eighteenth century to reimagine and reinterpret his reign. Henry IV was seen as a just ruler who had the best interests of his subjects in mind.¹¹⁶ At the time of the *ligue*, there was a rebellion against a female leader and a weak monarch, like with the *fronde* and the royal

¹¹⁵ Dunn, *The Age of Religious Wars*, 40.

¹¹⁶ Dunn, *The Age of Religious Wars*, 36.

minority, and a perceived sense of despotic rule. Later, with the enlightenment, young sword nobles rethought this earlier religious conflict as an instance of the nobility defending France against despotic authority, that of Catherine de Medici and her weak sons. They then applied their new understanding of rebellion to the American Revolution and used the history of the *ligue* as a basis for their support.

Séгур's family gained noble status during the reign of Henry IV because of the *ligue*. Ségur spoke of the incident saying, "one of my ancestors, who had been the companion of Henry IV in his youthful days, and who had been exposed to imminent danger on the day of St. Barthélemy, was honored by the friendship of that prince, who appointed him to be his ambassador at the court of several princes of Germany."¹¹⁷ Later in his memoirs, Ségur continued to draw upon the image of the *ligue* to justify his actions during the American Revolution. The *ligue* became an almost mythic rebellion, one that represented a challenging of despotic authority rather than a religious conflict. Talking about the period of the American rebellion, Ségur compared the *ligue* to a later upheaval, the *fronde*, reminding his contemporaries of their "pleasure in bringing back the old recollections."¹¹⁸

In addition to a desire for military conflict, the young sword nobles longed for a chance to rebel against perceived injustices like previous generations. In particular they longed to reenact the *fronde*. From 1648-1652, France was locked in a bitter struggle for control of the government. Anne of Austria ruled in her

¹¹⁷ Ségur, *Memoirs and Recollections of Count Louis Philippe de Ségur*, 5.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid*, 76.

son's place since, as a young boy, Louis XIV was as yet unable to control the country. Richard Bonney explains that royal minorities often led to struggles against the crown since young kings were relatively innocuous and unable to adequately control the nobility. This nobility, in this case the robe nobility, in turn used the opportunity to seize greater power.¹¹⁹ The upheaval began in 1648 with peasants refusing to pay taxes and the *Parlement* of Paris refusing to hear cases.¹²⁰ In the years leading up to the revolt, increased assessments and economic hardship spawned several refusals to pay along with small-scale uprisings involving the burning of tax collectors' property and various instances of murder.¹²¹ Perceived ineptitude of leaders and infighting amongst various ministers also led to unrest, which eventually erupted into open rebellion by an enraged populous.¹²²

Despite similarities to later eighteenth-century conflicts, this rebellion should not, however, be seen as a revolution. As James Collins points out, the *frondeurs* did not want to reinstitute a feudal monarchy and were not contesting the rising absolutism but instead sought redress against the perceived ineptitude of certain ministers. For Collins, the *fronde* "was a struggle for control of the state by specific individuals or groups of individuals."¹²³ Collins cautions against comparing the *fronde* to the French Revolution precisely because the *frondeur* did not wish to overthrow the government, merely to reform it.

¹¹⁹ Richard Bonney, "Cardinal Mazarin and the Great Nobility During the Fronde," *The English Historical Review*, Vol. 96, No. 381 (October 1981), 818.

¹²⁰ Orest Ranum, *The Fronde: A French Revolution 1648-1652* (New York and London: W.W. Norton & Company, 1993), 6-7.

¹²¹ Ranum, *The Fronde*, 11.

¹²² Ranum, *The Fronde*, 19-21.

¹²³ Collins, *The State in Early Modern France*, 76.

Séгур and his contemporaries saw this distinction as well in their reading of the American Revolution. They sought to conjure up ideas of reform and rebellion against corrupt forces, seeing the American Revolution as their opportunity to contribute to this new *fronde*. In fact, there were numerous occasions during the eighteenth century when the nobility sought to recall the image of the *fronde*. In his memoirs Ségur recalled the exile of Duke de Choiseul who was thwarted, according to Ségur, by the mistress of Louis XV Madame du Berry. The Duke might have been exiled, but Ségur wrote, “he was consoled by public opinion, which, displaying for the first time signs of existence and liberty, forsook the palace of the prince, and formed a court in the retreat of a disgraced minister.”¹²⁴ Eventually, the Duke erected a pillar at his retreat, Chanteloup, inscribed with the names of visitors. Ségur recalled:

[The pillar] served as a monument to this new *fronde*. The impressions of youth are very strong; and I never shall forget that which I derived from the pleasure of seeing my father’s name and my own upon that pillar of opposition, the forerunner of other acts of resistance, which afterwards assumed a character of such serious importance.¹²⁵

This pervading facet of noble culture, recollections of the *fronde*, suggests the younger generation needed its own frondean moment, something they saw later in the American cause.

Séгур saw this culture of rebellion everywhere. The new emphasis on the study of French history had canonized the great leaders of resistance like Joan of Arc, Henry IV, and others. Now, the young sword nobles sought a chance to secure their place in the annals of history. Ségur wrote, “Everything seemed to

¹²⁴ Ségur, *Memoirs and Recollections of Count Louis Philippe de Ségur*, 18.

¹²⁵ *Ibid*, 18.

breathe the spirit of the *ligue* and the *fronde*; and as public opinion, when it seeks to manifest itself, requires a rallying point – a sort of standard, this was supplied by the philosophers. The words liberty, property, equality, were uttered.”¹²⁶ Again new ideas of philosophy and Enlightenment became entwined with past ideas of a culture of rebellion. Support for the American Revolution came not simply from new ideas of liberty and equality but instead from notions of a noble ethos and the recollection of the *fronde*.

Séгур carefully pointed out that he was not the only one to enact this new noble ethos when he wrote, “Those who blamed us afterwards, ought to recollect that they then shared our enthusiasm, and felt pleasure in bringing back the old recollections of the *ligue* and the *fronde*; the times and the cause were widely different; but their censuring disposition was then unable to draw a distinction between them.”¹²⁷ Alarmed at their loss of influence, many of the nobility sought to recall images of the *fronde* in an effort to justify involvement in new causes, particularly the American Revolution. This new manifestation granted an opportunity to recapture a moment of usefulness, something lost in the effeminate glitter of the court.¹²⁸ Once again, an old idea was evoked to justify a new action. Yes, as Séгур points out, the situation was different, but the nobles hardly saw it that way, and it is their interpretation at the moment, not the later one offered in the wake of the French Revolution, that explains noble involvement in the American Revolution.

¹²⁶ Ibid, 20.

¹²⁷ Ségur, *Memoirs and Recollections of Count Louis Philippe de Ségur*, 76.

¹²⁸ Ségur discusses a noble desire to regain influence at various points in his memoirs. See in particular Ségur, *Memoirs and Recollections of Count Louis Philippe de Ségur*, 20.

Conclusion:

Throughout the late eighteenth-century, ideas propagated during the period of Enlightenment were constantly intertwined with allusions to the classics. This conceptualization represents a pattern of thought among nobles like Ségur who saw new notions of enlightenment and traditional classical learning as not dissimilar. These young nobles support Bell's model of using the new canon of great French thinkers as a point of reference and a source of emulation much closer to their own time. For Ségur, support for the American Revolution is very much a product of both worlds: that of new modes of thought and that of tradition. Without one, the other would no longer be as strong an argument for support. The historiography has long supported the idea of new intellectual currents leading to support of the American Revolution, but I contend this is only half the story. Only by looking at the combination of novelty and tradition can a deeper understanding of noble ideology be achieved.

Historians need to immerse themselves in the period of the American Revolution and forget that the French Revolution followed. The 1770s represent a unique moment in the history of France where tradition and progress were not incompatible and the nobles of France saw a chance for reform in the context of their traditional roles and traditional beliefs. Only by looking closely at men like Ségur who were caught in the early stages of this dichotomy can historians hope to understand what truly happened at this moment and why the young sword nobles would support a cause that would later call into question their position in society. In 1776 nothing was certain and the outcome of the French Revolution

could hardly have been predicted. By assuming prior knowledge of uncertain outcomes, scholars obscure earlier realities. Historians need to immerse themselves in the psyche of men like Ségur who, “thought, spoke, and acted by turns as a citizen of Athens, of Rome, or of Lutecia, as a knight errant, a crusader, or a courtier, as a follower of Plato, of Socrates, or of Epicurus.”¹²⁹ Certainly this pluralism led to a confusion of ideas, but it was still a coherent ideology on account of its universality among the young courtiers.

Later, of course, the French Revolution would disrupt this balance between old and new and create a period of extreme upheaval. At the time of the American Revolution, however, the nobles continued to try to work out these contradictions leading Ségur to recall, “The terrific struggles between ancient and modern doctrines were, as yet, confined to argument, and were treated in the light of theories. The period had not arrived in which their application was destined to excite hatred and discord in our breasts.”¹³⁰ At the moment, conflicting systems were tolerated and different opinions, rather than being a source of hatred, were a cause for discussion. This ideal state, of course, did not last and deteriorated into chaos, but Ségur’s memoirs are valuable to historians precisely because they complicate the timeline, suggesting rather than the first moment of rebellion, the American Revolution was part of a larger discussion and synthesis of conflicting systems of old and new doctrines. After all, history is often composed of incremental moments of change rather than watershed moments. By looking at history as a process rather than a study of periodization,

¹²⁹ Ségur, *Memoirs and Recollections of Count Louis Philippe de Ségur*, 61.

¹³⁰ Ségur, *Memoirs and Recollections of Count Louis Philippe de Ségur*, 142.

more valuable insights can be made and greater understandings of complex historical phenomena emerge.¹³¹

¹³¹ This approach to history is advocated by historian Joe Miller who sees Atlantic history in particular as benefiting from a closer examination of incremental change and appreciation of one historical moment as part of larger overall processes.

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