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SAR Speech

Rhetoric

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“And so, my fellow Americans: ask not what your country can do for you — ask what you can do for your country.” Thus President John F. Kennedy closed his inaugural address, with a profound expression of selfless patriotism. However, while the quote may belong to JFK, the sentiment is far older. Indeed, our country was founded upon this principle. We have all heard about the heroic deeds of American Revolutionaries, from the midnight ride of Paul Revere, to Nathan Hale, whose only regret was that he had but one life to lose for his country. However, you may not have heard of perhaps the best example of completely selfless patriotism: a man by the name of James Armistead Lafayette.

In 1781, James Armistead was a Virginian slave. It was not uncommon in those days for a master to compel a slave to fight in his place in the Revolutionary War. However, James Armistead was never compelled to fight; he volunteered. At first, Armistead was assigned as a courier to Marquis de Lafayette, the commander of the allied French forces. However, it was not long before Lafayette found a much more crucial role for Armistead: as a double agent spying on the British. Posing as an escaped slave, Armistead was hired by the British to guide their troops through unfamiliar areas. Under this guise, he was able to infiltrate the camp of Benedict Arnold himself, as a double agent spying on a former double agent. This positioned him perfectly to report British troop movements back to Marquis de Lafayette and General Washington. When

Benedict Arnold moved north, Armistead was transferred to the headquarters of Lord Cornwallis, where he continued his work. British officers paid him so little attention, they would often openly discuss plans and strategies in front of him. Later in 1781, Armistead was able to inform Washington and Lafayette of 10,000 British reinforcements bound for Yorktown. The French blockade surprised the British, and ensured an American victory at the Siege of Yorktown. Less than a year after he volunteered, James Armistead had played an instrumental role in both the capture of General Cornwallis and an American victory in the deciding battle of the Revolutionary War. Now what did the new war hero do? Did he use his skills as a spy and flee to Canada? Did he leave for France with Lafayette, a staunch abolitionist? No. James Armistead walked back to his plantation in Virginia, and returned to slavery. Although the Virginia legislature passed a law in 1783 freeing all slaves compelled to fight as soldiers on behalf of their masters, Armistead was not eligible for two reasons. First, he was a spy, not a soldier. Second, he was never compelled to fight. He volunteered.

In 1787, Armistead petitioned for his freedom, but in his letter to the Virginia legislature, he specifically asked not to be given his freedom, unless his master was fully compensated for the loss of a worker. Marquis de Lafayette himself wrote a personal letter to the legislature, requesting the freedom of this single man. In gratitude, the newly freed war hero adopted the French general's name, becoming James Armistead Lafayette. He then bought 40 acres of land in Virginia, just a few miles south of his old plantation, and lived out his days as a farmer.

In 1824, President James Monroe invited Marquis de Lafayette to make a tour of the United States. He visited all 24 states, stopping in Virginia to visit the grave of President George Washington. Crowds greeted him wherever he went, hailing him as a hero. However, when

Lafayette saw old James Armistead in the back of the crowd, he immediately stopped the carriage, and ran to embrace him. James Armistead Lafayette finally passed away in August of 1830.

Love does not have to be earned, and love of country is no different. James Armistead lived in a nation where many considered him less than human, and how did he respond? Did he protest in the streets, complaining about his lot in life? Did he kneel for the national anthem, showing his disdain for the nation that mistreated him? No. He loved his country as it was, and fought so that his children could love an even better country. He did not care what his country could do for him, but what he could do for his country.

America is the greatest nation on Earth, but we do not love our country because it is great. Our country is great because its founders loved it as a parent loves a child: before it even existed, and despite its many flaws. They fought not for the place America, but for the idea of America, and what it could be when fully realized. Nothing less could have made America what it is today, and nothing less will make a better America tomorrow. Thank you, and God bless America.