Soon after the Seven Years War ended in 1763, France and Spain began planning a comprehensive strategy of revenge against Great Britain. While pretending they were interested only in keeping the peace, ministers in both countries designed a unified Bourbon armada, capable of leading an invasion of the island nation. One of them, César Gabriel de Choiseul-Praslin, speculated that there might be another way to weaken England. One day, Choiseul-Praslin wrote, England’s colonies “will be powerful enough to separate from London and found a state independent from the English crown.”

The American Revolution came sooner than he thought. And, as independent scholar Larrie Ferreiro (the author of “Ships and Science: The Birth of Naval Architecture in the Scientific Revolution”) indicates, France and Spain played a pivotal role in enabling the colonies to defeat a mighty empire.

Engaging and informative, Ferreiro’s “Brothers at Arms” refutes the widely-held view that the Marquis de Lafayette alone represented France until Vicomte de Rochambeau and Admiral de Grasse sealed the fate of Lord Cornwallis at Yorktown. Noting that many historians give the French “short shrift” and the Spanish “no shrift at all,” Ferreiro tells the story of the American Revolution as a global war, during which France and Spain were present at every stage. More than 90 percent of the weapons used by the Americans and today’s equivalent of about $30 billion in direct monetary aid came from overseas, Ferreiro reveals. French ships neutralized the English navy in the Atlantic; when Spain declared war in 1779, and drove the British out of West Florida, the new nation’s southern border became far more secure.

Ferreiro is a skillful storyteller. His experience in the U.S. Navy, Coast Guard and Department of Defense, and as an exchange engineer in the French Navy, is on display in his descriptions of battles on land and at sea.
“Brothers at Arms” is filled with telling — and titillating — details. Pierre-Augustin Caron de Beaumarchais, the author of “The Barber of Seville,” a love triangle set in Spawin, Ferreiro reveals, was the principal supplier of arms to the colonists, and never received payment for them. Astronomer Neil de Grasse Tyson, the current director of the Hayden Planetarium in New York City, is a descendant of de Grasse. And Ferreiro indicates that many a naval battle was decided by which ships had coppered hulls (to keep them from fouling) and the success of the French and Spanish in agreeing on uniform signals to coordinate complex maneuvers despite the fog of combat.

In the end, however, the enduring importance of “Brothers at Arms” is Ferreiro’s accurate (and perhaps humbling) reminder that when Brig. Gen. O’Hara, representing Cornwallis, emerged at Yorktown to surrender, and turned toward Rochambeau, he was acknowledging that the victory was as much France’s as it was America’s. And when Rochambeau wordlessly pointed him across the lane toward Washington, he was “well aware to whom belonged the moment.” After all, as Ferreiro concludes, “the American nation was born as the centerpiece of an international coalition.”

Glenn C. Altschuler is the Thomas and Dorothy Litwin Professor of American Studies at Cornell University.