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A Tale of Two Revolutions

The French and American Revolutions were similar, yet extremely different.

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The year 1989 marks the 200th anniversary of the French Revolution. To celebrate, the French government is throwing its biggest party in at least 100 years, to last all year. In the United States, an American Committee on the French Revolution has been set up to coordinate programs on this side of the Atlantic, emphasizing the theme, “France and America: Partners in Liberty.”

But were the French and American Revolutions really similar? On the surface, there were parallels. Yet over the past two centuries, many observers have likened the American Revolution to the bloodless Glorious Revolution of 1688, while the French Revolution has been considered the forerunner of the many modern violent revolutions that have ended in totalitarianism. As the Russian naturalist, author, and soldier Prince Petr Kropotkin put it, “What we learn from the study of the Great [French] Revolution is that it was the source of all the present communist, anarchist, and socialist conceptions.”

It is because the French Revolution ended so violently that many Frenchmen are troubled about celebrating its 200th anniversary. French author Leon Daudet has written: “Commemorate the French Revolution? That’s like celebrating the day you got scarlet fever.” An Anti-89 Movement has even begun to sell mementos reminding today’s Frenchmen of the excesses of the Revolution, including Royalist black armbands and calendars that mock the sacred dates of the French Revolution.

The French should indeed be uneasy about their Revolution, for whereas the American Revolution brought forth a relatively free economy and limited government, the French Revolution brought forth first anarchy, then dictatorship.

Eighteenth-century France was the largest and most populous country in western Europe. Blessed with rich soil, natural resources, and a long and varied coastline, France was Europe’s greatest power and the dominant culture on the continent

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Unfortunately, like all the other countries of 18th century Europe, France was saddled with the economic philosophy of mercantilism. By discouraging free trade with other countries, mercantilism kept the economies of the European nation-states in the doldrums and their people in poverty.

Nevertheless, in 1774, King Louis XVI made a decision that could have prevented the French Revolution by breathing new life into the French economy: he appointed Physiocrat Robert Turgot as Controller General of Finance. The Physiocrats were a small band of followers of the French physician Francois Quesnay, whose economic prescriptions included reduced taxes, less regulation, the elimination of government-granted monopolies and internal tolls and tariffs—ideas that found their rallying cry in the famous slogan, "laissez-faire, laissez-passer."

The Physiocrats exerted a profound influence on Adam Smith, who had spent time in France in the 1760s and whose classic The Wealth of Nations embodied the Physiocratic attack on mercantilism and argued that nations get rich by practicing free trade. Of Smith, Turgot, and the Physiocrats, the great French statesman and author Frederic Bastiat (1801-1850) wrote: "The basis of their whole economic system may be truly said to lie in the principle of self-interest . . . . The only function of government according to this doctrine is to protect life, liberty, and property."

Embracing the principle of free trade not just as a temporary expedient, but as a philosophy, Turgot got the king to sign an edict in January 1776 that abolished the monopolies and special privileges of the guilds, corporations, and trading companies. He also abolished the forced labor of the peasants on the roads, the hated corvée. He then dedicated himself to breaking down the internal tariffs within France. By limiting government expense, he was able to cut the budget by 60 million livres and reduce the interest on the national debt from 8.7 million livres to 3 million livres.

Had Turgot been allowed to pursue his policies of free trade and less government intervention, France might very well have become Europe's first "common market" and avoided violent revolution. A rising tide would have lifted all ships. Unfortunately for France and the cause of freedom, resistance from the Court and special interests proved too powerful, and Turgot was removed from office in 1776. "The dismissal of this great man," wrote Voltaire, "crushes me . . . . Since that fatal day, I have not followed anything . . . and am waiting patiently for someone to cut our throats." Turgot's successors, following a mercantilist policy of government intervention, only made the French economy worse. In a desperate move to find money in the face of an uproar across the country and to re-establish harmony, Louis XVI agreed to convene the Estates-General for May 1789. Meanwhile, the king's new finance minister, Jacques Necker, a Swiss financial expert, delayed the effects of mercantilism by importing large amounts of grain.

On May 5, the Estates-General convened at Versailles. By June 17, the Third Estate had proclaimed itself the National Assembly Three days later, the delegates took the famous Tennis Court Oath, vowing not to disband until France had a new constitution.

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But the real French Revolution began not at Versailles but on the streets of Paris. On July 14, a Parisian mob attacked the old fortress known as the Bastille, liberating, as one pundit put it, "two fools, four forgers and a debaucher" The Bastille was no longer being used as a political prison, and Louis XVI had even made plans to destroy it. That made little difference to the mob, who were actually looking for weapons.

Promising the guards safe conduct if they surrendered, the leaders of the mob broke their word and hacked them to death. It would be the first of many broken promises. Soon the heads, torsos, and hands of the Bastille's former guardians were bobbing along the street on pikes. "In all," as historian Otto Scott put it, "a glorious victory for unarmed citizens over the forces of tyranny, or so the newspapers and history later said." The French Revolution had begun.

Despite the bloodshed at the Bastille and the riots in Paris, there was some clear-headed thinking. Mirabeau wanted to keep the Crown but restrain it. "We need a government like England's," he said. But the French not only hated things English, they even began to despise their own cultural heritage—the good as well as the bad. On October 5, the Assembly adopted the Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen—a good document all right, but only if it were followed.

Twenty-eight days later, the Assembly showed they had no intention of doing so: all church property in France was confiscated by the government. It was the wrong way to go about creating a free society. Certainly, the Church was responsible for some abuses, but seeking to build a free society by undermining property rights is like cutting down trees to grow a forest. Such confiscation only sets a precedent for further violation of property rights, which in turn violates individual rights—the very rights of man and the citizen the new government was so loudly proclaiming. By confiscating church property—no matter how justified—France's Revolutionary leaders showed that they weren't interested in a truly free society, only in one created in the image of their own philosophers. As Bastiat later pointed out, they were among the modern world's first social engineers.

Soon France began to descend into an abyss in which it would remain for the next 25 years. In towns where royalist mayors were still popular, bands of men invaded town halls and killed city magistrates. Thousands of people sold their homes and fled the country, taking with them precious skills and human capital. Francois Babeuf, the first modern communist, created a Society of Equals dedicated to the abolition of private property and the destruction of all those who held property. The king's guards were eventually

captured and killed. The Marquis de Sade, from whom we get the term sadism, was released from prison. The Paris Commune took over control of Paris.

Fiat Money Inflation

The actions of the government were even more radical than those of the people at large. In order to meet the continuing economic crisis, the Assembly resorted to paper money—the infamous assignats, backed ostensibly by the confiscated church property. Although most of the delegates were aware of the dangers of paper money, it was thought that if the government issued only a small amount—and that backed up by the confiscated property—the assignats would not create the kind of economic disaster that had accompanied the use of paper money in the past.

But as had happened again and again through history, the government proved unable to discipline itself. As Andrew Dickson White put it in his Fiat Money Inflation in France: "New issues of paper were then clamored for as more drams are demanded by a drunkard. New issues only increased the evil; capitalists were all the more reluctant to embark their money on such a sea of doubt. Workmen of all sorts were more and more thrown out of employment. Issue after issue of currency came; but no relief resulted save a momentary stimulus which aggravated the disease."

Writing from England in 1790, long before the French inflation had done its worst, Edmund Burke saw the danger of fiat currency. According to Burke, issuing assignats was the government's pat answer to any problem: "Is there a debt which presses them? Issue assig-nats. Are compensations to be made or a maintenance decreed to those whom they have robbed of their freehold in their office, or expelled from their profession? Assignats. Is a fleet to be fitted out? Assignats . . . . Are the old assignats depreciated at market? What is the remedy? Issue new assignats." The leaders of France, said Burke, were like quack doctors who urged the same remedy for every illness

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Burke saw in the French Revolution not a decrease in the power of the state, but an increase in it: "The establishment of a system of liberty would, of course, be supposed to give it [France's currency] new strength; and so it would actually have done if a system of liberty had been established." As for the confiscation of property—first that of the Catholic Church then that of anyone accused of being an enemy of the Revolution—Burke said: "Never did a state, in any case, enrich itself by the confiscation of the citizens."

But the issuing of assignats was only the beginning. In the spring of 1792, the first Committee of Public Safety was established, charged with judging and punishing traitors. Soon the streets of Paris began to run with blood, as thousands of people were killed by the guillotine. The following fall, the French government announced that it was prepared

to help subject peoples everywhere win their freedom. Thus, instead of peacefully exporting French products and French ideas on liberty, the French began exporting war and revolution . . . hence the saying, “When France sneezes, the whole world catches a cold.”

As more soldiers were needed to “liberate” the rest of Europe, France instituted history’s first universal levy—the ultimate in state control over the lives of its citizens. Meanwhile, for opposing the Revolution, most of the city of Lyons was destroyed. And Lafayette, who at first had embraced the Revolution, was arrested as a traitor.

Stifling Controls

Soon a progressive income tax was passed, prices on grain were fixed, and the death penalty was meted out to those who refused to sell at the government’s prices. Every citizen was required to carry an identity card issued by his local commune, called, in an Orwellian twist of language, Certificates of Good Citizenship. Every house had to post an outside listing of its legal occupants; the Revolutionary Communes had committees that watched everyone in the neighborhood, and special passes were needed to travel from one city to another. The jails were soon filled with more people than they had been under Louis XVI. Eventually, there flooded forth such a torrent of laws that virtually every citizen was technically guilty of crimes against the state. The desire for absolute equality resulted in everyone’s being addressed as “citizen,” much as the modern-day Communist is referred to as “comrade.”

Education was centralized and bureaucratized. The old traditions, dialects, and local allegiances that helped prevent centralization—and thus tyranny—were swept away as the Assembly placed a mathematical grid of departments, cantons, and municipalities on an unsuspecting France. Each department was to be run exactly as its neighbor. Since “differences” were aristocratic, plans were made to erase individual cultures, dialects, and customs. In order to accomplish this, teachers—paid by the state—began to teach a uniform language. Curriculum was controlled totally by the central government. Summing up this program, Saint-Just said, “Children belong to the State,” and advocated taking boys from their families at the age of five.

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So much of modern statism with all of its horror and disregard for individualism began with the French Revolution. The “purge,” the “commune,” the color red as a symbol of statism, even the political terms Left, Right, and Center came to us from this period. The only thing that ended the carnage—inside France, at least—was “a man on horseback,” Napoleon Bonaparte. The French Revolution had brought forth first anarchy, then statism, and finally, dictatorship. Had it not been for the indomitable spirit of the average

Frenchman and France's position as the largest country in Western Europe, France might never have recovered.

Now contrast all of this with the American Revolution—more correctly called the War for Independence. The American Revolution was different because, as Irving Kristol has pointed out, it was "a mild and relatively bloodless revolution. A war was fought to be sure, and soldiers died in that war. But . . . there was none of the butchery which we have come to accept as a natural concomitant of revolutionary warfare . . . . There was no 'revolutionary justice'; there was no reign of terror; there were no bloodthirsty proclamations by the Continental Congress."

A "Conservative Revolution"

The American Revolution was essentially a "conservative" movement, fought to conserve the freedoms America had painstakingly developed since the 1620s during the period of British "salutary neglect"—in reality, a period of laissez-faire government as far as the colonies were concerned. Samuel Eliot Mori-son has pointed out: "[T]he American Revolution was not fought to obtain freedom, but to preserve the liberties that Americans already had as colonials. Independence was no conscious goal, secretly nurtured in cellar or jungle by bearded conspirators, but a reluctant last resort, to preserve 'life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.'"

A sense of restraint pervaded this whole period. In the Boston Tea Party, no one was hurt and no property was damaged save for the tea. One patriot even returned the next day to replace a lock on a sea chest that had been accidentally broken. This was not the work of anarchists who wanted to destroy everything in their way, but of Englishmen who simply wanted a redress of grievances.

After the Boston Massacre, when the British soldiers who had fired upon the crowd were brought to trial, they were defended by American lawyers James Otis and John Adams. In any other "revolution," these men would have been calling for the deaths of the offending soldiers. Instead, they were defending them in court.

When the war finally began, it took over a year for the colonists to declare their independence. During that year, officers in the Continental Army still drank to "God save the King." When independence was finally declared, it was more out of desperation than careful planning, as the colonists sought help from foreign nations, particularly the French. In the end, it was the French monarchy—not the Revolutionists, as they had not yet come to power—that helped America win its independence.

Through the seven years of the American war, there were no mass executions, no "reigns of terror," no rivers of blood flowing in the streets of America's cities. When a Congressman suggested to George Washington that he raid the countryside around Valley

Forge to feed his starving troops, he flatly refused, saying that such an action would put him on the same level as the invaders.

Most revolutions consume those who start them; in France, Marat, Robespierre, and Danton all met violent deaths. But when Washington was offered a virtual dictatorship by some of his officers at Newburgh, New York, he resisted his natural impulse to take command and urged them to support the Republican legislative process. Professor Andrew C. McLaughlin has pointed out: "To teach our youth and persuade ourselves that the heroes of the controversy were only those taking part in tea-parties and various acts of violence is to inculcate the belief that liberty and justice rest in the main upon lawless force. And yet as a matter of plain fact, the self- restraint of the colonists is the striking theme; and their success in actually establishing institutions under which we still live was a remarkable achievement. No one telling the truth about the Revolution will attempt to conceal the fact that there was disorder . . . . [yet] we find it marked on the whole by constructive political capacity."

No Assault on Freedom of Religion

In America, unlike France, where religious dissenters were put to death, there was no wholesale assault on freedom of religion. At the Constitutional Convention in 1787, there were devout Congregationalists, Episcopalians, Dutch Reformed, Lutherans, Quakers, Presbyterians, Methodists, and Roman Catholics. Deist Ben Franklin asked for prayer during the Convention, while several months later George Washington spoke at a synagogue

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During the Revolution, many members of the Continental Congress attended sermons preached by Presbyterian John Witherspoon, and while Thomas Jefferson worked to separate church and state in Virginia, he personally raised money to help pay the salaries of Anglican ministers who would lose their tax-sup-ported paychecks. In matters of religion, the leaders of America's Revolution agreed to disagree.

Finally, unlike the French Revolution, the American Revolution brought forth what would become one of the world's freest societies. There were, of course, difficulties. During the "critical period" of American history, from 1783 to 1787, the 13 states acted as 13 separate nations, each levying import duties as it pleased. As far as New York was concerned, tariffs could be placed on New Jersey cider, produced across the river, as easily as on West Indian rum. The war had been won, but daily battles in the marketplace were being lost.

The U.S. Constitution changed all that by forbidding states to levy tariffs against one another. The result was, as John Chamberlain put it in his history of American business, "the greatest 'common market' in history." The Constitution also sought to protect property rights, including rights to ideas (patents and copyrights) and beliefs (the First Amendment). For Madison, this was indeed the sole purpose of civil government. In 1792 he wrote: "Government is instituted to protect the property of every sort . . . . This being the end of government, that alone is a just government which impartially secures to every man whatever is his own." Alexander Hamilton, the first Secretary of the Treasury, helped restore faith in the public credit with his economic program. It was at his urging that the U.S. dollar was defined in terms of hard money—silver, and gold. (At the Constitutional Convention, the delegates were so opposed to flat paper money that Luther Martin of Maryland complained that they were "filled with paper money dread.")

Hamilton's centralizing tendencies would have been inappropriate at any other time in American history; but in the 1790s, his program helped 13 nations combine to form one United States. Had succeeding Treasury Secretaries continued Hamilton's course of strengthening the federal government, at the expense of the states, America's economic expansion would have been stillborn.

Fortunately, when Jefferson came to power, he brought with him the Swiss financier and economist Albert Gallatin, who served Jefferson for two terms and Madison for one, Unlike his fellow countryman Necker, whose mercantilist policies only hastened the coming of the French Revolution, Gallatin was committed to limited government and free-market economic policies. Setting the tone for his Administration, Jefferson said in his first inaugural address: "Still one thing more, fellow-citizens—a wise and frugal government, which shall restrain men from injuring one another, shall leave them otherwise free to regulate their own pursuits of industry and improvement, and shall not take from the mouth of labor the bread it has earned."

For the next eight years, Jefferson and Gallatin worked to reduce the nation's debt as well as its taxes. The national debt was cut from $83 million to $57 million, and the number of Federal employees was reduced. Despite the restrictions on trade caused by Napoleon's Berlin and Milan decrees, and the British blockade of Europe, American businessmen continued to develop connections around the world. By the end of Jefferson's first term, he was able to ask, "What farmer, what mechanic, what laborer ever sees a tax gatherer in the United States?" By 1810, America was well on its way to becoming the world's greatest economic power. France, meanwhile, still languished under the heavy hand of Napoleon.

In his Report to the House of Representatives that same year, Gallatin summed up the reasons for America's prosperity: "No cause . . . has perhaps more promoted in every respect the general prosperity of the United States than the absence of those systems of internal restrictions and monopoly which continue to disfigure the state of society in other countries. No law exists here directly or indirectly confining man to a particular occupation

or place or excluding any citizen from any branch he may at any time think proper to pursue. An industry is in every respect perfectly free and unfettered; every species of trade, commerce, art, profession, and manufacture being equally opened to all without requiring any previous regular apprenticeship, admission, or license." The American Revolution was followed by 200 years of economic growth under the same government. By contrast, the French Revolution was followed by political instability, including three revolutions, a directorate, a Reign of Terror, a dictatorship, a restoration of the Bourbon Monarchy, another monarchy, and five republics. Today, socialism has a greater hold in France than it does in America—although America is not far behind. Even though they were close in time, it was the French Revolution that set the pattern for the Russian Revolution and other modern revolutions, not the American.

Bastiat's Opinion

Frederic Bastiat clearly saw the difference between the two. The French Revolution, he argued, was based on the idea of Rousseau that society is contrary to nature, and therefore must be radically changed. Because, according to Rousseau, the "social contract" had been violated early in man's history, it allowed all parties to that contract to return to a state of "natural liberty." In essence, what Rousseau was saying was, "Sweep aside all the restraints of property and society, destroy the existing system. Then you will be free, free to lose yourself in the collective good of mankind, under my care."

The social architects who emerged out of the Chaos of the French Revolution included Robespierre and Napoleon. In his analysis of Robespierre, Bastiat said: "Note that when Robespierre demands a dictatorship, it is . . . to make his own moral principles prevail by means of terror . . . . Oh, you wretches! . . You want to reform everything! Reform yourselves first! This will be enough of a task for you."

In Bastiat's opinion, the French Revolution failed because it repudiated the very principles upon which a free society is based: self-government, property rights, free markets, and limited civil government. The American Revolution, however, brought forth the world's freest society: "Look at the United States," wrote Bastiat. "There is no country in the world where the law confines itself more rigorously to its proper role, which is to guarantee everyone's liberty and property. Accordingly, there is no country in which the social order seems to rest on a more stable foundation . . . . This is how they understand freedom and democracy in the United States. There each citizen is vigilant with a jealous care to remain his own master. It is by virtue of such freedom that the poor hope to emerge from poverty, and that the rich hope to preserve their wealth. And, in fact, as we see, in a very short time this system has brought the Americans to a degree of enterprise, security, wealth, and equality of which the annals of the human race offer no other example . . . . [In America] each person can in full confidence dedicate his capital and his labor to production. He does not have to fear that his plans and calculations will be upset from one instant to another by the legislature."

Bastiat did see two inconsistencies in the American Republic: slavery (“a violation of the rights of a person”) and tariffs (“a violation of the right to property”). According to Bastiat, these were the two issues that would divide America if they were not dealt with speedily.

What was the answer for America as well as France? “Be responsible for ourselves,” said Bastiat. “Look to the State for nothing beyond law and order. Count on it for no wealth, no enlightenment. No more holding it responsible for our faults, our negligence, our improvidence. Count only on ourselves for our subsistence, our physical, intellectual, and moral progress!”

On the 200th anniversary of the French Revolution, Frenchmen and Americans can truly become partners in the liberty by working toward the principles advocated by Bastiat, America’s Founding Fathers, and others: limited government, private property, free markets, and free men.

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