

KEYNOTE ADDRESS
VIEWS OF THE FRENCH REVOLUTION ON ITS BICENTENNIAL

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Fellow historians, I am very flattered to have been invited to speak to you on this occasion. However, I feel at a certain disadvantage vis-a-vis your speaker of last evening, David Hurst Thomas, the renowned anthropologist studying the Georgia Island of St. Catherine.

I have no slides or pictures to show you. I do not even have bones. Poor Louis XVI was buried in quick-lime, and there is nothing left of him. Nevertheless, I hope you approve of my little talk, or at least do not riot or attack the rostrum.

Americans persist in imagining that the French Revolution was GOOD (by definition), perhaps because (they think) it was like ours--generally supported, at least after the fact (again, we like to think), by ALL citizens. Convenient proof of our studiedly naive view of the French Revolution is the American Academics' celebration of its Bicentennial in Washington, DC, in May 1989; it's very easy for us. The French are having a lot more trouble with deciding WHAT exactly to celebrate. They are divided, left and right, in multiple political factions--each insisting that only ONE phase of the Revolution is "good."

The LEFT loves the TERROR, though the Marxists think Robespierre wasn't enough of a Socialist. The French RIGHT, anchored in the *Academie Francaise*, has surprising numbers who would bring back the MONARCHY if given a chance.

Socialist President Mitterand's plan for a World's Fair (like that staged for the Centennial in 1889) was trashed before it came to a vote. The controversy was too violent and tempers too strained. Too bad, and after he announced that one of his reasons for running for a second term was to be able to make the opening speech at the "Exposition Universelle." Well, he spoke on Bastille Day (14 July) anyway. And, to look on the bright side, perhaps we shall be spared another horror like the Eiffel Tower--the Awful Eiffel. It always has looked to me like one support for a giant bridge that was never finished.

Mitterand, says Jane Kramer, Paris correspondent of *The New Yorker* [30 Jan 1989, pp. 72-83] has proclaimed a "year of self-congratulation," which he refers to as "la reconciliation," in reference to the 200-year struggle between the left and right. Principally, however, the French are doing what they do best: writing books on the Revolution; some 200 will be published in 1989.

But I digress, and I have not yet begun. . . .

The Revolution really began in February 1788 with the Assembly of Notables. This melange of educated and supposedly enlightened princes-of-

the-blood, nobles, judges, and burghers was expected to approve the King's recommended reforms, but it declined, and the King had to promise to call the Estates General, which had not met for 175 years. The Notables became an advisory body charged to tell the King how the Estates--a medieval Parliament which, of course, no one alive had ever seen meet--should be elected or selected, proceed, and even dress (very important to the French).

The Revolution began, then, as it were, with a committee meeting--a fact full of foreboding for the future, the worse since the Notables were divided into subcommittees.

The King, with classic bad judgment (assuming he wanted to preserve the monarchy) accepted a minority report and doubled the number of deputies of the Third Estate. The Marquis de LaFayette has been much praised for his part in this, but it should be noted that he did not push for 98 percent representation for the Third, proportional to its percentage in the population. He didn't trust the unwashed masses *that* much.

What "Doubling the Third" actually did was produce an Estates General dominated by *lawyers*. Lawyers have controlled legislative bodies in the Western World ever since, and politics has been their province except when people like Napoleon or Andy Jackson came along and "let them have it"--if briefly.

Such is the lawyers' domination in the United States today that I doubt if we could start a revolution if we wanted to--even though the Constitution guarantees our right to have a whopper whenever we're misgoverned.

But I'm here to talk about the Revolution viewed after 200 years . . .

There are a great many facts which are in conflict with general notions on the subject. Perhaps this will interest you.

Other historians and I have put all these things down in various books, but no one has paid much attention . . . For example, in a review of Simon Schama's *Citizens* in *Newsweek*, the Harvard-educated reviewer expressed astonishment that there were no political prisoners in the Bastille--and only seven of any kind--three of them mad as hatters. Now *I thought everybody knew that*. The most interesting "whacko" thought he was a medieval bishop, and amid all the noise and confusion, went about calmly blessing everybody in sight.

Here are a few other "revisionist" items that may interest you:

1. *Most of the philosophes of the "Age of Reason" were authoritarians, not advocates of parliamentary government.* This applies especially to Jean Jacques Rousseau, whose *Social Contract* preached government "by the General Will," but who defined the General Will as what was good for the people--not what the majority--"or even ALL"--favored. Anyone who objected to the General Will was to be "forced to be free."

Rousseau was the darling of the men of the Terror, for whom the

guillotine "set free" those who challenged their version of the General Will.

He is beloved of the Soviets and Eastern Bloc Communists, who define democracy as government FOR--but not BY--the people.

Hitler approved of Rousseau; Der Fuhrer interpreted the General Will; his followers sang: "Und willst du nicht genosse sein, den schlagen wir dir den schadel ein . . ." (If you will not go along with us, we will bash in your skull.) A new German translation of the *Social Contract* came out in 1944.

2. *The Enlightenment was an Age of Science only for scientists.* Rational men were common among political theorists, for example, but few used anything resembling the scientific method. Their views were speculative, or rationalized from very shaky first premises, as, for example, the goodness of man in his natural state, or the "natural rights" of man--which John Locke and many after him, including Rousseau, asserted were recognized by man before civilization corrupted him. Jefferson was more canny. Paraphrasing Locke in the Declaration of Independence, he avoided an indefensible first premise, and wrote: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men were created equal . . ." We are proud to subscribe to that principle, but it would be foolish to think that it was scientifically derived.

3. *The Revolutionary "classes" did not exist;* they were invented by Karl Marx. That has not kept even Americans from writing "Western Civ" textbooks for high schools and colleges which depict the Revolution as a triumph of the bourgeoisie over the aristocracy. Few of the writers were Marxists; they adopted the class-struggle thesis because it was so *simple* and "got them over" the sticky subject of the Revolution. For the same reason, many teachers, among whom there are even fewer Socialists, have purveyed the Marxist version of history because it made the Revolution easy to teach. (Also, of course, many did not realize that their texts followed a Marxist line.)

The problem, generally, with the class-struggle thesis is that *all* the classes "disappear" on analysis. If we define "class" by wealth, function, influence, and the like, as we normally do, each Marxist class breaks into a multitude of sub-classes. There were hundreds of sub-classes within the bourgeoisie--from village shoemakers (who often called themselves "manufacturers") to bankers who lent money to the King. The bourgeoisie was too diverse to have a program on which everyone could agree--thus the "triumph of the bourgeoisie," in the sense that it crushed the nobility, was impossible.

The nobility (really a caste) was made up of dozens of classes. Men like Lafayette were rich, owned vast properties, had access to the King; many nobles, with titles as old as Lafayette's, lived in the style of peasants, had little or no influence, and usually exercised only one of their legal privileges--the right to admission to the King's military schools. Poor, country nobles were the backbone of the Royal Army's officer corps. (Napoleon and almost half of his

marshals were in that category.)

4. *Lafayette was something of a Jackass.* He dreamed of being a "French George Washington," and helped start the Revolution, but he was a monarchist, first, last, and always. He never conceived that the Revolution could go beyond establishing a parliamentary monarch--in which he, the "Hero of Two Worlds" would play a glorious part. The Revolution, of course, went much further, and after the King was overthrown in 1792, Lafayette had to run for his life. The Austrians took him prisoner and imprisoned him as a "dangerous revolutionary" at Olmutz until 1797, when Napoleon got him released. He showed no gratitude to Napoleon, but helped restore the Bourbons in 1815 (and the Orleanist branch in 1830).

Americans are often surprised to discover that the French have little reverence for the Marquis de LaFayette. To the nobility, he was a traitor to his class; to Republicans, left or right leaning, he was anathema.

5. *The peasants had little or nothing to do with causing the Revolution or keeping it rolling.* Their ills are still emphasized in most books, and were so flagrant that it is hard to believe they were not ready to revolt. However, in fact, the "grass roots" *cahiers de doléances* (complaint sheets) show that the peasants complained hardly at all about feudal dues, and not much about taxes, but violently about *Colombiers* (*Pigeon Hutches!*). For years I have threatened to write a tongue-in-cheek article blaming the Revolution on *Pigeons*, with a brief text and tons of footnotes from the *Cahiers de doléances*. (Pigeons were used for target practice by the nobles, who shot too few of them, so that they ate up the peasants' crops.)

6. *Sans-Culottes*, in the literal sense, i.e., workers without kneebritches--seem to have been few and far between--if we judge from the paintings and drawings of the period. The men in the crowds (mobs) are in culottes--tattered and torn, but culottes--perhaps the cast-off clothing of the aristos. Again there is room for an article--many pictures, little text--called, perhaps "Where were the Sans-Culottes?" Good question.

7. *The mobs (crowds) of Paris had little conception of political or revolutionary principles*, but were motivated almost entirely by hunger and deprivation--and hope of relief from the same. So much was admitted even by the Communist Albert Soboul, who held the chair of the French Revolution at the Sorbonne from 1958 until his death in 1982.

8. *The Bastille was not stormed, but given over by the commander, the Comte de Launey.* He had cannon and ammunition, and was behind walls 9 to 25 feet thick--impenetrable by the artillery of the day. But he did not care to fire on mostly unarmed people, perhaps half of them women and children. All day he tried to persuade the people--through delegations he let into the place--that he would not fire on them, without success. Late in the afternoon, drained

... said in panic) from hours of stress, he sent out a note offering to surrender if his men were allowed to leave unharmed--and then dropped the drawbridge at the gate. The mob flooded into the fortress, but killed only *ONE* soldier. De Launey was taken to the city hall, where another mob killed him; a butcher, armed with the tools of his trade, cut off his head and the crowd put it up on a pike (settling a fashion for mob actions to come). The Bastille fell because of the incompetence (or kindheartedness, or weakness) of the Count de Launey. He had no orders from the King, all the same, so Louis XVI was the ultimate incompetent.

By the way, you should warn your students *not* to ask to see the Bastille when they visit Paris. It ain't there. The crowd started tearing it down; commercial companies finished the job. All the same, Paris taxi drivers will take you to see "the Bastille," if you like--via Milan, with the meter running all the way . . .

9. *The real turning point of the Revolution was the march of the women in Versailles* in October 1789. They marched, over 6,000 strong, through rain and mud--twelve miles from the City Hall in Paris--to tell the King that there was no food in the capital and that their families were starving. (They were encouraged to go by the City Fathers, who didn't think they would make it.) A delegation saw Louis XVI, still thought of as the "Father of the People," and who genuinely wanted to be. He cried over their plight, promised them relief, and they were given shelter, food, and wine, and the affair seemed over.

Then, however, the "Hero of Two Worlds," the Marquis de Lafayette, arrived with the Paris National Guard, miffed at the damage the rain had done to his hairdo and boiling to have his valet recurl it. Nevertheless, he took time to screw everything up. His Guardsmen were not needed, but he persuaded the King to let them replace regular troops outside the palace. Next morning, before dawn, men broke into the palace, killed two soldiers, and broke into the Queen's apartment (she ran screaming into the King's). The city was roused and Guardsmen expelled the intruders, who dragged out one of their victims, however, and put his head on a pike.

The cry went up for the King to return to Paris, where the people could protect him. Lafayette advised Louis XVI that it would be a good move; the Parisians meant no harm, and it would make them very happy. So the King appeared on the balcony of the Chateau with the Queen (holding the royal heir in her arms), and Lafayette. Silence. The King shouted that he would go with them. Cheers. That afternoon the royal family traveled to Paris, escorted by the mob, National Guards, and royal troops, and moved into the Tuileries Palace, in the center of the city. The National Assembly followed, and began meeting nearby in a former riding school.

The King was doomed. Once in Paris--though at first the people were

friendly--he could not escape. His one great attempt, the "Flight to Varennes" of June 1791, failed. In August 1792 the people swept him from his throne. The National Assembly and subsequent assemblies were also trapped and under pressure of the mobs to decide issues to please Paris. The March of the Women was *the* turning point of the Revolution.

10. *The aristos were not exterminated en masse*, but were in every government, including that of the Terror, and were employed by Napoleon in force, both in his government and officer corps. Their descendants are still around and often in important posts in the government.

But enough of this . . .

On a more general note--and to conclude: When I began studying the Revolution, I thought it was about the Rights of Man, Constitutionalism, *Liberté, Egalité, and Fraternité*--and it was. However, it soon became clear to me that Liberty and Equality were contradictory, i.e., that is, as Equality increased, Liberty decreased, and vice-versa. As of now, it seems to me that the Revolution was about finding a balance between Equality and Liberty.

The maximum in Equality--legal, social, and economic--was achieved under the Terror, when it was enforced by the guillotine. Equality required bureaucracy, improved police forces, and sometimes armies to enforce it. The discipline of the Terror was too harsh; it was swept away after one year. During ten years of Revolution, in cycle after bloody cycle, those in power struggled to find a formula under which liberty and equality could coexist. Fraternity got lost in the furor.

In most of its phases, the Revolution reinforced the ideals of representative democracy. Ultimately, however, it also reinforced those of authoritarian democracy--of the Terror--as well. In our century, the most studied phase of the Revolution has been the Terror, and we are beset by its legacies even in the United States.

The French Revolution is still alive, because basic questions it raised have yet to be answered. That is why the French cannot agree on its meaning after two hundred years. Most especially, the struggle goes on to find a balance between Equality and Liberty.

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Suggested Readings:

(For a my whole bibliography, please see my textbook, *French Revolution/Napoleonic Era*. New York: Holt, 1979).

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