

The Difference Between Fourth of July and Bastille Day

To celebrate Fourth of July, Donald Trump added a large military theme to the parade. Many observers, and critics, noted that this looked a lot like the [traditional French celebration](#) of Bastille Day, which will be celebrated this Sunday, July 14th.

Americans tend to conflate Fourth of July and Bastille Day. The fact that they fall only ten days apart, the fact that they both celebrate some form of “liberty”, and the fact that France was America’s ally in the American Revolution have led many Americans to think of Bastille Day as “France’s Fourth of July.”

But do these holidays really celebrate the same thing? Hardly.

The Fourth of July celebrates an orderly meeting. On July 4th, 1776, the Founding Fathers met in Philadelphia to discuss how to address their complaints against the British. They then signed the Declaration of Independence, and by doing so declared their independence from Britain in a peaceful fashion.

Bastille Day, by contrast, celebrates a bloody slaughter by a mob. On July 14th, 1789, a mob of angry Parisians stormed the Bastille, a royal fortress and prison in the heart of Paris. This event ignited the French Revolution. After they took the fortress, they captured the governor of the fortress and brutally killed him, as described by a [Paris newspaper](#):

“De Launey [the governor] was struck by a thousand blows, his head was cut off and hoisted on the end of a pike with blood streaming down all sides”

This massacre is what the French people commemorate (and celebrate) every year on July 14th.

These two holidays point to the very different natures of the revolutions. The Fourth of July celebrates a revolution waged out of a desire to defend the historical rights of the colonies, not to invent anything new, as Thomas Jefferson [pointed out](#) in 1825:

“This was the object of the Declaration of Independence. Not to find out new principles, or new arguments, never before thought of, not merely to say things which had never been said before...Neither aiming at originality of principle or sentiment, nor yet copied from any particular and previous writing, it was intended to be an expression of the American mind, and to give to that expression the proper tone and spirit called for by the occasion.”

Bastille Day celebrates the French Revolution, an attempt to radically reorder society by force. The French Revolutionaries took Jean-Jacques Rousseau as their ideological guru. Rousseau [said](#) that society had corrupted man and created unjust

inequalities. Therefore, men should form a government that took them back to their utopian “state of nature.”

To achieve their goal, the revolutionaries unleashed what became known as [“the Reign of Terror”](#) during which they guillotined 17,000 people. In addition, [civil war](#) broke out in several regions of France, leading to further death and destruction.

The American Founders clearly perceived that flaws of human nature, and therefore believed that a government run directly by the people would only result in chaos and disorder. Alexander Hamilton [argued this](#) in 1777:

“To determine the qualifications proper for the chief executive Magistrate requires the deliberate wisdom of a select assembly, and cannot be safely lodged with the people at large.”

The French revolutionaries believed the people could never be wrong. The leading figure of the French Revolution, Maximilian Robespierre, [said as much](#) in 1793:

“Any institution which does not suppose the people good, and the magistrate corruptible, is evil.”

The Founding Father and the French Revolutionaries had radically differing views on liberty, society, and human nature. As both holidays are commemorated this month, it is helpful to remember this. While they appear to be celebrating the same ideas on the surface, look a little deeper, and you will find that they are very different.

—