

Why Some Revolutions Fail

Soon after the start of the French Revolution on July 14, 1789, the English statesman Edmund Burke saw storm clouds on the horizon.

Under the banner of “liberty, equality, and fraternity,” the French revolutionaries not only attacked the dreaded Bastille prison in Paris. They assaulted the most important historic institutions in France: the monarchy, the aristocracy, and the Christian religion.

In his “Reflections on the Revolution in France,” Burke warned of political revolutions that despise everything that came before them: “People will not look forward to posterity, who never look backward to their ancestors.”

We know the rest of the story. Barely a decade after executing their hated monarch – and after years of political instability, social chaos, and the remorseless violence of the guillotine – the freedom-loving revolutionaries installed an emperor to replace him. Napoleon Bonaparte, dictator for life, would plunge continental Europe into war.

Near the heart of America’s cultural crisis today is a failure to grasp the profound differences between the two great revolutions for freedom in the 18th century – between the events of 1776 and those of 1789.

Intoxicated by lofty visions of an egalitarian society, the revolutionaries in Paris took a wrecking ball to the institutions and traditions that had shaped France for centuries. Virtually nothing, including the religion that guided the lives of most of their fellow citizens, was sacrosanct.

“We must smother the internal and external enemies of the Republic,” warned Maximilien Robespierre, “or perish with

them.” Their list of enemies – past and present – was endless.

The men who signed the Declaration of Independence in Philadelphia, by contrast, did not share this rage against inherited authorities.

Although the Americans, in the words of James Madison, did not suffer from a “blind veneration for antiquity,” neither did they reject the political and cultural inheritance of Great Britain and the Western tradition. They did not seek to invent rights, but rather to reclaim their “chartered rights” as Englishmen.

From both classical and religious sources, the American Founders understood that human passions made freedom a vulnerable state of affairs: Political liberty demanded the restraints of civic virtue and Biblical religion.

The French revolutionaries took a different view. Paul-Henri Thiry, Baron d’Holbach, one of the most influential French philosophers of his day, spoke for many: “To learn the true principles of morality, men have no need of theology, of revelation, or gods: They have need only of reason. They have only to enter into themselves, to reflect upon their own nature, [and] consult their sensible interests.”

This sanguine – and thoroughly secular – view of human nature underwrote the French political project. In their democratic society, all of the base and cruel passions would be enchained, while the sentiments of generosity and brotherhood would be awakened by the laws. The revolutionaries sang an anthem to political utopianism the likes of which had never been heard before in Europe.

The Americans rejected it as dangerous nonsense. Instead, the Founders – living in a society animated by Protestant Christianity – held a hopeful but deeply sober view about the prospects for republican self-government.

Benjamin Franklin captured the essence of it when, emerging from the Constitutional Convention in Philadelphia, he was asked what kind of government the Framers were delivering to the American people. “A republic,” he said, “if you can keep it.”

A major concern of the “Federalist Papers,” perhaps the most significant reflection on the nature of political societies ever written, is the problem of human self-interest. The threat of factions – what we would call tribalism – weighed heavily on their minds.

Though defending, along with John Jay and Alexander Hamilton, the American Constitution, Madison identified factions as the “mortal disease” of popular government:

The latent causes of faction are thus sown in the nature of man. ... So strong is this propensity of mankind to fall into mutual animosities, that where no substantial occasion presents itself, the most frivolous and fanciful distinctions have been sufficient to kindle their unfriendly passions and excite their most violent conflicts.

Here is the most challenging aspect of any democratic revolution: preserving freedom over the long haul. A sound constitution – embodying concepts such as limited government, the separation of powers, and equal justice under the law – is essential.

Good political leadership is also important. But so is civic virtue: the capacity to govern oneself and to work for the common good.

And for that, the Founders believed, democracies needed the moral ballast of religious belief.

In his farewell address as president, for example, George Washington took a swipe at the French “philosophes”: “Whatever

may be conceded to the influence of refined education[,] ... reason and experience both forbid us to expect that national morality can prevail in exclusion of religious principle.”

Reverend John Witherspoon – the only minister to sign the Declaration of Independence – reinforced the prevailing view: “that he is the best friend to American liberty who is most sincere and active in promoting true and undefiled religion.”

Ironically, it was a Frenchman, Alexis de Tocqueville, who confirmed Burke’s worst fears about the events in France. “Because the Revolution seemed to be striving for the regeneration of the human race even more than the reform of France,” de Tocqueville wrote, “it lit a passion which the most violent political revolutions had never before been able to produce.”

This zeal, he added, took on the appearance of “a new kind of religion ... without God, without ritual, and without life after death.”

Thus in the American and French revolutions, we encounter starkly different journeys toward freedom: two conflicting visions of human nature and the nature of political societies. A republic – if you can keep it – or the dawn of universal bliss.

Herein lies the source of our current crisis: the willingness to trade the legacy of the [American Revolution for that of the French](#).

What path will we take? Perhaps the welfare of the City of Man really does depend, after all, on our belief in the City of God.

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