



Two Revolutions: America Got a Constitution—France Got Napoleon

Two Revolutions, Similar Ideas

The American and French Revolutions were similar in several significant ways. They occurred within little more than a decade of one another, drew inspiration from many of the same Enlightenment ideas, challenged hereditary monarchy, and attempted to replace inherited authority with government deriving its legitimacy from the people. Yet their outcomes were strikingly different.

The American Revolution eventually produced a Constitution, a Bill of Rights and a durable republic. The French Revolution produced its own remarkable declaration of human rights but then passed through political upheaval, war and the Reign of Terror before Napoleon Bonaparte seized power in 1799. The two revolutions began with related ideas. They did not end in the same place.

America Came First—and France Helped

There is considerable historical irony in the relationship between the two revolutions. In 1778, King Louis XVI formally allied France with the rebellious American colonies in their struggle against Britain's George III. French money, soldiers and especially naval power became indispensable to the eventual American victory. At Yorktown in 1781, the French helped Washington trap Cornwallis and bring major fighting to an end.

Eight years later, in **1789**, George Washington took the oath of office as the first president under the new American Constitution. That same year, revolution erupted in France. Louis XVI had helped Americans overthrow the authority of one king. Revolutionary forces in his own country

would eventually overthrow him. The French monarchy was abolished in 1792, and Louis XVI was executed in January 1793.

The Rights of Man

Both revolutions grew from the intellectual soil of the Enlightenment. Thinkers such as John Locke challenged the proposition that kings possessed an inherent right to rule and argued instead that human beings possessed natural rights. The American Declaration of Independence expressed that proposition in 1776:

“...whenever any Form of Government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the Right of the People to alter or to abolish it...”

Thirteen years later, France's **Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen** proclaimed that men were born free and equal in rights and that sovereignty rested fundamentally with the nation. It protected such principles as liberty, property, security, equality before the law and resistance to oppression.

The similarity was not accidental. The French declaration drew upon Enlightenment thought as well as ideas already expressed during the American Revolution. There was therefore a recognizable philosophical connection between Philadelphia and Paris: **government existed for the benefit of the governed, not for the private benefit of those who happened to rule.**

America Added a Bill of Rights

The American Revolution certainly did not immediately fulfill all of its promises. Slavery remained, women lacked equal political rights, and voting qualifications excluded many Americans. Nevertheless, the new political system gradually stabilized. The Constitution was drafted in 1787, Washington became president in 1789, and the first ten amendments—the **Bill of Rights**—were ratified in 1791. They protected freedom of speech, religion and the press, along with due process, protections for criminal defendants and other limitations upon governmental power.

Perhaps just as importantly, Americans eventually demonstrated that fierce political disagreements could occur without destroying the constitutional system. The election of 1800 was particularly important. John Adams lost the presidency to Thomas Jefferson, and political power passed peacefully from one rival party to another. That peaceful transfer helped demonstrate that political opponents did not necessarily have to imprison, exile or execute one another when they lost an election.

France would have a much rougher journey.

When Revolution Devoured Its Own

The French Revolution began with demands for political reform but became increasingly radical as France confronted internal upheaval and war with European monarchies fearful of

revolutionary ideas spreading beyond France. The monarchy disappeared, political factions struggled for control, and revolutionary tribunals and executions followed.

During the **Reign of Terror**, suspected enemies of the Revolution were imprisoned and executed, and eventually the revolutionaries began destroying one another. Maximilien Robespierre, one of the leading figures of the Terror, was himself overthrown and executed in 1794. The progression illustrated one of history's recurring problems: overthrowing an old political order can sometimes be easier than constructing a stable replacement.

The Americans had experienced considerable political turmoil after independence, too. Their first national government under the Articles of Confederation proved inadequate, forcing them to reconsider their system and write the Constitution. France repeatedly reconstructed its political order as well, but under considerably more violent circumstances.

Americans Watch With Increasing Alarm

The French Revolution also widened political divisions within the United States. Thomas Jefferson and many Democratic-Republicans initially sympathized strongly with revolutionary France and regarded it as an extension of the struggle for republican government. Federalists such as John Adams and Alexander Hamilton increasingly feared the violence and radicalism of the French Revolution and favored maintaining closer economic and diplomatic relations with Britain.

These disagreements became part of the emerging American party system. The irony was considerable. France had been America's indispensable ally against Britain. Barely a decade later, Americans were arguing bitterly over whether revolutionary France represented the fulfillment of republican ideals or a warning about what could happen when revolution escaped constitutional restraint.

And Then Came Napoleon

After the Terror came the Directory, another attempt to create stable republican government. It did not last. Napoleon Bonaparte, a successful young general whose reputation had been enhanced by France's revolutionary wars, participated in the **coup of 18 Brumaire in November 1799** and emerged as First Consul. Five years later, he crowned himself Emperor of the French.

Napoleon preserved and institutionalized some achievements associated with the Revolution, most notably through the Napoleonic Code. He did not simply erase everything the Revolution had accomplished. But representative republican government had given way to increasingly centralized personal rule and eventually empire. There was an unmistakable historical irony in the outcome: **the revolution that had begun by attacking hereditary privilege had produced an emperor.**

Two Revolutions, Two Legacies

It would be too simple to say that the American Revolution succeeded while the French Revolution failed. France permanently altered its political and social order, abolished important remnants of feudal privilege, established enduring principles of legal equality and produced the Declaration of the Rights of Man, which remains an important part of the French constitutional tradition.

But the immediate political outcomes were undeniably different. The American Revolution moved from rebellion to independence, from the inadequate Articles of Confederation to the Constitution, and from the Constitution to the Bill of Rights. The French Revolution moved from constitutional reform to the abolition of monarchy, republic, Terror, Directory, dictatorship and ultimately empire.

There was one final connection between the two revolutions. Napoleon's wars required money, and in 1803 he sold the enormous Louisiana territory to Thomas Jefferson's administration. The **Louisiana Purchase** nearly doubled the territory of the young United States. France had helped Americans win their Revolution. The American Revolution helped inspire events in France. And Napoleon—the eventual product of that revolutionary upheaval—helped make the new American republic considerably larger.

The two revolutions began with remarkably similar declarations about liberty and the rights of man. America eventually added a Bill of Rights. France, after a far more violent political journey, got Napoleon.