**Advice (Not Taken) for the French Revolution from America**

by Susan Dunn, Williams College

“I come as a friend to offer my help to this very interesting republic,” wrote the nineteen-year-old Marquis de Lafayette from aboard the *Victoire* as it sailed from France across the ocean to the rebellious British colonies in the spring of 1777. “The happiness of America is intimately tied to the happiness of all humanity; America will become the respected and secure haven of virtue, honesty, tolerance, equality, and a peaceful freedom.”[[1]](http://www.gilderlehrman.org/history-by-era/global-history-and-us-foreign-policy/essays/advice-not-taken-for-french-revolution-fr?utm_source=History+Now-The+Revolutionary+Age-Sid+Lapidus&utm_campaign=History+Now+Issue+32&utm_medium=email" \l "_ftn1" \o ") Within six months, he would be honored with the command of a division in the Continental Army. At the Battle of Monmouth in June 1778, Lafayette and General George Washington, fighting side by side, succeeded in turning the tide and trouncing the British. The night after their victory, they fell asleep, side by side, under a tree on the battlefield.

When Lafayette returned to France in early 1779 to secure more aid for his American brothers, he found his native country deeply sympathetic to the American cause. The French had been following the dramatic events closely; they cheered at American victories, they wept over defeats. The captivating Revolution provided not only an absorbing pastime but a new vocabulary as well: “freedom” was an exciting word, and in wishing it for the Americans, the French began to contemplate it for themselves.

Even King Louis XVI was swept away by the revolutionary vogue. His advisers warned him that it was a grave risk for an absolute monarch to support a colonial uprising and embrace principles of freedom and equality; and just as important, they cautioned against incurring more debt by aiding the colonies. But the thrilling struggle of a young people against tyranny outweighed prudent counsel. Finally the king’s desire to inflict upon England a humiliating defeat tipped the scale: Louis XVI decided to make a major contribution to the American cause. By 1789 the interest alone on France’s debt would become staggering. But in 1779, in a country heady with the excitement of a distant revolutionary struggle, Louis XVI could not imagine that within a decade his generosity would egregiously worsen the economic crisis in France, subvert all traditional values, destabilize the monarchy, and put his own life in jeopardy.

The arrival of the French forces in America proved to be the turning point of the war. Their military and naval prowess helped make the October 1781 Battle of Yorktown—at which French soldiers outnumbered Americans and Lafayette helped prevent the escape of Cornwallis’s troops—the decisive victory of the American Revolution. After Yorktown, French officers and soldiers returned to France. They shared with their countrymen their experiences in the young democratic land, spreading the contagion of liberty. Stories about America intoxicated the French, who applauded the Revolution across the sea as the most important event since Columbus’s discovery of the New World.

In 1789, at the onset of the French Revolution, that American model was France’s for the taking—she had helped pay for it, and Frenchmen had fought and died for it. When the French set about drafting a constitution and establishing unfamiliar political and judicial institutions, advice and wisdom from thoughtful Americans might have been highly useful. After all, the Americans had already drafted a Constitution, elected George Washington as their first president, and, in the summer of 1789, were in the process of framing a Bill of Rights.

But the tables quickly turned. The French had strong doubts about their sister revolution. Some believed they could improve upon what the Americans had done—maybe even surpass it. One French veteran of the American Revolution, Count Mathieu de Montmorency, acknowledged that the Americans had created a worthy precedent, but, he grandly added, “they have given a great example to the new hemisphere. Let us give it to the universe!” Another revolutionary, Jean-Paul Rabaut de Saint-Étienne, declared, “O nation of France, you are not made to receive an example, but to set it!” The leaders of the French Revolution pointed out that the Americans still tolerated slavery, their Senate mirrored the antiquated hereditary British House of Lords, and their new system of checks and balances was designed to fragment power and thus could have the counterrevolutionary effect of thwarting the people’s will.[[2]](http://www.gilderlehrman.org/history-by-era/global-history-and-us-foreign-policy/essays/advice-not-taken-for-french-revolution-fr?utm_source=History+Now-The+Revolutionary+Age-Sid+Lapidus&utm_campaign=History+Now+Issue+32&utm_medium=email" \l "_ftn2" \o ")

Ultimately French revolutionary leaders would dismiss the American model as too conservative—and they were partially correct. As Thomas Jefferson had made clear in the Declaration of Independence, Americans had at first tried to avoid conflict with Britain; they had merely wanted a return to the rights and freedoms they had long enjoyed before Parliament and King George III violated them. And so, at least in its initial stages, the American Revolution signified a *return*, as the literal astronomical meaning of the word “revolution” suggests—“a circuit around a central axis, ending at the point from whence the motion began.”

The French, on the other hand, sought not return but total transformation. Their goal was to reconceive and reorganize the entire political, legal, and social structure of the nation, to overthrow all the nation’s institutions, and to break with a thousand years of history. But even their more modest goals—simply ensuring for the French people equality before the law, freedom of religion, a decent standard of living, and peace and security—presented challenges far more complex and daunting than those that had confronted Americans. Unlike the French, Americans were content with their legal system; they had no feudal heritage to extirpate, no privileged hereditary aristocracy to democratize and integrate into society, less-pervasive traditions of religious intolerance to oppose, no illiterate peasantry to educate, no wretched poverty to eliminate, fewer domestic insurrections to quell, and no hostile neighboring countries threatening immediate attack.

Faced with such overwhelming hurdles, the French had little patience for what was the greatest strength of the American revolutionary project: the moderation of its leaders. “I would say that great moderation should be used . . . ” General Washington advised his young friend Lafayette in 1788, when confrontation between the French parliament and King Louis XVI seemed imminent. “I caution you . . . against running into extremes.” But the French rejected that prudent and moderate course. “Let us be bold, ever more bold, bold forever!” roared the French radical Georges Danton.[[3]](http://www.gilderlehrman.org/history-by-era/global-history-and-us-foreign-policy/essays/advice-not-taken-for-french-revolution-fr?utm_source=History+Now-The+Revolutionary+Age-Sid+Lapidus&utm_campaign=History+Now+Issue+32&utm_medium=email" \l "_ftn3" \o ")

The theme of respect for the longstanding suffering of the French people would be continuously used by radical French leaders as a broad excuse for all manner of extremism. “We do not know how to respect the people,” shouted Maximilien Robespierre, the leader of the Jacobin party in France, during the trial of Louis XVI as he demanded the swift beheading of the king. “We are kind to oppressors because we lack feeling for the oppressed. . . . A people does not judge as does a court of law. It does not hand down sentences, it hurls down thunderbolts . . . such justice is as compelling as the justice of courts.”[[4]](http://www.gilderlehrman.org/history-by-era/global-history-and-us-foreign-policy/essays/advice-not-taken-for-french-revolution-fr?utm_source=History+Now-The+Revolutionary+Age-Sid+Lapidus&utm_campaign=History+Now+Issue+32&utm_medium=email" \l "_ftn4" \o ") The trial, conviction, and beheading of the king in early 1793 marked the end of the constitutional monarchy; the legislature as well as the judiciary were quickly superseded by the new dictatorial Committee of Public Safety.

In the history of revolutions around the world, the moderation of the American leaders is almost unique. In part, it was born, as historian Gordon S. Wood wrote in his illuminating article “The Democratization of Mind,” from the marriage of their political experience and their ideas.[[5]](http://www.gilderlehrman.org/history-by-era/global-history-and-us-foreign-policy/essays/advice-not-taken-for-french-revolution-fr?utm_source=History+Now-The+Revolutionary+Age-Sid+Lapidus&utm_campaign=History+Now+Issue+32&utm_medium=email" \l "_ftn5" \o ") Washington, Adams, Jefferson, Madison, Hamilton, and other American revolutionary leaders were highly educated men of great intellect, familiar with the political theories of the day. But in addition to those theories, they had also acquired experience in the give-and-take of ordinary politics, serving in the legislative bodies of the colonies or engaging in other forms of public and military service. The leaders of the French Revolution were also well schooled in political theory, but they had virtually no practical experience in politics to temper those theories. Nor could they have possessed such experience, for in the absolute monarchy of France, the French people had been excluded from participation in government. All that the revolutionary leaders had to guide them were abstract—and unrealistic—ideas gleaned from books and essays about government and human nature.

The moderation of American leaders was also a product of their understanding of the limits of human rationality, their tolerance for diversity of opinion and for dissent, and their fear of centralized, concentrated power. Even James Madison, the principal architect of the US Constitution, modestly admitted that the Constitution was not a “faultless plan.” And the young republic’s first president, George Washington, would urge the members of his Cabinet to compromise with one another and take a “middle course.” But Robespierre would express contempt for those who would “compromise the cause of liberty by a hypocritical moderation.” The “false revolutionary,” he insisted, “is moderate.”[[6]](http://www.gilderlehrman.org/history-by-era/global-history-and-us-foreign-policy/essays/advice-not-taken-for-french-revolution-fr?utm_source=History+Now-The+Revolutionary+Age-Sid+Lapidus&utm_campaign=History+Now+Issue+32&utm_medium=email" \l "_ftn6" \o ")

The stage was set for the downfall of their revolution when the French rejected not only the self-restraint and moderation of the American leaders but also their insistence on due process and the inviolability of individual rights. During the revolutionary summer months of 1789, when French men and women were storming the Bastille, James Madison was calmly introducing to the House of Representatives his draft of a bill of rights. Interestingly, in that Bill of Rights, negative constructions abound: “Congress shall make *no law*; the right . . . shall *not be infringed*; the right shall *not be violated*.”[[7]](http://www.gilderlehrman.org/history-by-era/global-history-and-us-foreign-policy/essays/advice-not-taken-for-french-revolution-fr?utm_source=History+Now-The+Revolutionary+Age-Sid+Lapidus&utm_campaign=History+Now+Issue+32&utm_medium=email" \l "_ftn7" \o ") With those crucial negatives, the Bill of Rights recognizes the individual citizen’s rights and liberties *against* government, against the coercion of the community.

But in their Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen of 1789, the French chose a distinctly different course: the protection of the rights and well being of the community *against* the rights of potentially disruptive individuals. One article, for example, states that “liberty consists in being able to do whatever does not harm others”; another, “the law may rightfully prohibit only those actions that are harmful to society.” The primacy of the rights of the group over the rights of individual citizens would help set the stage for the French Revolution’s final, defining, and fatal stage: the Terror. It was an episode predicted by none other than Alexander Hamilton.

In 1784, after American independence was won, the New York State legislature demanded summary legal action against all those Americans who had remained loyal to Great Britain during the war and the expropriation of their property. But Hamilton implored the members of the legislature to remember the critical importance of due process. The spirit of the American Revolution, he wrote, “cherishes legal liberty, holds the rights of every individual sacred, condemns or punishes no man without regular trial.” Hamilton understood that, in times of passionate political upheaval, a government could be tempted “to declare whole classes of citizens disfranchised and excluded from the common rights of the society, without hearing, trial, examination or proof . . . [and] institute an inquisition into men’s consciences.”[[8]](http://www.gilderlehrman.org/history-by-era/global-history-and-us-foreign-policy/essays/advice-not-taken-for-french-revolution-fr?utm_source=History+Now-The+Revolutionary+Age-Sid+Lapidus&utm_campaign=History+Now+Issue+32&utm_medium=email" \l "_ftn8" \o ")

And in fact, the radical leaders of the French Revolution—Robespierre and his colleague Louis-Antoine-Léon de Saint-Just—would indulge in precisely the kind of extralegal summary group punishments that Hamilton had warned against. They saw no need for tedious legal procedures. “Some people would like to govern revolutions by the quibbles of the law courts,” Robespierre scoffed in an address on “political morality” in 1794. Eventually the Jacobins would pursue, just as Hamilton had foreseen, an inquisition into men’s consciences. “You must punish not only traitors,” railed the twenty-seven-year-old Saint-Just in one of his typical diatribes, “but even people who are indifferent; you must punish whomever remains passive in the Republic and does nothing for her.”[[9]](http://www.gilderlehrman.org/history-by-era/global-history-and-us-foreign-policy/essays/advice-not-taken-for-french-revolution-fr?utm_source=History+Now-The+Revolutionary+Age-Sid+Lapidus&utm_campaign=History+Now+Issue+32&utm_medium=email" \l "_ftn9" \o ")

In the end, somewhere between seventeen thousand and fifty thousand people were killed in the Terror, deaths that made the execution of King Louis XVI, who was at least permitted a trial and a defense attorney, appear a model of due process. Those French radicals, sneered a disgusted Hamilton, were “assassins still reeking with the blood of murdered fellow Citizens.”[[10]](http://www.gilderlehrman.org/history-by-era/global-history-and-us-foreign-policy/essays/advice-not-taken-for-french-revolution-fr?utm_source=History+Now-The+Revolutionary+Age-Sid+Lapidus&utm_campaign=History+Now+Issue+32&utm_medium=email" \l "_ftn10" \o ")

By 1795, the term “republic” would become a smear word for the exhausted French people. In a plebiscite in 1799, they voted for a constitution that guaranteed the dictatorial rule of Napoleon. The vote was 3,011,007 to 1,562. The nation wanted, first and foremost, order and the rule of law, and Napoleon and then the restoration of the monarchy would supply them in their different ways. France would not know stable republican government until 1871.

In 1910, the British historian Lord Acton astutely observed that “what the French took from the Americans was their theory of revolution, not their theory of government—their cutting, not their sewing.”[[11]](http://www.gilderlehrman.org/history-by-era/global-history-and-us-foreign-policy/essays/advice-not-taken-for-french-revolution-fr?utm_source=History+Now-The+Revolutionary+Age-Sid+Lapidus&utm_campaign=History+Now+Issue+32&utm_medium=email" \l "_ftn11" \o ") The availability of the American revolutionary model not withstanding, the French revolutionaries indeed had failed in that all-important sewing stage.

And yet, despite its sanguinary end, the French Revolution did transform the French nation: in the nineteenth century, virtually all the vestiges of feudalism had been abolished; citizens were equal before the law; the aristocracy was no longer a privileged elite exempt from taxes; the right of all children to share equally in inheritance had replaced primogeniture; illegitimate children had won full legal status; Church property had been confiscated and sold; Jews and Protestants had been granted civil rights; married couples could divorce; a meritocracy had replaced the hegemony of the aristocracy; and the principles of the “rights of man” were broadly respected.

And in May 2012, as the red, white, and blue revolutionary flag fluttered above the Elysée Palace in Paris, François Hollande became the seventh president of France’s staunchly democratic Fifth Republic.

[[1]](http://www.gilderlehrman.org/history-by-era/global-history-and-us-foreign-policy/essays/advice-not-taken-for-french-revolution-fr?utm_source=History+Now-The+Revolutionary+Age-Sid+Lapidus&utm_campaign=History+Now+Issue+32&utm_medium=email" \l "_ftnref1" \o ") Lafayette to Adrienne, May 30, 1777, in Lafayette, *Lafayette in the Age of the American Revolution: Selected Letters and Papers*, ed. Stanley J. Idzerda, et al. (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1977), 1:56.

[[2]](http://www.gilderlehrman.org/history-by-era/global-history-and-us-foreign-policy/essays/advice-not-taken-for-french-revolution-fr?utm_source=History+Now-The+Revolutionary+Age-Sid+Lapidus&utm_campaign=History+Now+Issue+32&utm_medium=email" \l "_ftnref2" \o ") Montmorency, session of August 1, 1789, quoted in Lewis Rosenthal, *America and France: The Influence of the United States on France* (New York: Holt, 1882), 184; Rabaut de Saint-Étienne, August 23, 1789, quoted in Rosenthal, *America and France*, 208.

[[3]](http://www.gilderlehrman.org/history-by-era/global-history-and-us-foreign-policy/essays/advice-not-taken-for-french-revolution-fr?utm_source=History+Now-The+Revolutionary+Age-Sid+Lapidus&utm_campaign=History+Now+Issue+32&utm_medium=email" \l "_ftnref3" \o ") George Washington to the Marquis de Lafayette, June 18, 1788, in *The Papers of George Washington, The Confederation Series*, vol. 6, ed. W. W. Abbot (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1997). Available online at [gwpapers.virginia.edu/documents/constitution/1788/lafayette3.html](http://gwpapers.virginia.edu/documents/constitution/1788/lafayette3.html); Danton, Speech of September 2, 1792, in Henry Stephens, ed., *The Principal Speeches of the Statesmen and Orators of the French Revolution* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1892), 2:170.

[[4]](http://www.gilderlehrman.org/history-by-era/global-history-and-us-foreign-policy/essays/advice-not-taken-for-french-revolution-fr?utm_source=History+Now-The+Revolutionary+Age-Sid+Lapidus&utm_campaign=History+Now+Issue+32&utm_medium=email" \l "_ftnref4" \o ") Robespierre, Speech of December 3, 1792, in Michael Walzer, ed., *Regicide and Revolution: Speeches at the Trial of Louis XVI* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1974), 133.

[[5]](http://www.gilderlehrman.org/history-by-era/global-history-and-us-foreign-policy/essays/advice-not-taken-for-french-revolution-fr?utm_source=History+Now-The+Revolutionary+Age-Sid+Lapidus&utm_campaign=History+Now+Issue+32&utm_medium=email" \l "_ftnref5" \o ") Gordon S. Wood, “The Democratization of Mind in the American Revolution,” in *Leadership in the American Revolution: Papers Presented at the Third Symposium, May 9 and 10, 1974* (Washington DC: Library of Congress, 1974).

[[6]](http://www.gilderlehrman.org/history-by-era/global-history-and-us-foreign-policy/essays/advice-not-taken-for-french-revolution-fr?utm_source=History+Now-The+Revolutionary+Age-Sid+Lapidus&utm_campaign=History+Now+Issue+32&utm_medium=email" \l "_ftnref6" \o ") Robespierre, Report on the Principles of Political Moderation, February 5, 1794, in Keith Michael Baker, ed., *The Old Regime and the French Revolution* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986–1987), 378–379.

[[7]](http://www.gilderlehrman.org/history-by-era/global-history-and-us-foreign-policy/essays/advice-not-taken-for-french-revolution-fr?utm_source=History+Now-The+Revolutionary+Age-Sid+Lapidus&utm_campaign=History+Now+Issue+32&utm_medium=email" \l "_ftnref7" \o ") Emphasis added.

[[8]](http://www.gilderlehrman.org/history-by-era/global-history-and-us-foreign-policy/essays/advice-not-taken-for-french-revolution-fr?utm_source=History+Now-The+Revolutionary+Age-Sid+Lapidus&utm_campaign=History+Now+Issue+32&utm_medium=email" \l "_ftnref8" \o ") *The Papers of Alexander Hamilton*, ed. Harold C. Syrett, et al. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1962), 3:484 and 548–549.

[[9]](http://www.gilderlehrman.org/history-by-era/global-history-and-us-foreign-policy/essays/advice-not-taken-for-french-revolution-fr?utm_source=History+Now-The+Revolutionary+Age-Sid+Lapidus&utm_campaign=History+Now+Issue+32&utm_medium=email" \l "_ftnref9" \o ") Saint-Just, Rapport fait au nom du comité de salut public, 19th day of the first month of the Year II, in Saint-Just, *Oeuvres complètes*, ed. Michele Duval (Paris: Gerard Lebovici, 1984), 521. Author’s translation.

[[10]](http://www.gilderlehrman.org/history-by-era/global-history-and-us-foreign-policy/essays/advice-not-taken-for-french-revolution-fr?utm_source=History+Now-The+Revolutionary+Age-Sid+Lapidus&utm_campaign=History+Now+Issue+32&utm_medium=email" \l "_ftnref10" \o ") *Papers of Alexander Hamilton*, ed. Syrett (1969), 15:671.

[[11]](http://www.gilderlehrman.org/history-by-era/global-history-and-us-foreign-policy/essays/advice-not-taken-for-french-revolution-fr?utm_source=History+Now-The+Revolutionary+Age-Sid+Lapidus&utm_campaign=History+Now+Issue+32&utm_medium=email" \l "_ftnref11" \o ") John Emerich Edward Dalberg-Acton, *Lectures on the French Revolution*, ed. by John Neville Figgis and Reginald Vere Laurence (London: MacMillan and Co., 1920), 32.

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