Comparison Of The French And American Revolutions Essay, Research Paper

During the late 1800’s, two great revolutions occurred, the American

Revolution and the French Revolution. These two historical events happened

at the same time, but had a great number differences and very little

similarity. When French Revolution occurred, it turned into a very violent

and bloody event, while the American Revolution was almost nonviolent,

aside from the war.

In 1774, King Louis XVI made a decision that could have prevented the

French Revolution by breathing new life into the French economy: he

appointed Physiocrat Robert Turgot as Controller General of Finance. The

Physiocrats were a small band of followers of the French physician Francois

Quesnay, whose economic prescriptions included reduced taxes, less

regulation, the elimination of government-granted monopolies and internal

tolls and tariffs, ideas that found their rallying cry in the famous slogan,

“laissez-faire, laissez-passer.”

The Physiocrats exerted a profound influence on Adam Smith, who had spent

time in France in the 1760s and whose classic The Wealth of Nations

embodied the Physiocratic attack on mercantilism and argued that nations

get rich by practicing free trade.2 Of Smith, Turgot, and the Physiocrats,

the great French statesman and author Frederic Bastiat (1801-1850) wrote:

“The basis of their whole economic system may be truly said to lie in the

principle of self-interest. . . . The only function of government according

to this doctrine is to protect life, liberty, and property.”10

Embracing the principle of free trade not just as a temporary expedient,

but as a philosophy, Turgot got the king to sign an edict in January 1776

that abolished the monopolies and special privileges of the guilds,

corporations, and trading companies. He then dedicated himself to breaking

down the internal tariffs within France. By limiting government expense, he

was able to cut the budget by 60 million livres and reduce the interest on

the national debt from 8.7 million livres to 3 million livres.

Had Turgot been allowed to pursue his policies of free trade and less

government intervention, France may very well have become Europe’s first

“common market” and avoided violent revolution. Unfortunately for France

and the cause of freedom, resistance from the Court and special interests

proved too powerful, and Turgot was removed from office in 1776. “The

dismissal of this great man,” wrote Voltaire, “crushes me. . . . Since that

fatal day, I have not followed anything . . . and am waiting patiently for

someone to cut our throats.”3

Turgot’s successors, following a mercantilist policy of government

intervention, only made the French economy worse. In a desperate move to

find money in the face of an uproar across the country and to re-establish

harmony, Louis XVI agreed to convene the Estates-General for May, 1789.

Meanwhile, the king’s new finance minister, Jacques Necker, a Swiss

financial expert, delayed the effects of mercantilism by importing large

amounts of grain.

On May 5, the Estates-General convened at Versailles. By June 17, the Third

Estate had proclaimed itself the National Assembly. Three days later, the

delegates took the famous Tennis Court Oath, vowing not to disband until

France had a new constitution.

But the real French Revolution began not at Versailles but on the streets

of Paris. On July 14, a Parisian mob attacked the old fortress known as the

Bastille, liberating, as one pundit put it, “two fools, four forgers and a

debaucher.” The Bastille was no longer being used as a political prison,

and Louis XVI had even made plans to destroy it. That made little

difference to the mob, who were actually looking for weapons.

Promising the guards safe-conduct if they would surrender, the leaders of

the mob broke their word and hacked them to death. It would be the first of

many broken promises. Soon the heads, torsos, and hands of the Bastille’s

former guardians were bobbing along the street on pikes. “In all,” as

historian Otto Scott put it, “a glorious victory of unarmed citizens over

the forces of tyranny, or so the newspapers and history later said.”11 The

French Revolution had begun.

Despite the bloodshed at the Bastille and the riots in Paris, there was

some clear-headed thinking. Mirabeau wanted to keep the Crown but restrain

it. “We need a government like England’s,” he said.4 The French would never

accept it though, for they hated anything to do with the English. On

October 5, the Assembly adopted the Declaration of the Rights of Man and

the Citizen, a good document all right, but only if it were followed.

Twenty-eight days later, the Assembly showed they had no intention of doing

so: all church property in France was confiscated by the government. It was

the wrong way to go about creating a free society. Certainly the Church was

responsible for some abuses, but to seek to build a free society by

undermining property rights is like cutting down trees to grow a forest.

Such confiscation only sets a precedent for further violation of property

rights, which in turn violates individual rights, the very rights of man

and the citizen the new government was so loudly proclaiming. By

confiscating church property, no matter how justified, France’s

Revolutionary leaders showed that they weren’t interested in a true free

society, only in one created in the image of their own philosophers.

Soon France began to descend into a state of anarchy in which it would

remain for the next 25 years. In towns where royalist mayors were still

popular, bands of men invaded town halls and killed city magistrates.

Thousands of people sold their homes and fled the country, taking with them

precious skills and human capital. Francois Babeuf, the first modern

communist, created a Society of Equals dedicated to the abolition of

private property and the destruction of all those who held property. The

king’s guards were eventually captured and killed. The Marquis de Sade,

from whom we get the term sadism, was released from prison. The Paris

Commune took over control of Paris.

In the spring of 1792, the First Committee of Public Safety was established,

charged with judging and punishing traitors. Soon the streets of Paris

began to run with blood, as thousands of people were killed by theguillotine.

As more soldiers were needed to “liberate” the rest of Europe, France

instituted history’s first universal levy, the ultimate in state control

over the lives of its citizens. For opposing the Revolution, most of the

city of Lyons was destroyed. Lafayette, who at first had embraced the

Revolution, was arrested as a traitor.

Soon a progressive income tax was passed, prices on grain were fixed, and

the death penalty meted out to those who refused to sell at the

government’s prices. Every citizen was required to carry an identity card

issued by his local commune, called, Certificates of Good Citizenship.

Every house had to post an outside listing of its legal occupants. The

Revolutionary Communes had committees that watched everyone in the

neighborhood and special passes were needed to travel from one city to

another. The jails were soon filled with more people than they had been

under Louis XVI. Eventually, every citizen was technically guilty of crimes

against the state. The desire for absolute equality resulted in everyone’s

being addressed as “citizen,” much as the modern-day Communist is referred

to as “comrade.”

Education was centralized and bureaucratized. The old traditions, dialects,

and local allegiances that helped prevent centralization, were swept away

as the Assembly placed a mathematical grid of departments, cantons, and

municipalities on an unsuspecting France. Each department was to be run

exactly as its neighbor. Since “differences” were aristocratic, plans were

made to erase individual cultures, dialects, and customs. In order to

accomplish this, teachers that were paid by the state began to teach a

uniform language. Curriculum was controlled totally by the central

government. Summing up this program, Saint Just said, “Children belong to

the State,” and advocated taking boys from their families at the age offive.5

So much of modern statism, with all of its horror and disregard for

individualism, began with the French Revolution. The “purge,” the

“commune,” the color red as a symbol of statism, even the political terms

Left, Right, and Center came to us from this period. The only thing that

ended the carnage, inside France, at least, was “a man on horseback,”

Napoleon Bonaparte. The French Revolution had brought forth first anarchy,

then statism, and finally, dictatorship. Had it not been for the unyielding

spirit of the average Frenchman and France’s position as the largest

country in Europe, France might never have recovered.

Now contrast all of this with the American Revolution, more correctly

called the War for Independence. The American Revolution was different

because, as Irving Kristol has pointed out, it was “a mild and relatively

bloodless revolution. A war was fought to be sure, and soldiers died in

that war. But . . . there was none of the butchery which we have come to

accept as a natural concomitant of revolutionary warfare. . . . There was

no ‘revolutionary justice’; there was no reign of terror; there were no

bloodthirsty proclamations by the Continental Congress.”4

The American Revolution was essentially a “conservative” movement, fought

to conserve the freedoms America had painstakingly developed since the

1620s during the period of British “salutary neglect”, in reality, a period

of laissez faire government as far as the colonies were concerned. A sense

of restraint pervades this whole period. In the Boston Tea Party, no one

was hurt and no property was damaged except for the tea. One Patriot even

returned the next day to replace a lock on a sea chest that had been

accidentally broken.7 This was not the work of anarchists who wanted to

destroy everything in their way, but of Englishmen who simply wanted a

redress of grievances.

After the Boston Massacre, when the British soldiers who had fired upon the

crowd were brought to trial, they were defended by American lawyers James

Otis and John Adams. In any other “revolution,” these men would have been

calling for the deaths of the offending soldiers. Instead, they were

defending them in court.

When the war finally began, it took over a year for the colonists to

declare their independence. During that year, officers in the Continental

Army still drank to “God save the King.” When the Declaration of

Independence was finally declared, it was more out of desperation than

careful planning, as we sought help from foreign nations, particularly the

French. In the end, it was the French monarchy, not the Revolutionists. As

they had not yet come to power, that helped America win its independence.

Through the seven years of the American war, there were no mass executions,

no “reigns of terror,” no rivers of blood flowing in the streets of

America’s cities. When a Congressman suggested to George Washington that he

raid the countryside around Valley Forge to feed his starving troops, he

flatly refused, saying that such an action would put him on the same level

as the invaders.Most revolutions consume those who start them; in France, Marat,

Robespierre, and Danton all met violent deaths. But when Washington was

offered a virtual dictatorship by some of his officers at Newburgh, New

York, he resisted his natural impulse to take command and urged them to

support the republican legislative process.

In America, unlike France, where religious dissenters were put to death,

there was no wholesale assault on freedom of religion. At the

Constitutional Convention in 1787, there were devout Congregationalists,

Episcopalians, Dutch Reformed, Lutherans, Quakers, Presbyterians,

Methodists, and Roman Catholics. Deist Ben Franklin asked for prayer during

the Convention, while several months later George Washington spoke at a

Jewish synagogue. During the Revolution, many members of the Continental

Congress attended sermons preached by Presbyterian John Witherspoon. While

Thomas Jefferson worked to separate church and state in Virginia, he

personally raised money to help pay the salaries of Anglican ministers who

would lose their tax-supported paychecks. In matters of religion, the

leaders of America’s Revolution agreed to disagree.

Finally, unlike the French Revolution, the American Revolution brought

forth what would become one of the world’s freest societies. There were, of

course, difficulties. During the “critical period” of American history,

from 1783- 1787, the 13 states acted as 13 separate nations, each levying

import duties as it pleased. As far as New York was concerned, tariffs

could be placed on New Jersey cider, produced across the river, as easily

as on West Indian rum. The war had been won, but daily battles in the

marketplace were being lost.

The U.S. Constitution changed all that by forbidding states to levy tariffs

against one another. The Constitution also sought to protect property

rights, including rights to ideas (patents and copyrights) and beliefs (the

First Amendment). For Madison, this was indeed the sole purpose of civil

government. In 1792 he wrote: “Government is instituted to protect property

of every sort. . . . This being the end of government, that alone is a just

government which impartially secures to every man whatever is his own.”6

Alexander Hamilton, the first Secretary of the Treasury, helped restore

faith in the public credit with his economic program. It was at his urging

that the U.S. dollar be defined in terms of hard money, silver and gold.

(At the Constitutional Convention, the delegates were so opposed to fiat

paper money that Luther Martin of Maryland complained that they were

“filled with paper money dread.”)

Hamilton’s centralizing tendencies would have been inappropriate at any

other time in American history; but in the 1790s, his program helped 13

nations combine to form one United States. Had succeeding Treasury

Secretaries continued Hamilton’s course of strengthening the federal

government, at the expense of the states, America’s economic expansion

would have been stillborn.

Fortunately, when Jefferson came to power, he brought with him the Swiss

financier and economist Albert Gallatin, who served Jefferson for two terms

and Madison for one. Unlike his fellow countryman Necker, whose

mercantilist policies only hastened the coming of the French Revolution,

Gallatin was committed to limited government and free market economic

policies. Setting the tone for his Administration, Jefferson said in his

first inaugural address: “Still one thing more, fellow citizens, a wise and

frugal government, which shall restrain men from injuring one another,

shall leave them otherwise free to regulate their own pursuits of industry

and improvement, and shall not take from the mouth of labor the bread it

has earned.”9

For the next eight years, Jefferson and Gallatin worked to reduce the

nation’s debt as well as its taxes. The national debt was cut from $83

million to $57 million, and the number of Federal employees was reduced.

Despite the restrictions on trade caused by Napoleon’s Berlin and Milan

decrees, and the British blockade of Europe, American businessmen continued

to develop connections around the world. By the end of Jefferson’s first

term, he was able to ask, “What farmer, what mechanic, what laborer ever

sees a tax gatherer in the United States?”9 By 1810.

The only real comparison that can be made between these two great historic

revolutions is the formation of their new government. The revolutionists

in America abolished laws that Britain opposed on them such as the

Navigation Acts, Quartering Acts, Stamp Acts , and the hated Intolerable

Acts. Are founding fathers also used a democratic form of government,

which, in that time frame, was considered radical and totally unheard of in

Europe, where the major European powers were almost all total monarchies.

In addition to this, the revolutionists founded there own constitution.

Now the revolutionists in France used the same idea by using their newly

formed National Assembly by passing laws to wipe out many of the abuses of

the old feudal system. The National Assembly drew up a new constitution,

which made France a constitutional monarchy. Aside from that, the

constitution formed a legislative branch with 475 members elected by

“active citizens,” and it represented mainly the middle class, which was

the majority of the population. The king could declare war and peace only

with the consent of the legislature. This National Assembly did not last

long for that the king did not uphold the constitution and even some of the

revolutionaries revolted against it also. Nevertheless, the National

Assembly dissolved on Sept 30, 1791 making it only lasting three years.

These two revolutions occurred relatively at same time frame, but were

almost complete mirror reflections of one another. The patriots of the

revolution in America did not really even wanted a revolution, but had no

choice, which made it peaceful aside from the war. The revolutionists in

France seemed almost bloodthirsty and were very quick to kill someone for

any injustice. The group of revolutionists were to radical in that they

were not willing to compromise. Compromise can sure make a difference in

how events can turn out.

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10. Roche, George, Charles, Frederic, Basiat. A Man Alone. (New Rochelle,

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11. Scott, Otto, J. , Robespierre: The Voice of Virtue. (New York: Mason

and Lipscomb Publishers, 1974), pp. 59-61.

12. So strong were the connections between the Physiocrats and Adam Smith

that, according to the French economists Charles Gide and Charles Rist,

“But for the death of Quesnay in 1774 — two years before the publication

of The Wealth of Nations — Smith would have dedicated his masterpiece to

him.” Later, Frederic Bastiat lumped Smith, Quesnay, and Turgot together as

“my guides and masters.” Dean Russell, Frederic Bastiat: Ideas and

Influence (Irvington-on-Hudson, N.Y.: The Foundation for Economic Education,

1969), pp. 58, 19.