

Bush's dangerous liaisons

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MONTREAL — Much as George W. Bush's presidency was ineluctably shaped by Sept. 11, 2001, so the outbreak of the French Revolution was symbolized by the events of one fateful day, July 14, 1789. And though 18th-century France may seem impossibly distant to contemporary Americans, future historians examining Bush's presidency within the longer sweep of political and intellectual history may find the French Revolution useful in understanding his curious brand of 21st-century conservatism.

Soon after the storming of the Bastille, pro-Revolutionary elements came together to form an association that would become known as the Jacobin Club, an umbrella group of politicians, journalists and citizens dedicated to advancing the principles of the Revolution.

The Jacobins shared a defining ideological feature. They divided the world between pro- and anti-Revolutionaries - the defenders of liberty versus its enemies. The French Revolution, as they understood it, was the great event that would determine whether liberty was to prevail on the planet or whether the world would fall back into tyranny and despotism.

The stakes could not be higher, and on these matters there could be no nuance or hesitation. One was either for the Revolution or for tyranny.

By 1792, France was confronting the hostility of neighboring countries, debating how to react. The Jacobins were divided. On one side stood the journalist and political leader Jacques-Pierre Brissot de Warville, who argued for war.

Brissot understood the war as preventive - "une guerre offensive," he called it - to defeat the despotic powers of Europe before they could organize their counter-Revolutionary strike. It would not be a war of conquest, as Brissot saw it, but a war "between liberty and tyranny."

Pro-war Jacobins believed theirs was a mission not for a single nation or even for a single continent. It was, in Brissot's words, "a crusade for universal liberty."

Brissot's opponents were skeptical. "No one likes armed missionaries," declared Robespierre, with words as apt then as they remain today. Not long after the invasion of Austria, the military tide turned quickly against France.

The United States, France's "sister republic," refused to enter the war on France's side. It was an infuriating show of ingratitude, as the French saw it, coming from a fledgling nation they had magnanimously saved from foreign occupation in a previous war.

Confronted by a monarchical Europe united in opposition to revolutionary France - old Europe, they might have called it - the Jacobins rooted out domestic political dissent. It was the beginning of the period that would become infamous as the Terror.

Among the Jacobins' greatest triumphs was their ability to appropriate the rhetoric of patriotism - *Le Patriote Français* was the title of Brissot's newspaper - and to promote their political program through a tightly coordinated network of newspapers, political hacks, pamphleteers and political clubs.

Even the Jacobins' dress distinguished "true patriots": those who wore badges of patriotism like the liberty cap on their heads, or the cocarde tricolore (a red, white and blue rosette) on their hats or even on their lapels.

Insisting that their partisan views were identical to the national will, believing that only they could save France from apocalyptic destruction, Jacobins could not conceive of legitimate dissent. Political opponents were treasonous, stabbing France and the Revolution in the back.

To defend the nation from its enemies, Jacobins expanded the government's police powers at the expense of civil liberties, endowing the state with the power to detain, interrogate and imprison suspects without due process. Policies like the mass warrantless searches undertaken in 1792 - "domiciliary visits," they were called - were justified, according to Georges Danton, the Jacobin leader, "when the homeland is in danger."

Robespierre - now firmly committed to the most militant brand of Jacobinism - condemned the "treacherous insinuations" cast by those who questioned "the excessive severity of measures prescribed by the public interest." He warned his political opponents, "This severity is alarming only for the conspirators, only for the enemies of liberty." Such measures, then as now, were undertaken to protect the nation - indeed, to protect liberty itself.

If the French Terror had a slogan, it was that attributed to the great orator Louis de Saint-Just: "No liberty for the enemies of liberty." Saint-Just's pithy phrase (like Bush's variant, "We must not let foreign enemies use the forums of liberty to destroy liberty itself") could serve as the very antithesis of the Western liberal tradition.

On this principle, the Terror demonized its political opponents, imprisoned suspected enemies without trial and eventually sent thousands to the guillotine. All of these actions emerged from the Jacobin worldview that the enemies of liberty deserved no rights.

Though it has been a topic of much attention in recent years, the origin of the term "terrorist" has gone largely unnoticed by politicians and pundits alike. The word was an invention of the French Revolution, and it referred not to those who hated freedom, nor to non-state actors, nor of course to "Islamofascism."

A terroriste was, in its original meaning, a Jacobin leader who ruled France during la Terreur.

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