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Political Change in an Age of Revolution

In the eighteenth century the word 'revolution' came to have a new meaning. Traditionally it meant only a change in the composition of government, and not necessarily a violent one (though one reason why the English 'Glorious Revolution' of 1688 was thought glorious was that it had been non-violent, Englishmen learnt to believe). Men could speak of a 'revolution' occurring at a particular court when one minister replaced another. After 1789 this changed. Men came to see that year as the beginning of a new sort of revolution, a real rupture with the past, perhaps characterized by violence, but also by limitless possibilities for radical change, social, political and economic, and began to think, too, that this new phenomenon might transcend national boundaries and have something universal and general about it. Even those who disagreed very much about the desirability of such a revolution could none the less agree that this new sort of revolution was a phenomenon of the politics of their age.

It would be misleading to seek to group all the political changes of this period under the rubric of 'revolution' conceived in such terms as these. But we can usefully speak of an 'age of revolution' for two other reasons. One is that there were indeed within a century or so many more political upheavals than hitherto that could be called revolutions in this extreme sense, even though many of them failed and others brought results far different from those they had led people to expect. In the second place, if we give the term a little more elasticity, and allow it to cover examples of greatly accelerated and fundamental political change, which certainly go beyond the replacement of one set of governors by another, then there are many less dramatic political changes in these years which are distinctly revolutionary in their effect. The first and most obvious was the dissolution of the first British empire, whose central episode later became known as the American Revolution.

In 1763 British imperial power in North America was at its height. Canada had been taken from the French; the old fear of a Mississippi valley cordon of French forts enclosing the thirteen colonies had been blown

away. This might seem to dispose of any grounds for future misgiving, yet some prophets had already suggested, even before the French defeat, that their removal might not strengthen but weaken the British grasp on North America. In the British colonies, after all, there were already more colonists than there were subjects in many sovereign states of Europe. Many were neither of English descent nor native English-speakers. They had economic interests not necessarily congruent with those of the imperial power. Yet the grip of the British government on them was bound to be slack, simply because of the huge distances which separated London from the colonies. Once the threat from the French (and from the Indians whom the French had egged on) was gone, the ties of empire might have to be allowed to grow slacker still.

Difficulties soon appeared. How was the west to be organized? What relation was it to have to the existing colonies? How were the new Canadian subjects of the Crown to be treated? These problems were given urgency by Indian revolt in the Ohio valley in 1763, in response to pressure by the colonists who saw the west as their proper domain for settlement and trade. The imperial government immediately proclaimed the area west of the Alleghenies closed to settlement. This, as a start, offended many colonials who had looked forward to the exploitation of these regions, and it was followed by further irritation as British administrators negotiated treaties with Indians and worked out arrangements for a garrisoned frontier to protect the colonists and Indians from one another.

Ten years followed during which the dormant potential for American independence matured and came to a head. Grumbles about grievances turned first into resistance, then rebellion. Time after time, colonial politicians used provocative British legislation to radicalize American politics by making the colonists believe that the practical liberty they already enjoyed was in danger. The pace throughout was set by British initiatives. Paradoxically, Great Britain was ruled at this time by a succession of ministers anxious to carry out reforms in colonial affairs; their excellent intentions helped to destroy a status quo which had previously proved workable. They thus provide one of the first examples of what was to be a frequent phenomenon of the next few decades: the goading of vested interests into rebellion by well-meant but politically ill-judged reform.

One principle firmly grasped in London was that the Americans ought to pay a proper share of the taxes which contributed to their defence and the common good of the empire. There were two distinct attempts to assure this. The first, in 1764–5, took the form of imposing duties on sugar imported to the colonies and a Stamp Act which was to raise money from revenue stamps to be put on various classes of legal documents. The import-

ant thing about these was not the amounts they proposed to raise, nor even the novelty of taxing the internal transactions of the colonies (which was much discussed), but rather that these were, as both English politicians and American tax-payers saw, unilateral acts of legislation by the imperial parliament. The usual way in which colonial affairs were handled and revenue raised had been by haggling with their own assemblies. What was now brought into question was something so far hardly even formulated as a question: whether the undoubted legislative sovereignty of the parliament of the United Kingdom also extended to its colonies. Riots, non-importation agreements and angry protest followed. The unhappy officials who held the stamps were given a bad time. Ominously, representatives of nine colonies attended a Stamp Act Congress to protest. The Stamp Act was withdrawn.

The London government then took a different tack. Its second fiscal initiative imposed external duties on paint, paper, glass and tea. As these were not internal taxes and the imperial government had always regulated trade, they seemed more promising. But it proved an illusion. Americans were by now being told by their radical politicians that no taxation at all should be levied on them by a legislature in which they were not represented. As George III saw, it was not the Crown but Parliament whose power was under attack. There were more riots and boycotts and one of the first of those influential scuffles which make up so much of the history of decolonization, when the death of possibly five rioters in 1770 was mythologized into a 'Boston Massacre'.

Once more, the British government retreated. Three of the duties were withdrawn: that on tea remained. Unfortunately, the issue was by now out of hand; it transcended taxation, as the British government saw, and had become one of whether or not the imperial parliament could make laws enforceable in the colonies; as George III put it a little later: 'We must either master them, or totally leave them to themselves.' The issue was focused in one place, though it manifested itself throughout the colonies. By 1773, after the destruction of a cargo of tea by radicals (the 'Boston Tea Party'), the crucial question for the British government was: could Massachusetts be governed?

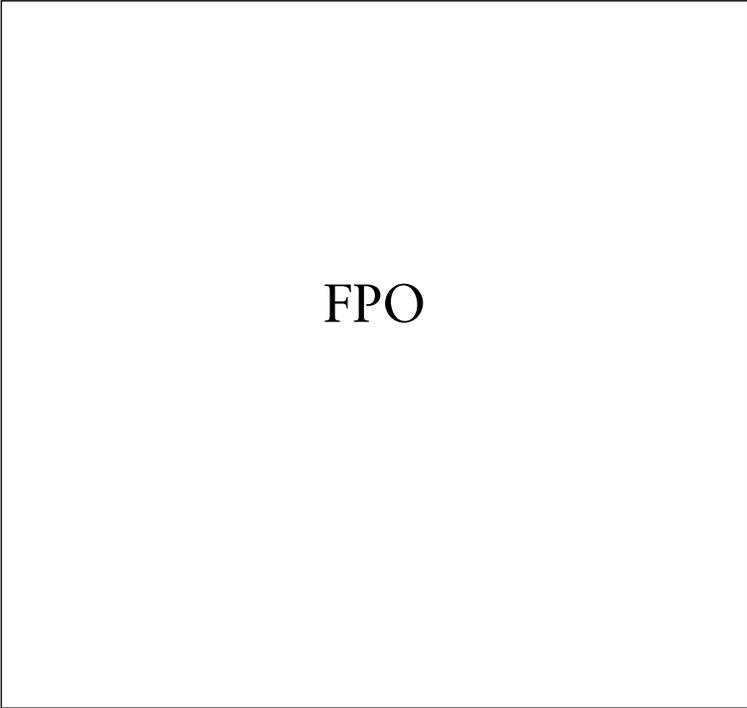
There were to be no more retreats: George III, his ministers and the majority of the House of Commons were agreed on this. A number of coercive acts were passed to bring Boston to heel. The New England radicals were heard all the more sympathetically in the other colonies at this juncture because a humane and sensible measure providing for the future of Canada, the Quebec Act of 1774, stirred up wide feeling. Some disliked the privileged position it gave to Roman Catholicism (it was intended to leave

French Canadians as undisturbed as possible in their ways by their change of rulers), while others saw its extension of Canadian boundaries south to the Ohio as another block to expansion in the west. In September the same year, a Continental Congress of delegates from the colonies at Philadelphia severed commercial relations with the United Kingdom and demanded the repeal of much existing legislation, including the Quebec Act. By this time the recourse to force was probably inevitable. The radical colonial politicians had brought out into the open the practical sense of independence already felt by many Americans. But it was inconceivable that any eighteenth-century imperial government could have grasped this. The British government was in fact remarkably reluctant to act on its convictions by relying simply on force until disorder and intimidation of the law-abiding and moderate colonials had already gone very far. At the same time, it made it clear that it would not willingly bend on the principles of sovereignty.

Arms were gathered in Massachusetts. In April 1775 a detachment of British soldiers sent to Lexington to seize some of them fought the first action of the American Revolution. It was not quite the end of the beginning. It took a year more for the feelings of the colonists' leaders to harden into the conviction that only complete independence from Great Britain would rally an effective resistance. The result was the Declaration of Independence of July 1776, and the debate was transferred to the battlefield.

The British lost the war which followed because of the difficulties imposed by geography, because American generalship succeeded in avoiding superior forces long enough to preserve an army which could impose its will on them at Saratoga in 1777, because the French entered the war soon afterwards to win a return match for the defeat of 1763, and because the Spanish followed them and thus tipped the balance of naval power. The British had a further handicap; they dared not fight the kind of war which might win military victory, by terrorizing the American population and thus encouraging those who wished to remain under the British flag to cut off the supplies and freedom of movement which General Washington's army enjoyed. They could not do this because their overriding aim had to be to keep open the way to a conciliatory peace with colonists willing again to accept British rule. In these circumstances, the Bourbon coalition was fatal.

The military decision came in 1781, when a British army found itself trapped at Yorktown between the Americans on land and a French squadron at sea. Only 7,000 or so men were involved, but their surrender was the worst humiliation yet undergone by British arms and the end of an era of imperial rule. Peace negotiations soon began and two years later, at Paris, a



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treaty was signed in which Great Britain recognized the independence of the United States of America, whose territory the British negotiators had already conceded should run to the Mississippi. This was a crucial decision in the shaping of a new nation; the French, who had envisaged making a recovery in the Mississippi valley, were disappointed. The northern continent was to be shared by the rebels only with Spain and Great Britain, it appeared.

For all the loose ends which had to be tied up, and some boundary disputes which dragged on for decades to come, the appearance of a new state of great potential resources in the western hemisphere was by any standard certainly a revolutionary change. If it was at first often seen as something less than this by foreign observers that was because the weaknesses of the new nation were at the time more apparent than its potential. Indeed, it was far from clear that it was a nation at all; the colonies were divided and many expected them to fall to quarrelling and disunion. Their great and inestimable advantage was their remoteness. They could work out their problems virtually untroubled by foreign intervention, a blessing crucial to much that was to follow.

Victory in war was followed by half a dozen critical years during which

a handful of American politicians took decisions which were to shape much of the future history of the world. As in all civil wars and wars of independence, new divisions had been created which accentuated political weakness. Among these, those which divided loyalists from rebels were, for all their bitterness, perhaps the least important. That problem had been solved, brutally, by emigration of the defeated; something like 80,000 loyalists left the rebel colonies, for a variety of motives ranging from dislike of intimidation and terror to simple loyalty to the Crown. Other divisions were likely to cause more trouble in the future. Class and economic interests separated farmers, merchants and plantation-owners. There were important differences between the new states which had replaced the former colonies and between the regions or sections of a rapidly developing country; one of these, that imposed by the economic importance of black slavery to the southern states, was to take decades to work out. On the other hand, the Americans also had great advantages as they set about nation-building. They faced the future without the incubus of a huge illiterate and backward peasant population such as stood in the way of evolving a democratic system in many other countries. They had ample territory and great economic resources even in their existing areas of occupation. Finally, they had European civilization to draw upon, subject only to the modifications its legacies might undergo in transplantation to a virgin – or near-virgin – continent.

The war against the British had imposed a certain discipline. Articles of Confederation had been agreed between the former colonies and came into force in 1781. In them appeared the name of the new nation, the United States of America. The peace brought a growing sense that these arrangements were unsatisfactory. There were two areas of particular concern. One was disturbance arising fundamentally from disagreement about what the Revolution ought to have meant in domestic affairs. The central government came to many Americans to appear to be far too weak to deal with disaffection and disorder. The other arose from a post-war economic depression, particularly affecting external trade and linked to currency problems arising from the independence of individual states. To deal with these as well, the central government seemed ill-equipped. It was accused of neglecting American economic interests in its conduct of relations with other countries. Whether true or not, this was widely believed. The outcome was a meeting of delegates from the states in a constitutional convention at Philadelphia in 1787. After four months' work they signed a draft constitution, which was then submitted to the individual states for ratification. When nine states had ratified it, the constitution came into effect in the summer of 1788. In April 1789 George Washington, the former commander of the American forces in the war against the British, took

the oath of office as the first president of the new republic, thus inaugurating a series of presidencies which has continued unbroken to this day.

Much was said about the need for simple institutions and principles clear in their intention, yet the new constitution was still to be revealing its potential for development 200 years later. For all the determination of its drafters to provide a document which would unambiguously resist reinterpretation, they were (fortunately) unsuccessful. The United States' constitution was to prove capable of spanning a historical epoch, which turned a scatter of largely agricultural societies into a giant and industrial world power. In part this was because of the provision for conscious amendment, but in larger measure it was due to the evolving interpretation of the doctrines it embodied. But also much remained unchanged; though often formal, these features of the constitution are very important. Besides them, too, there were fundamental principles which were to endure, even if there was much argument about what they might mean.

To begin with the most obvious fact: the constitution was republican. This was by no means normal in the eighteenth century and should not be taken for granted. Some Americans felt that republicanism was so important and so insecure that they even disapproved of the constitution because they thought it (and particularly its installation of a president as the head of the executive) 'squinted towards monarchy', as one of them put it. The ancient republics were as familiar to classically educated Europeans for their tendency towards decay and faction as for their legendarily admirable morals. The history of the Italian republics was unpromising, too, and much more unedifying than that of Athens and Rome. Republics in eighteenth-century Europe were few and apparently unflourishing. They seemed to persist only in small states, though it was conceded that the remoteness of the United States might protect republican forms which would elsewhere ensure the collapse of a large state. Still, observers were not sanguine about the new nation. The later success of the United States was therefore to be of incalculable importance in reversing opinion about republicanism. Very soon, its capacity to survive, its cheapness and a liberalism mistakenly thought to be inseparable from it focused the attention of critics of traditional governments all over the civilized world. European advocates of political change soon began to look to America for inspiration; soon, too, the influence of republican example was to spread from the northern to the southern American continent.

The second characteristic of the new constitution, which was of fundamental importance, was that its roots lay largely in British political experience. Besides the law of England, whose Common Law principles passed into the jurisprudence of the new state, this was true also of the

actual arrangement of government. The founding fathers had all grown up in the British colonial system in which elected assemblies had debated the public interest with monarchical governors. They instituted a bicameral legislature (although they excluded any hereditary element in its composition) on the English model, to offset a president. They thus followed English constitutional theory in putting a monarch, albeit an elected one, at the head of the executive machinery of government. Though, in a different sense, the British had an elected monarchy, this was not how the British constitution of the eighteenth century actually worked, but it was a good approximation to its appearance.

The founding fathers took, in fact, the best constitution they knew, purged it of its corruptions (as they saw them) and added modifications appropriate to American political and social circumstance. What they did not do was to emulate the alternative principle of government available in contemporary Europe – monarchical absolutism – even in its enlightened form. The Americans wrote a constitution for free men because they believed that the British already lived under one. They thought it had failed only in so far as it had been corrupted, and that it had been improperly employed to deprive Americans of the rights they too ought to have exercised under it. Because of this, the same principles of government (albeit in much evolved forms) would one day be propagated and patronized in areas which shared none of the cultural assumptions of the Anglo-Saxon world on which they rested.

One way in which the United States differed radically from most other existing states, and diverged consciously from the British constitutional model, was in adherence to the principle of federalism. This was indeed fundamental to it, since only large concessions to the independence of individual states made it possible for the new union to come into existence at all. The former colonies had no wish to set up a new central government which would bully them as they believed the government of King George had done. The federal structure provided an answer to the problem of diversity – *e pluribus unum*. It also dictated much of the form and content of American politics for the next eighty years. Question after question, whose substance was economic or social or ideological, would find itself pressed into the channels of a continuing debate about what were the proper relations of the central government and the individual states. It was a debate which would in the end come within an inch of destroying the Union. Federalism would also promote a major readjustment within the constitution, the rise of the Supreme Court as an instrument of judicial review. Outside the Union, the nineteenth century would reveal the appeal of federalism to many other countries, impressed by what appeared to

have been achieved by the Americans. Federalism was to be seen by European liberals as a crucial device for reconciling unity with freedom, and British governments found it a great standby in their handling of colonial problems.

Finally, in any summary, however brief, of the historic significance of the constitution of the United States, attention must be given to its opening words: 'We the People' (even though they seem to have been included almost casually). The actual political arrangements in several of the states of 1789 were by no means democratic, but the principle of popular sovereignty was enunciated clearly from the start. In whatever form the mythology of a particular historical epoch might cloak it, the popular will was to remain the ultimate court of appeal in politics for Americans. Here was a fundamental departure from British constitutional practice, and it owed something to the way in which seventeenth-century colonists had sometimes given themselves constitutions. Yet British constitutionalism was prescriptive; the sovereignty of king in parliament was not there because the people had once decided it should be, but because it was there and was unquestioned. As the great English constitutional historian Frederic Maitland once put it, Englishmen had taken the authority of the Crown as a substitute for the theory of the state. The new constitution broke with this and with every other prescriptive theory (although not with British political thinking, for John Locke had said in the 1680s that governments held their powers on trust and that the people could upset governments which abused that trust, and on this ground, among others, some Englishmen had justified the Glorious Revolution).

The American adoption of a democratic theory that all governments derive their just powers from the consent of the governed (as it had been put in the Declaration of Independence) was epoch-marking. But it by no means solved the problems of political authority at a stroke. Many Americans feared what a democracy might do and sought to restrict the popular element in the political system right from the start. Another problem was suggested by the fundamental rights set out in the first ten amendments to the constitution at the end of 1789. These were presumably as much open to re-amendment at the hands of popular sovereignty as any other part of the constitution. Here was an important source of disagreement for the future: Americans have always found it easy to be somewhat confused (especially in the affairs of other countries, but even in their own at times) about whether democratic principles consist in following the wishes of the majority or in upholding certain fundamental rights. Nevertheless, the *de facto* adoption of the democratic principle in 1787 was immensely important and justifies the consideration of the constitution as a landmark in

world history. For generations to come the new United States would become the focus of the aspirations of men longing to be free the world over – ‘the world’s last, best hope’, as one American once memorably said. Even today, when America so often appears conservative and inward-looking, the democratic ideal of which for so long it was the custodian and exemplar retains its power in many countries, and the institutions it fertilized are still working.

Paris was the centre of social and political discussion in Europe. To it returned some of the French soldiers who had helped to bring to birth the young American Republic. It is hardly surprising, then, that although most European nations responded in some measure to the transatlantic revolution, Frenchmen were especially aware of it. The American example and the hopes it raised were a contribution, though a subsidiary one, to the huge release of forces which is still, after 200 years and many subsequent risings, called the French Revolution. Unfortunately, this all-too familiar and simple term puts obstacles in the way of understanding. Politicians and scholars have offered many different interpretations of what the essence of the Revolution was, have disagreed about how long it went on and what were its results, and even about when it began. They agree about little except that what happened in 1789 was very important. Within a very short time, indeed, it changed the whole concept of revolution, though there was much in it that looked to the past rather than the future. It was a great boiling-over of the pot of French society and the pot’s contents were a jumbled mixture of conservative and innovating elements, much like those of the 1640s in England, and equally confused in their mixture of consciousness and unconsciousness of direction and purposes, too.

This confusion was the symptom of big dislocations and maladjustments in the material life and government of France. She was the greatest of European powers and her rulers neither could nor wished to relinquish her international role. The first way in which the American Revolution had affected her was by providing an opportunity for revenge; Yorktown was the retaliation for defeat at the hands of the British in the Seven Years War, and to deprive them of the Thirteen Colonies was some compensation for the French loss of India and Canada. Yet the successful effort was costly. The second great consequence was that for no considerable gain beyond the humiliation of a rival, France added yet another layer to the huge and accumulating debt piled up by her efforts since the 1630s to build and maintain a European supremacy.

Attempts to liquidate this debt and cut the monarchy free from the cramping burden it imposed (and it was becoming clear after 1783 that France’s real independence in foreign affairs was narrowing sharply because

of it) were made by a succession of ministers under Louis XVI, the young, somewhat obtuse, but high-principled and well-meaning king who came to the throne in 1774. None of them succeeded in even arresting the growth of the debt, let alone in reducing it. What was worse, their effects only advertised the facts of failure. The deficit could be measured and the figures published as would never have been possible under Louis XIV. If there was a spectre haunting France in the 1780s, it was not that of revolution but of state bankruptcy. The whole social and political structure of France stood in the way of tapping the wealth of the better-off, the only sure way of emerging from the financial impasse. Ever since the days of Louis XIV himself, it had proved impossible to levy a due weight of taxation on the wealthy without resorting to force, for French legal and social assumptions and the mass of privileges, special immunities and the prescriptive rights they upheld, blocked the way ahead. The conundrum of eighteenth-century European government was at its most evident in France: a theoretically absolute monarchy could not infringe the mass of liberties and rights which made up the essentially medieval constitution of the country without threatening its own foundations. Monarchy itself rested on prescription.

To more and more Frenchmen it appeared that France needed to reform her governmental and constitutional structure if she was to emerge from her difficulties. But some went further. They saw in the inability of government to share fiscal burdens equitably between classes the extreme example of a whole range of abuses which needed reform. The issue was more and more exaggerated in terms of polarities: of reason and superstition, of freedom and slavery, of humanitarianism and greed. Above all, it tended to concentrate on the symbolic question of legal privilege. The class which focused the anger this aroused was the nobility, an immensely diverse and very large body (there seem to have been between 200,000 and 250,000 noble males in France in 1789), about which cultural, economic or social generalization is impossible but whose members all shared a legal status which in some degree conferred privilege at law.

While the logic of financial extremity pushed the governments of France more and more towards conflict with the privileged, there was a natural unwillingness on the part of many of the royal advisers, themselves usually noblemen, and of the king himself to proceed except by agreement. When in 1788 a series of failures nerved the government to accept that conflict was inevitable, it still sought to confine it to legal channels, and, like Englishmen in 1640, turned to historic institutions for the means to do so. Not having Parliament to hand, they trundled out from the attic of French constitutionalism the nearest thing to a national representative body that France had ever possessed, the Estates General. This body of

representatives of nobles, clergy and commoners had not met since 1614. It was hoped that it would provide sufficient moral authority to squeeze agreement from the fiscally privileged for the payment of higher taxes. It was an unimpeachably constitutional step, but as a solution it had the disadvantage that great expectations were aroused while what the Estates General could legally do was obscure. More than one answer was given. Some were already saying that the Estates General could legislate for the nation, even if historic and undoubted legal privileges were at issue.

This very complicated political crisis was coming to a head at the end of a period in which France was also under other strains. One was population growth. Since the second quarter of the century this had risen at what a later age would think a slow rate, but it was still fast enough to outstrip growth in the production of food. This sustained a long-term inflation of food prices, which bore most painfully upon the poor, the vast majority of whom were peasants with little or no land. Given the coincidence of the fiscal demands of government – which for a long time staved off the financial crisis by borrowing or by putting up the direct and indirect taxes which fell most heavily on the poor – and the efforts of landlords to protect themselves in inflationary times by holding down wages and putting up rents and dues, the life of the poor was growing harsher and more miserable for most of the century. To this general impoverishment should be added the special troubles that from time to time afflicted particular regions or classes but which, coincidentally, underwent something of an intensification in the second half of the 1780s. Bad harvests, cattle disease and recession, which badly affected the areas where peasants produced textiles as a supplement to their income, all sapped the precarious health of the economy in the 1780s. The sum effect was that the elections to the Estates General in 1789 took place in a very excited and embittered atmosphere. Millions of Frenchmen were desperately seeking some way out of their troubles, were eager to seek and blame scapegoats, and had quite unrealistic and inflated notions of what good the king, whom they trusted, could do for them.

Thus a complex interplay of governmental impotence, social injustice, economic hardship and reforming aspiration brought about the French Revolution. But before this complexity is lost to sight in the subsequent political battles and the simplifying slogans they generated, it is important to emphasize that almost no one either anticipated this outcome or desired it. There was much social injustice in France, but no more than many other eighteenth-century states found it possible to live with. There was a welter of expectant and hopeful advocates of particular reforms, ranging from the abolition of the censorship to the prohibition of immoral and irreligious literature, but no one doubted that such changes could easily be

carried out by the king, once he was informed of his people's wishes and needs. What did not exist was a party of revolution clearly confronting a party of reaction.

Parties only came into existence when the Estates General had met. This is one reason why the day on which they did so, 5 May 1789 (a week after George Washington's inauguration), is a date in world history, because it opened an era in which to be for or against the Revolution became the central political question in most continental countries, and even tainted the very different politics of Great Britain and the United States. What happened in France was bound to matter elsewhere. At the simplest level this was because she was the greatest European power; the Estates General would either paralyse her (as many foreign diplomats hoped) or liberate her from her difficulties to play again a forceful role. Beyond this, France was also the cultural leader of Europe. What her writers and politicians said and did was immediately accessible to people elsewhere because of the universality of the French language, and it was bound to be given respectful attention because people were used to looking to Paris for intellectual guidance.

In the summer of 1789 the Estates General turned itself into a national assembly claiming sovereignty. Breaking with the assumption that it represented the great medieval divisions of society, the majority of its members claimed to represent all Frenchmen without distinction. It could take this revolutionary step because the turbulence of France frightened the government and those deputies to the assembly who opposed change. Rural revolt and Parisian riot alarmed ministers no longer sure that they could rely upon the army. This led first to the monarchy's abandonment of the privileged classes, and then its concession, unwillingly and uneasily, of many other things asked for by the politicians who led the new National Assembly. At the same time these concessions created a fairly clear-cut division between those who were for the Revolution and those who were against it; in language to go round the world they were soon called Left and Right (because of the places in which they sat in the National Assembly).

The main task which that body set itself was the writing of a constitution, but in the process it transformed the whole institutional structure of France. By 1791, when it dispersed, it had nationalized the lands of the Church, abolished what it termed 'the feudal system', ended censorship, created a system of centralized representative government, obliterated the old provincial and local divisions and replaced them with the *departments* under which Frenchmen still live, instituted equality before the law, and separated the executive from the legislative power. These were only the most remarkable things done by one of the most remarkable parliamentary

bodies the world has ever seen. Its failures tend to mask this huge achievement; they should not be allowed to do so. Broadly speaking, they removed the legal and institutional checks on the modernization of France. Popular sovereignty, administrative centralization and individual legal equality were from this time points towards which her institutional life always returned.

Many Frenchmen did not like all this; some liked none of it. By 1791 the king had given clear evidence of his own misgivings, the goodwill which had supported him in the early Revolution was gone and he was suspected as an anti-revolutionary. Some noblemen had already disliked enough of what was going on to emigrate; they were led by two of the king's brothers, which did not improve the outlook for royalty. Most important of all, many Frenchmen turned against the Revolution when, because of papal policy, the National Assembly's settlement of Church affairs was called into question. Much in it had appealed deeply to many Frenchmen, churchmen among them, but the pope rejected it and this raised the ultimate question of authority. French Catholics had to decide whether the authority of the pope or that of the French constitution was supreme for them. This created the most important division which came to embitter revolutionary politics.

As 1792 began, the British prime minister expressed his confidence that fifteen years of peace could reasonably be expected to lie ahead. In April, France went to war with Austria and was at war with Prussia soon after. The issue was complicated, but many Frenchmen believed that foreign powers wished to intervene to bring the Revolution to an end and put the clock back to 1788. By the summer, as things went badly and shortages and suspicion mounted at home, the king was discredited. A Parisian insurrection overthrew the monarchy and led to the summoning of a new assembly to draw up a new and, this time, republican constitution.

This body, remembered as the Convention, was the centre of French government until 1796. Through civil and foreign war and economic and ideological crisis it achieved the survival of the Revolution. Most of its members were politically not much more advanced in their views than their predecessors. They believed in the individual and the sanctity of property (they prescribed the death penalty for anyone proposing a law to introduce agrarian communism) and that the poor are always with us, although they allowed some of them a small say in affairs by supporting direct universal adult male suffrage. What distinguished them from their predecessors was that they were willing to go rather further to meet emergencies than earlier French assemblies (especially when frightened by the possibility of defeat); they also sat in a capital city which was for a long time manipulated by more extreme politicians to push them into measures more radical than

they really wanted, and into using very democratic language. Consequently, they frightened Europe much more than their predecessors had done.

Their symbolic break with the past came when the Convention voted for the execution of the king in January 1793. The judicial murder of kings had hitherto been believed to be an English aberration; now the English were as shocked as the rest of Europe. They, too, now went to war with France, because they feared the strategic and commercial result of French success against the Austrians in the Netherlands. But the war looked more and more like an ideological struggle and to win it the French government appeared increasingly bloodthirsty at home. A new instrument for humane execution, the guillotine (a characteristic product of pre-revolutionary enlightenment, combining as it did technical efficiency and benevolence in the swift, sure death it afforded its victims), became the symbol of the Terror, the name soon given to a period during which the Convention strove by intimidation of its enemies at home to assure survival to the Revolution.

There was much that was misleading in this symbolism. Some of the Terror was only rhetoric, the hot air of politicians trying to keep up their own spirits and frighten their opponents. In practice it often reflected a jumble of patriotism, practical necessity, muddled idealism, self-interest and petty vengefulness, as old scores were settled in the name of the republic. Many people died, of course – something over 35,000, perhaps – and many emigrated to avoid danger, yet the guillotine killed only a minority of the victims, most of whom died in the provinces, often in conditions of civil war and sometimes with arms in their hands. In eighteen months or so, the Frenchmen whom contemporaries regarded as monsters killed about as many of their countrymen as died in ten days of street-fighting and fring-squads in Paris in 1871. To take a different but equally revealing measure, the numbers of those who died in this year and a half are roughly twice those of the British soldiers who died on the first day of the battle of the Somme in 1916. Such bloodshed drove divisions even deeper between Frenchmen, but their extent should not be exaggerated. All noblemen, perhaps, had lost something in the Revolution, but only a minority of them found it necessary to emigrate. Probably the clergy suffered more, man for man, than the nobility, and many priests fled abroad; yet fewer fled from France during the Revolution than from the American colonies after 1783. A much larger proportion of Americans felt too intimidated or disgusted with their Revolution to live in the United States after independence than the proportion of Frenchmen who could not live in France after the Terror.

The Convention won victories and put down insurrection at home. By 1797, only Great Britain had not made peace with France, the Terror had been left behind, and the republic was ruled by something much more like

a parliamentary regime, under the constitution whose adoption closed the Convention era in 1796. The Revolution was safer than ever. But it did not seem so. Abroad, the royalists strove to get allies with whom to return, and also intrigued with malcontents inside France. The return of the old order was a prospect which few Frenchmen would welcome, though. On the other hand, there were those who argued that the logic of democracy should be pressed further, that there were still great divisions between rich and poor which were as offensive as had been the old distinctions of legally privileged and unprivileged, and that the Parisian radicals should have a greater say in affairs. This was almost as alarming as fears of a restoration to those who had benefited from the Revolution or simply wanted to avoid further bloodshed. Thus pressed from Right and Left, the Directory (as the new regime was called) was in a way in a good position, though it made enemies who found the (somewhat zigzag) *via media* it followed unacceptable. In the end it was destroyed from within when a group of politicians intrigued with soldiers to bring about a *coup d'état*, which instituted a new regime in 1799.

At that moment, ten years after the meeting of the Estates General, it was at least clear to most observers that France had for ever broken with the medieval past. In law this happened very rapidly. Nearly all the great reforms underlying it were legislated, at least in principle, in 1789. The formal abolition of feudalism, legal privilege and theocratic absolutism, and the organization of society on individualist and secular foundations, were the heart of the 'principles of '89' then distilled in the Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen which prefaced the constitution of 1791. Legal equality and the legal protection of individual rights, the separation of Church and State and religious toleration were their expressions. The derivation of authority from popular sovereignty acting through a unified National Assembly, before whose legislation no privilege of locality or group could stand, was the basis of the jurisprudence which underlay them. It showed both that it could ride out financial storms far worse than those the old monarch had failed to master (national bankruptcy and the collapse of the currency among them), and that it could carry out administrative change of which enlightened despotism had only dreamt. Other Europeans watched aghast or at least amazed as this powerful legislative engine was employed to overturn and rebuild institutions at every level of French life. Legislative sovereignty was a great instrument of reform, as the enlightened despots had known. Judicial torture came to an end, and so did titular nobility, juridical inequality and the old corporate guilds of French workmen. Incipient trades unionism was nipped in the bud by legislation forbidding association by workers or employers for collect-

ive economic ends. In retrospect, the signposts to market society seem pretty plain. Even the old currency, based on units in the Carolingian ratios of 1:20:12 (livres, sous and deniers), gave way to a decimal system of francs and centimes, just as the chaos of old-fashioned weights and measures was (in theory) replaced by the metric system later to become almost universal.

Such great changes were bound to be divisive, the more so because minds can change more slowly than laws. Peasants who eagerly welcomed the abolition of feudal dues were much less happy about the disappearance of the communal usages from which they benefited and which were also part of the 'feudal' order. Such conservatism was especially hard to interpret in religious affairs, yet was very important. The holy vessel kept at Rheims, from which the kings of France had been anointed since the Middle Ages, was publicly destroyed by the authorities during the Terror, an altar to Reason replaced the Christian one in the cathedral of Notre Dame and many priests underwent fierce personal persecution. Clearly, the France which did this was no longer Christian in the traditional sense, and the theocratic monarchy went un-mourned by most people. Yet the treatment of the Church aroused popular opposition to the Revolution as nothing else had done; the cults of quasi-divinities such as Reason and the Supreme Being, which some revolutionaries promoted, were a flop, and many Frenchmen (and perhaps most Frenchwomen) would happily welcome the official restoration of the Catholic Church to French life when it eventually came. By then, it had long been restored *de facto* in the parishes by the spontaneous actions of church-goers.

The divisions aroused by revolutionary change in France could no more be confined within its borders than could the principles of '89. These had at first commanded much admiration and not much explicit condemnation or distrust in other countries, though this soon changed, in particular when French governments began to export their principles by propaganda and war. Change in France rapidly generated debate about what should happen in other countries. Such debate was bound to reflect the terminology and circumstances in which it arose. In this way France gave her politics to Europe and this is the second great fact about the revolutionary decade. That is when modern European politics began, and the terms Right and Left have been with us ever since. Liberals and conservatives (though it was to be a decade or so before those terms were used) came into political existence when the French Revolution provided what appeared to be a touchstone or litmus paper for political standpoints. On one side were republicanism, a wide suffrage, individual rights, free speech and free publication; on the other were order, discipline and emphasis on duties rather

than rights, the recognition of the social function of hierarchy and a wish to temper market forces by morality.

Some Frenchmen had always believed that the French Revolution had universal significance. In the language of enlightened thought they advocated the acceptance by other nations of the recipes they employed for the settlement of French problems. This was not entirely arrogant. Societies in pre-industrial and traditional Europe still had many features in common; all could learn something from France. In this way the forces making for French influence were reinforced by conscious propaganda and missionary effort. This was another route by which events in France entered universal history.

That the Revolution was of universal, unprecedented significance was not an idea confined to its admirers and supporters. It also lay at the roots of European conservatism as a self-conscious force. Well before 1789, it is true, many of the constituent elements of modern conservative thought were lying about in such phenomena as irritation over the reforming measures of enlightened despotism, clerical resentment of the prestige and effect of 'advanced' ideas, and the emotional reaction against the fashionable and consciously rational which lay at the heart of Romanticism. Such forces were especially prevalent in Germany, but it was in England that there appeared the first and in many ways the greatest statement of the conservative, anti-revolutionary argument. This was the *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, published in 1790 by Edmund Burke. As might easily be inferred from his former role as defender of the rights of the American colonists, this book was far from a mindless defence of privilege. In it a conservative stance shook itself clear of the legalistic defence of institutions and expressed itself in a theory of society as the creation of more than will and reason and the embodiment of morality. The Revolution, by contrast, was condemned as the expression of the arrogance of the intellect, of arid rationalism, and of pride – deadliest of all the sins.

The new polarization which the Revolution brought to Europe's politics promoted also the new idea of revolution itself, and that was to have great consequences. The old idea that a political revolution was merely a circumstantial break in an essential continuity was replaced by one which took it as a radical, comprehensive upheaval, leaving untouched no institution and limitless in principle, tending, perhaps, even to the subversion of such basic institutions as the family and property. According to whether people felt heartened or dismayed by this prospect, they sympathized with or deplored revolution wherever it occurred as a manifestation of a universal phenomenon. In the nineteenth century they came even to speak of the Revolution as a universally, eternally present force. This idea was the extreme expres-

sion of an ideological form of politics which is by no means yet dead. There are still those who, broadly speaking, feel that all insurrectionary and subversive movements should, in principle, be approved or condemned without regard to the particular circumstances of cases. This mythology has produced much misery, but first Europe and then the world which Europe transformed have had to live with those who respond emotionally to it, just as earlier generations had to live with the follies of religious divisions. Its survival, unhappily, is testimony still of the impact of the French Revolution.

Many dates can be chosen as the 'beginning' of the French Revolution; a specific date to 'end' it would be meaningless. The year 1799 none the less was an important punctuation mark in its course. The *coup d'état* which then swept the Directory away brought to power a man who quickly inaugurated a dictatorship which was to last until 1814 and turn the European order upside-down. This was Napoleon Bonaparte, formerly general of the republic, now First Consul of the new regime and soon to be the first emperor of France. Like most of the leading figures of his age, he was still a young man when he came to power. He had already shown exceptional brilliance and ruthlessness as a soldier. His victories combined with a shrewd political sense and a readiness to act in an insubordinate manner to win him a glamorous reputation; in many ways he was the greatest example of the eighteenth-century type of 'the adventurer'. In 1799 he had a great personal prestige and popularity. No one except the defeated politicians much regretted it when he shouldered them aside and assumed power. Immediately he justified himself by defeating the Austrians (who had joined again in a war against France), and by making a victorious peace for France (as he had done once already). This removed the threat to the Revolution; no one doubted Bonaparte's own commitment to its principles. His consolidation of them was his most positive achievement.

Although Napoleon (as he was called officially after 1804, when he proclaimed his empire) reinstated monarchy in France, it was in no sense a restoration. Indeed, he took care so to affront the exiled Bourbon family that any reconciliation with it was inconceivable. He sought popular approval for the empire in a plebiscite and got it. This was a monarchy Frenchmen had voted for; it rested on popular sovereignty, that is, the Revolution. It assumed the consolidation of the Revolution which the Consulate had already begun. All the great institutional reforms of the 1790s were confirmed or at least left intact; there was no disturbance of the land sales which had followed the confiscation of Church property, no resurrection of the old corporations, no questioning of the principle of equality before the law. Some measures were even taken further, notably when each

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department was given an administrative head, the prefect, who was in his powers something like one of the emergency emissaries of the Terror (many former revolutionaries became prefects). Such further centralization of the administrative structure would, of course, have been approved also by the enlightened despots. In the actual working of government, it is true, the principles of the Revolution were often infringed in practice. Like all his predecessors in power since 1793, Napoleon controlled the press by a punitive censorship, locked up people without trial and in general gave short shrift to the Rights of Man so far as civil liberties were concerned. Representative bodies existed under consulate and empire, but not much attention was paid to them. Yet it seems that this was what Frenchmen wanted, as they had wanted Napoleon's shrewd recognition of reality in, for instance, a concordat with the pope which reconciled Catholics to the regime by giving legal recognition to what had already happened to the Church in France.

All in all, this amounted to a great consolidation of the Revolution and

one guaranteed at home by firm government and by military and diplomatic strength abroad. Both were eventually to be eroded by Napoleon's huge military efforts. These for a time gave France the dominance of Europe; her armies fought their way to Moscow in the east and Portugal in the west and garrisoned the Atlantic and northern coast from Corunna to Stettin. Nevertheless, the cost of this was too great; even the ruthless exploitation of occupied countries was not enough for France to sustain this hegemony indefinitely against the coalition of all the other European countries which Napoleon's arrogant assertion of his power aroused. When he invaded Russia in 1812, and the greatest army he ever led crumbled into ruin amid the snows of the winter, he was doomed unless his enemies should fall out with one another. This time they did not. Napoleon himself blamed the British, who had been at war with him (and, before him, with the Revolution), with only one short break, since 1792. There is something in this; the Anglo-French war was the last and most important round in a century of rivalry, as well as a war of constitutional monarchy against military dictatorship. It was the Royal Navy at Aboukir in 1798 and Trafalgar in 1805 which confined Napoleon to Europe, British money which financed the allies when they were ready to come forward, and a British army in the Iberian Peninsula which kept alive there from 1809 onwards a front which drained French resources and gave hope to other Europeans.

By the beginning of 1814, Napoleon could defend only France. Although he did so at his most brilliant, the resources were not available to fight off Russian, Prussian and Austrian armies in the east, and a British invasion in the south-west. At last his generals and ministers were able to set him aside and make peace without a popular outcry, even though this meant the return of the Bourbons. But it could not by then mean the return of anything else of significance from the years before 1789. The Concordat remained, the departmental system remained, equality before the law remained, a representative system remained; the Revolution, in fact, had become part of the established order in France. Napoleon had provided the time, the social peace and the institutions for that to happen. Nothing survived of the Revolution except what he had confirmed.

This makes him very different from a monarch of the traditional stamp, even the most modernizing – and, in fact, he was often very conservative in his policies, distrusting innovation. In the end he was a democratic despot, whose authority came from the people, both in the formal sense of the plebiscites, and in the more general one that he had needed (and won) their goodwill to keep his armies in the field. He is thus nearer in style to modern rulers than to Louis XIV. Yet he shares with that monarch the credit for carrying French international power to an unprecedented height, and

because of this both of them have retained the admiration of their countrymen. But again there is an important, and two-fold, difference: Napoleon not only dominated Europe as Louis XIV never did, but because the Revolution had taken place his hegemony represented more than mere national supremacy, though this fact should not be sentimentalized. The Napoleon who was supposed to be a liberator and a great European was the creation of later legend. The most obvious impact he had on Europe between 1800 and 1814 was the bloodshed and upheaval he brought to every corner of it, often as a consequence of megalomania and personal vanity. But there were also important side-effects, some intentional, some not. They all added up to the further spread and effectiveness of the principles of the French Revolution.

Their most obvious expression was on the map. The patchwork quilt of the European state system of 1789 had undergone some revolutionary revision already before Napoleon took power, when French armies in Italy, Switzerland and the United Provinces had created new satellite republics. But these had proved incapable of survival once French support was withdrawn, and it was not until French hegemony was re-established under the Consulate that there appeared a new organization which would have enduring consequences in some parts of Europe.

The most important of these were in west Germany, whose political structure was revolutionized and medieval foundations swept away. German territories on the left bank of the Rhine were annexed to France for the whole of the period from 1801 to 1814, and this began a period of destroying historic German polities. Beyond the river, France provided the plan of a reorganization which secularized the ecclesiastical territories, abolished nearly all the imperial free cities, gave extra territory to Prussia, Hanover, Bavaria and Baden to compensate them for losses elsewhere, and abolished the old independent imperial nobility. The practical effect was to diminish the Catholic and Habsburg influence in Germany while strengthening the influence of its larger princely states (especially Prussia). The constitution of the Holy Roman Empire was revised, too, to take account of these changes. In its new form it lasted only until 1806, when another defeat of the Austrians led to more changes in Germany and the empire's abolition.

So came to an end the institutional structure which, however inadequately, had given Germany such political coherence as it had possessed since Ottoman times. A Confederation of the Rhine was now set up, which provided a third force balancing that of Prussia and Austria. Thus were triumphantly asserted the national interests of France in a great work of destruction. Richelieu and Louis XIV would have enjoyed the contempla-

tion of a French frontier on the Rhine with, beyond it, a Germany divided into interests likely to hold one another in check. But there was another side to it; the old structure, after all, had been a hindrance to German consolidation. No future rearrangement would ever contemplate its resurrection. When, finally, the allies came to settle post-Napoleonic Europe, they too provided for a German Confederation. It was different from Napoleon's. Prussia and Austria were members of it in so far as their territories were German, but there was no going back on the fact of consolidation. More than 300 political units with different principles of organization in 1789 were reduced to thirty-eight states in 1815.

Reorganization was less dramatic in Italy and its effect less revolutionary. The Napoleonic system provided in the north and south of the peninsula two large units which were nominally independent, while a large part of it (including the Papal States) was formally incorporated into France and organized in *departments*. None of this survived 1815, but neither was there a complete restoration of the old regime. Notably, the ancient republics of Genoa and Venice were left in the tombs to which the armies of the Directory had first consigned them. They were absorbed by bigger states – Genoa by Sardinia, Venice by Austria. Elsewhere in Europe, at the height of Napoleonic power, France had annexed and governed directly a huge block of territory whose coasts ran from the Pyrenees to Denmark in the north and from Catalonia almost without interruption to the boundary between Rome and Naples in the south. Lying detached from it was a large piece of what became Yugoslavia. Satellite states and vassals of varying degrees of real independence, some of them ruled over by members of Napoleon's own family, divided between them the rest of Italy, Switzerland and Germany west of the Elbe. Isolated in the east was another satellite, the 'grand duchy' of Warsaw, which had been created from former Russian territory.

In most of these countries, similar administrative practices and institutions provided a large measure of shared experience. That experience, of course, was of institutions and ideas which embodied the principles of the Revolution. They hardly reached beyond the Elbe except in the brief Polish experiment, and thus the French Revolution came to be another of those great shaping influences which again and again have helped to differentiate eastern and western Europe. Within the French empire, Germans, Italians, Illyrians, Belgians and Dutch were all governed by the Napoleonic legal codes; the bringing of these to fruition was the result of Napoleon's own initiative and insistence, but the work was essentially that of revolutionary legislators who had never been able in the troubled 1790s to draw up the new codes so many Frenchmen had hoped for in 1789. With the codes went

concepts of family, property, the individual and public power, which were thus generally spread through Europe. They sometimes replaced and sometimes supplemented a chaos of local, customary, Roman and ecclesiastical law. Similarly, the departmental system of the empire imposed a common administrative practice, service in the French armies imposed a common discipline and military regulation, and French weights and measures, based on the decimal system, replaced many local scales. Such innovations exercised an influence beyond the actual limits of French rule, providing models and inspiration to modernizers in other countries. The models were all the more easily assimilated because French officials and technicians worked in many of the satellite states while many nationalities other than French were represented in the Napoleonic service.

Such changes took time to produce their full effect, but it was a deep one and was revolutionary. It was by no means necessarily liberal; even if the Rights of Man formally followed the tricolour of the French armies, so did Napoleon's secret police, quartermasters and customs officers. A more subtle revolution deriving from the Napoleonic impact lay in the reaction and resistance it provoked. In spreading revolutionary principles the French were often putting a rod in pickle for their own backs. Popular sovereignty lay at the heart of the Revolution and it is an ideal closely linked to that of nationalism. French principles said that peoples ought to govern themselves and that the proper unit in which they should do so was the nation: the revolutionaries had proclaimed their own republic 'one and indivisible' for this reason. Some of their foreign admirers applied this principle to their own countries; manifestly, Italians and Germans did not live in national states, and perhaps they should.

But this was only one side of the coin. French Europe was run for the benefit of France, and it thus denied the national rights of other Europeans. They saw their agriculture and commerce sacrificed to French economic policy; found they had to serve in the French armies, or to receive at the hands of Napoleon French (or quisling) rulers and viceroys. When even those who had welcomed the principles of the Revolution felt such things as grievances, it is hardly surprising that those who had never welcomed them at all should begin to think in terms of national resistance, too. Nationalism in Europe was given an immense fillip by the Napoleonic era, even if governments distrusted it and felt uneasy about employing it. Germans began to think of themselves as more than Westphalians and Bavarians, and Italians began to believe they were more than Romans or Milanese, because they discerned a common interest against France. In Spain and Russia, the identification of patriotic resistance with resistance to the Revolution was virtually complete.

In the end, then, though the dynasty Napoleon hoped to found and the empire he set up both proved ephemeral, his work was of great importance. He unlocked reserves of energy in other countries just as the Revolution had unlocked them in France, and afterwards they could never be quite shut up again. He ensured the legacy of the Revolution its maximum effect, and this was his greatest achievement, whether he desired it or not.

His unconditional abdication in 1814 was not quite the end of the story. Just under a year later the emperor returned to France from Elba, where he had lived in a pensioned exile, and the restored Bourbon regime crumbled at a touch. The allies none the less determined to overthrow him, for he had frightened them too much in the past. Napoleon's attempt to anticipate the gathering of overwhelming forces against him came to an end at Waterloo, on 18 June 1815, when the threat of a revived French empire was destroyed by the Anglo-Belgian and Prussian armies. This time the victors sent him to St Helena, thousands of miles away in the South Atlantic, where he died in 1821. The fright that he had given them strengthened their determination to make a peace that would avoid any danger of a repetition of the quarter-century of almost continuous war which Europe had undergone in the wake of the Revolution. Thus Napoleon still shaped the map of Europe, not only by the changes he had made in it, but also by the fear France had inspired under his leadership.