

Two Views of the Revolution

Edmund Burke:

Given his record as a strong supporter of American independence and as a campaigner against royal prerogative, many were surprised when Burke published his *Reflections on the Revolution in France* in 1790. With it, Burke became one of the earliest and fiercest British critics of the French Revolution, which he saw not as movement towards a representative, constitutional democracy but rather as a violent rebellion against tradition and proper authority and as an experiment disconnected from the complex realities of human society, which would end in disaster.

Burke emphasised the dangers of mob rule, fearing that the Revolution's foggy fervour was destroying French society and appealed to the English virtues of continuity, tradition, rank and property.

Former admirers of Burke, such as Thomas Jefferson and fellow Whig politician Charles James Fox, proceeded to denounce Burke as a reactionary and an enemy of democracy. Thomas Paine penned *The Rights of Man* in 1791 as a response to Burke. However, other pro-democratic politicians, such as the American John Adams, agreed with Burke's assessment of the French situation. Many of Burke's dire predictions for the outcome of the French Revolution were later borne out by the execution of King Louis XVI, the subsequent Reign of Terror, and the eventual rise of Napoleon's autocratic regime. Winston Churchill saw Edmund Burke's views as follows:

On the one hand {Burke} is revealed as a foremost apostle of Liberty, on the other as the redoubtable champion of Authority. But a charge of political inconsistency applied to this life appears a mean and petty thing. History easily discerns that ...his soul revolted against tyranny, whether it appeared in the aspect of a domineering Monarch and a corrupt Court and Parliamentary system.. No one can read the Burke of Liberty and the Burke of Authority without feeling that here was the same man pursuing the same ends, seeking the same ideals of society and Government, and defending them from assaults, now from one extreme, now from the other.

Thomas Paine

"These are the times that try men's souls. The summer soldier and the sunshine patriot will, in this crisis, shrink from the service of their country; but he that stands it now, deserves the love and thanks of man and woman. Tyranny, like hell, is not easily conquered; yet we have this consolation with us, that the harder the conflict, the more glorious the triumph. -: Thomas Paine (Common Sense) Already famous for his writings urging and American Revolution, Thomas Paine was moved by Edmund Burke's resistance to the French Revolution to write his most influential work, *the Rights of Man* in 1791-2. In Part I, Paine urged political rights for all men because of their natural equality in the sight of God. All forms of hereditary government, including the British constitution, were condemned because they were based on farce or force. Only a democratic republic could be trusted to protect

the equal political rights of all men. Part II was even more radical for Paine argued for a whole program of social legislation to deal with the shocking condition of the poor. His popularity sounded the alarm and he was forced to leave Britain in September 1792. He was condemned in his absence and declared an outlaw. Paine immediately immersed himself in French affairs for the next ten years although he still hoped to see a revolution in Britain. In his *Letter Addressed to the Addressers of the Late Proclamation* (London, 1792), he rejected the policy of appealing to parliament for reform and instead urged British radicals to call a national convention to establish a republican form of government.

In August 1792, Paine was made a French citizen and a month later was elected to the National Convention. He voted for the French Republic; but argued against the execution of Louis XVI, saying that he should instead be exiled to the United States of America: firstly, because of the way royalist France had come to the aid of the American Revolution; and secondly because of a moral objection to capital punishment in general and to revenge killings in particular.

Crossfire - Debating the Merits of the French Revolution

The Situation

Spain, 1793. During and after the French Revolution, public opinion was stirred world-wide. Two men who helped form opinion were Thomas Paine and Edmund Burke. Paine and Burke debate the merits of the French Revolution in the company of an undecided Spanish aristocrat.

Characters

Edmund Burke- a British politician and author. When the American colonists fought for their independence from a government thousands of miles away, Burke supported them. The American Revolution, however, had no Reign of Terror-no mass executions. Burke feels that the French revolutionaries are destroying traditions, beliefs, and institutions with little thought of how difficult it will be to create new ones. The majority of the French people, he argues, have no experience with self-government. The French Republic, therefore, is doomed to failure. When it fails, Burke believes, a dictator will arise; and the dictator's rule will be no better than that of the Bourbon kings.

Thomas Paine-an English-born American author and revolutionary leader. His reply to Burke focuses on the reasons for the Revolution. He mentions some of the problems associated with a monarchy. Absolute monarchy, Paine insists, invites tyranny. The new French government, however, has a legislative assembly that will make the laws. Despite the fact that much blood has been shed to reach this end, all classes are equal now. For too long the natural rights of European peoples have been trampled 'on, Paine says, but the French have now shown the rest of Europe that government should be by rule of the people. Paine urges the Spanish aristocrat to consider the progress made already in America. The American republic is functioning better than many had expected. Paine points out that the common people in America take an active interest in politics and are well-informed about their government.

Dona Martinez-a Spanish aristocrat who is concerned about the revolution that has turned a neighboring country upside down. She is eager to hear the opinions of people who have observed other governments and revolutions. While sympathetic to many of the goals of the revolutionaries, she is concerned about the violence and lawlessness of the French since 1789.

Task

Both Burke and Paine must try to influence Doria Martinez's view of the French Revolution. You will have seven minutes to complete the task.