For over 200 years historians have compared and contrasted the American and French Revolutions, outlining the causes of each and how Western civilization was changed by their occurrences. While some of the causes of the revolutions were similar in nature, the initial sparks for each were quite different in philosophy. At their cores, the American revolution was about how to rule themselves as an independent nation, while the French were concerned about how the monarchy was already governing them, as an already well-established nation and culture. Where Americans turned to history and experience to guide them through their fight for independence, the French believed that reason held the answers to everything.

Similarities between the French and American revolutions begin with problems surrounding the economy. In France, the rising cost of bread and a declining demand for other manufactures and types of labor meant beginning during the reign of Louis XIV in its own way correlates with the way Britain felt the strain of the Seven Years’ War on their own economy. The difference, however, is that Britain tried to make up for their deficits by taxing the thirteen colonies across the Atlantic. Whereas the French Parlements had representation in their own nation to at least attempt to counter any taxes levied against them, all the colonies had were the governors and councilors which had been placed in power by British agency in the first place. When the first serious legislation was levied, The Stamp Act, in 1765, the feeling in England was that “the colonists were an irresponsible people who must be brought under effectual government – that they must be made to realize the existence of central authority in the empire.”[[1]](#footnote-1) The thought at the time in Parliament was that the Americans would just have to “get used” to this type of legislation. However, Palmer is also quick to point out that it was not the tax itself that infuriated the colonists, but “the authority by which the tax was levied.”[[2]](#footnote-2) Thus was born the revolutionary argument of “no taxation without representation.” Here is a prime example of the differences between the French and American revolutions. On the American side, the thought of being taxed by a foreign body, even one by which they are colonized under, violated their rights as citizens who should be equal to their English counterparts under the British Constitution; it was about who was levying taxes against them. In France, opposition toward taxation came forth due to vexations on *how* the ministers of the King levied taxes against their own subjects.

On a different aspect, while America did not see radicalism in the sense that France did before 1789, they did see their own share of protests before the outbreak of the actual war, such as in the case of the Boston Massacre. In France it became common for protests to turn riot-like in nature, and it led to the King deciding to use Frances’ own troops against it’s people in order to instill proper justice. Violence in this sense was often the result of calculated interference by the monarchy, whereas in America violence and protest erupted as the result of too much tension in the air between opposing parties for too long of a period without any sorts of resolution. One of the most notorious moments during the French revolution is the storming of the Bastille on July 14th, 1789. On this night a mob, similar to the one that stormed the streets of Boston on March 5, 1770, stormed the state prison located in Paris. The reasoning lay in the fact that many believed the prison was a symbol of the monarchy’s tyrannical rule. As a result, King Louis XVI used the military against his own people in order to aid the governor of the prisoner. The mob scene turned into a violent battle which ended with the decapitation of the governor. The event is still celebrated today as the official beginning of the French Revolution.[[3]](#footnote-3)

The Boston Massacre came about by way of a mob scene, like Bastille Day, however, none of the events which precipitated or followed the immediate event were coordinated by the government in anyway. Problems began early in the year when it was decided that soldiers should be allowed to work part-time as laborers. This decree meant that soldiers loyal to the British cause had free opportunities to work alongside colonists with more patriotic ambitions. Almost immediately fights between soldiers and locals ignited and became regular occurrences.[[4]](#footnote-4)

The Monday night of the Massacre followed a weekend of bloody fighting between workers and off-duty soldiers. Rumors of deaths between some fighters led to the harassment of a soldier by a group of Bostonians as the moonlight came out. At about 8:00 that night alarm bells sounded in the city and the would-be mob began to form on the streets of Boston. The crowd massed between 300 and 400 soldiers and locals. The disturbance escalated when things started being thrown by those involved in the fighting. A soldier was struck and thus startled, which caused him to fire his weapon into the crowd suddenly. Ferling describes the scene as: “…the startling sound of a musket discharged by a comrade, and perhaps convinced that in the din on this moonlit night they had failed to hear the commands to open fire, other soldiers fired as well.”[[5]](#footnote-5) The mob scene had turned into confused, panicked chaos that was finally quelled by the arrival of the British captain who finally stopped his soldiers from firing their weapons anymore. He was able to order his men up sufficiently enough to move them back to the Main Guard. The damage, however, had already been done, and at least five were dead, with many more wounded.[[6]](#footnote-6)

Palmer notes that “the influence of the American Revolution in Europe has been studied only for France.”[[7]](#footnote-7) The French viewed the war in America as something akin to a religious crusade. Learning of the state constitutions developed in America after the war and the meetings of the Continental Congress led many in Europe, not just in France, to question the plausibility of constitutional government rendered by separated powers. Many books with the state constitutions began appearing across the European continent, with those such as Turgot and Mably finding much to interpret in them in regards to the efficiency of their own government and monarchy.

It is well noted that “the American state constitutions were published in France on at least five different occasions between 1776 and 1786,” which many may consider the building years mounting to the outbreak of the French Revolution in 1789. Palmer cites that “what most impressed the French was the very act of constitution-making itself…through the principle as of the people as constituent power.”[[8]](#footnote-8) In a French nation where many were beginning to question the innerworkings of the monarchy as the head of government power and legislation, the idea of a government ultimately governed by the people seemed like a dream. One thing France and America both found similar interests in was decreasing the power of the aristocracy in the influence of governmental action and legislation. This was easier to do in America, as people of all social classes still were more equal to one another in wealth and heritage than in Europe. The downfall of countries like France in terms of breaking aristocratic traditions was the fact that the aristocracy was an institution that had been built over hundreds of years, especially since the introduction of feudalism in the Middle Ages. Inequalities of wealth were so much greater in France that they posed more of a logistical problem than in America, where civilization was still being established in many places and even those at the highest places in society having connections to those who may not be as fortunate as they. There are many instances of well-to-do merchants and lawyers taking up the patriotic cause for the same reasons as their “commoner” counterparts.

The main fact is that the American Revolution was not born out of the same oppression through which a revolution such as that of France was. From the landing of the Mayflower, life in the New World had always been an escape to freedom in some way. It also shocked those in Europe because it held so many distinct European characteristics, with the exception that the Americans were having better luck overcoming these particular obstacles. It also had the advantage of loyalists being able to leave after the war and either flee to Canada or go back to Europe. French citizens had nowhere to flee to. They were already home.[[9]](#footnote-9) Palmer notes that it was “in the implementation of similar ideas that Americans were successful.”[[10]](#footnote-10) Both powers were concerned with establishing better constituted governments and more evolved, equal, and free societies. Europe saw their solution in Napoleon’s overtaking of the French thrown as a military dictator for over a decade while order was attempted to be brought back to the nation. This was done through forceful legislation that resulted in terror and death in monumental proportions. The end result was the re-introduction of the monarchy, which was the very thing the revolution was started over in the first place.

Truly, the difference for America was in the constitutional convention. All of these bodies and nations were trying to achieve the best level of sovereignty for themselves as governments and as free individuals. Americans were able to use the conventions to devise a system of government with balanced powers that would equally represent each state in the nation, regardless of size, wealth, or influence. The American Revolution was the beginning of a new historical era, of which the French Revolution was just a big part of. During the Age of Enlightenment when discussions on liberty and equality were of utmost importance for politicians, commoners, and intellectual thinkers alike, “it got people into the habit of thinking more concretely about political questions, and made them more readily critical of their own governments and society.”[[11]](#footnote-11) The American Revolution helped other subsequent political fights become possible in motivation, as, for example, in France, much fire was drawn from the simple fact that from the Americans they realized that political change by the people, for the people, was possible on some level. Success was never guaranteed to anyone because of the American fight, but the possibility of it being achievable made all the difference in moving the Western world forward into more modern sociopolitical thinking.

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