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Great Books of the Modern Age

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My “Dear France Letter”

When you hear about overcoming oppressive government, what is the first thing you think of? The word “revolution” will probably come to mind. You may think of the French Revolution since it is so well known in western history. But what went wrong? Excluding the fact, of course, that it was run by French people trying too hard to be like American people. The French Revolution was also called the Revolution of 1789. It started when the working class, which made up about 98% of the population of France, noted that the nobility was not affected by the incredibly high taxes and shortages of food, so in 1789 the French population created a national assembly to fix the dilemmas of the French government that was governed only by the rich. It began with good intentions, spurred on by the American revolution. However, it soon turned disastrous and became more of a murder fest than a revolution. There isn’t much debate that without change a nation will usually become complacent and give rise to overpowering leaders who take advantage of their position, but there is probably much disagreement on whether the change should come in the form of a revolution or the gradual change of evolution. People should engage in revolution to enact change for

these three reasons: if it overthrows a corrupt government, if it protects peoples' rights as citizens, and if its core foundations are virtuous.

The first reason why a revolution should be used as means of enacting change is: to prevent corrupt government. A revolution can be good if it is throwing out an unjust government. (Epic Fox). The Declaration of Independence also says, "But when a long train of abuses and usurpations... evinces to design to reduce them under absolute despotism, it is their right, it is their duty, to throw off such government, and to provide new guards for their future security." Thomas Paine wrote in "The Rights of Man" that the only way to bring about change in France was to dismantle everything and start from scratch since it was profoundly corrupt ("Revolution or Reform"). If the governing authority is corrupt, it won't change unless the people ruled take action to make sure there is no overstepping of the authorities' boundaries.

The second reason why society should engage in revolution to enact change is for the protection of rights. "A revolution can help change a government to preserve and protect its people's inalienable rights and freedom (Declaration of Independence). In addition, Edmund Burke wrote that "A government of five hundred country attorneys and obscure curates is not good for twenty-four millions of men, though it were chosen by eight-and-forty millions; nor is it the better for being guided by a dozen of

persons of quality, who have betrayed their trust in order to obtain that power" (Burke). Why should a country be ruled by the rich and the few? Do they know what the general public wants, and even if they did know, would they care? In the same way, a country's government is the people, so if the people wish to have a rebellion, whether good for them or not, it is the people who are the government and thus should get what they desire. "If it could have been made clear to me that the king and queen of France (those I mean who were such before the triumph) were inexorable and cruel tyrants, that they had formed a deliberate scheme for massacring the national assembly, I think I have seen just."(Edmund Burk). Whether Burk believed that the king and queen of France were tyrants, he still held the belief that if they were cruel tyrants, then it would be a just cause to get rid of them. So not only would the rebellion ensure the people get what they want, but it would also be justifiable.

The third reason why revolution should be used as a tool for bringing about change is because revolution is acceptable when the foundation is virtuous. "As long as the foundation of a revolution is virtuous, then the outcome will often be virtuous. Likewise, if the foundation of the revolution is corrupt, it will often have a corrupt and evil outcome" (unknown). Certain forms of government, such as communism or fascism as an example, go against human nature. These forms of government rely on people caring more about others than themselves, and this goes against self-preservation which is the key to success. But revolutions, on the other

hand, do not go against human nature. It is not against human nature for people to want to have an ethical government. Edmund Burke also said, "Institutions should evolve, change is unavoidable" (Burke). He further instructed, "To make a government requires no great prudence. Settle the seat of power; teach obedience: and the work is done. To give freedom is still more easy. It is not necessary to guide; it only requires to let go the rein." (Burke). Burke adds that you don't have to be a genius to make a government, and it is even easier to teach obedience as long as you have leadership skills, and are willing to let go of the reigns and trust that others also can make the right and just decisions.

However, some people argue that people should not engage in revolution to enact change because it restricts religious freedoms. Burke says that "The French Revolution was never intended to better the condition of the people in France, and it was anti-Christendom (Burke on the Inhumanity of the French Revolution). However, again and again, Burke stressed,

> The revolutionaries would never be content with mere revolution in France. They were radicals, seeking civil war not only in France, but also in all of Christendom. Britain, in alliance with other European powers, must eradicate the revolution. There can be no compromise with such an infection. (Edmund Burke on the Inhumanity of the French Revolution)

This argument is inadequate because revolutions are a lashback against large government, and large governments are usually oppressive toward religion. Even Karl Marx admitted to this. In addition, someone might say that revolutions ensue in chaos. A revolution can throw a nation into chaos and harm not only the citizens of that country but also the supplies such as food and building materials. "When all the frauds, imposters, violences, rapines, burnings, murders, confiscations, compulsory paper currencies, and every description of tyranny and cruelty employed to bring about and to uphold this Revolution, have their natural effect, that is to shock the moral sentiments of all the virtuous and sober minds" (Burke). This may have been true for the French Revolution. However, this argument is inadequate because the United States created a written constitution and the leaders of the French revolution did have the Tennis Court Oath to keep them in check. Neither of these reasons, that revolutions restrict freedom or that revolutions result in chaos, are adequate reasons for not engaging in revolutions.

For these three reasons: if it is to protect against corrupt government, if it is to protect citizens' rights, and if the revolution's foundation is virtuous, people should engage in revolution to enact change. This should matter to someone who wants to be politically active and cares about their country and its government. This should matter because revolutions have changed the history of governments such as France or the United States, whether good or bad.