The Terror Justified:

Speech to the National Convention
February 5, 1794

Primary Source By: Maximilien Robespierre

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“Terror without virtue is murderous, virtue without terror in powerless.”

–Author’s Thesis

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The late eighteenth century marked a time of unrest and political transformation in France, as revolutionary events took hold of the nation. Movements for political liberty and equality and the influence of Enlightenment ideals culminated to cause the outbreak of the French Revolution. With the outbreak of rebellion came the destruction of the old regime in France and the beginning of a new and revolutionary era that spelled a great deal of changes in the country. The innocent blood of thousands was spilled on the Streets of Paris, as the revolution progressed into a radical phase. Although it resulted in widespread fear and violence, it was argued that such a time was necessary and justified for the goals of the revolution to come to pass. In his speech to the National Convention, Maximilien Robespierre persuasively presents what he believes to be the aim of the revolution and the correct means of achieving it, while, in doing so, he strives to justify the terror.

With the execution of the king, Louis XVI, the old regime was destroyed and the revolution officially took hold of France. This caused more people to favor the movement, but also creating many new enemies of it, while strengthening those who had been loyal to the king and already opposed to the revolution. The country then faced internal crisis as the National Convention and its factions struggled amongst themselves and with loyalist opposition. In response to the domestic crisis, the convention and Committee of Public Safety instituted the “Reign of Terror.” Revolutionary courts were formed to swiftly try and execute those seen as internal enemies of the revolution, including the queen, royalists, former revolutionaries, and even peasants. The blood of sixteen thousand people was spilled by the “National Razor”, the
guillotine, but the Terror’s victims numbered near fifty thousand in total, and, through the Reign of Terror, the National Convention and the Committee of Public Safety re-established and strengthened their hold on the French people and government. Leaders of the Terror strived to preserve, protect and defend the French Revolution and its accomplishments, through the bloodshed of many innocent people.

The promises of the Declaration of the Rights of Man had been forgotten in the bloodshed, and the enlightenment principles on which the revolution had been originally founded were lost in the terror. Meanwhile, a former provincial lawyer was rising among the ranks of the radical Jacobin Club, gaining a reputation for incorruptibility and superb oratory. This man behind the Reign of Terror, Robespierre, was, by then, a dominant and outspoken leader in the executive committee of the National Convention, and was seen as the most powerful man in France at the time, for he ordered the deaths of so many. As the Terror was beginning to be questioned, Robespierre strived, by delivering a speech to the Convention, to explain how it was the only course of action that would lead to a “Republic of Virtue”, or new republican order and citizens. The violence of the Terror was, he believed, the only means of coming to such an end. Robespierre’s crazed and radical obsession with purifying the populous of all those corrupt increased and, in turn, corrupted he who had once been known as “The Incorruptable.” As a result, the Jacobins, who had supported Robespierre, and other members of the convention came to fear for their own safety and that of the nation as a whole, realizing that the Terror must come to an end.

Robespierre, at the time, saw the violence as the only means for achieving the goals of the revolution and arriving at the revolutionaries’ desired end. Though Robespierre had, at the revolution’s beginning, campaigned against the bloodshed that accompanied the movement, the
power he had gained as a leader in the National Convention slowly corrupted him and caused him to be the most radical of his fellow Jacobins. As his thirst for blood increased, his viewpoint and bias grew ever more radical, which he proved through the thesis of his speech. The concepts of virtue and terror are combined and a bit skewed in his assertion of his points, showing his corruption and that of the society that molded his opinion and the speech he wrote in response.

It was a short speech, Robespierre’s address to the National Convention, but it clearly and persuasively expressed his opinion on the justification of the Terror, as he stated and attempted to convince others that such violence was necessary. Robespierre stated that “terror without virtue is murderous, virtue without terror is powerless,” making this statement a thesis for his speech. The point of the entire speech was to justify the violent and terrifying acts being carried out, in order to achieve the goals of the Revolution. Such actions were causing the revolution to turn from the Enlightenment principles it was originally founded on, but Robespierre argued the necessity of them, saying that, without the terror such violence instilled in the people of France, the revolution would be unsuccessful, virtue being, on its own, an insignificant force.

The terror enacted by the revolution was seen by Robespierre as nothing more than “justice” and he spoke of it as though the innocent lives of thousands were an unavoidable cost of the revolution. It was time, Robespierre said, to clearly state the goals of the revolution, and how it should come to such an end. He begins by stating that the revolution is an attempt to gain for the people of the nation liberty and equality under a fair and unbiased justice system, then goes on to state how these goals should be brought about. The government, he stated, has an obligation to the people, same as they have to the government, and those who love the “fatherland”, should agree with the aims of the revolutionary governing body; being proof of treason if one should disagree. He clearly recites the allegations against the old regime that led to
the revolution and the new nation that is to be formed out of this destruction of the flawed past social structure. This listing of the flaws of the monarchy and the virtues that the revolution is striving for pulls on the emotions of the audience, as he begins to state the means of reaching the revolution’s aim.

Democratic government, as Robespierre states, is based on the principle of virtue, the love of one’s nation and the abiding by its laws. His admission that there are numerous enemies to the revolution points to the domestic crisis plaguing the nation, as he goes on to state that “the first maxim of our politics ought to be to lead the people by means of reason and the enemies of the people by terror.” In peace, he states, government is based on virtue, but, in revolution, terror must accompany this virtue and support it, becoming justice for the treasonous. Robespierre, through his speech, defined the revolution and strived to justify extreme actions, including terror, in the defense of revolutionary ideals.

Due to threats to revolutionary accomplishments, the French Revolution entered a radical phase, which resulted in the establishment of the “Reign of Terror.” Headed by the Committee of Public Safety, the Terror resulted in the deaths of thousands and greatly influenced the rest of the revolution. As the streets ran with blood, the French government, led by a group of twelve men, continued to order the execution of people seen as enemies of the revolutionary Republic. Through this action, they believed they were effectively combating the domestic crisis caused by such enemies; however, most of the blood that ran across the cobblestones was far from that of the guilty. Maximilien Robespierre, one of these leaders, strived to justify such terror through his speech to the National Convention, and, although his speech was well-planned and persuasive, it caused discord and fear among the Convention. Soon he himself would meet the same fate as the
thousands he condemned, becoming the final victim of The Reign of Terror.

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“It is time to mark clearly the aim of the Revolution and the end toward which we wish to move; it is time to take stock of ourselves, of the obstacles which we still face, and of the means which we ought to adopt to attain our objectives.

What is the goal for which we strive? A peaceful enjoyment of liberty and equality, the rule of that eternal justice whose laws are engraved, not upon marble or stone, but in the hearts of all men.

We wish an order of things where all low and cruel passions are enchained by the laws, all beneficent and generous feelings aroused; where ambition is the desire to merit glory and to serve one's fatherland; where distinctions are born only of equality itself; where the citizen is subject to the magistrate, the magistrate to the people, the people to justice; where the nation safeguards the welfare of each individual, and each individual proudly enjoys the prosperity and glory of his fatherland; where all spirits are enlarged by the constant exchange of republican sentiments and by the need of earning the respect of a great people; where the arts are the adornment of liberty, which ennobles them; and where commerce is the source of public wealth, not simply of monstrous opulence for a few families.

In our country we wish to substitute morality for egotism, probity for honor, principles for conventions, duties for etiquette, the empire of reason for the tyranny of customs, contempt for vice for contempt for misfortune, pride for insolence, the love of honor for the love of money . . . that is to say, all the virtues and miracles of the Republic for all the vices and snobbishness of the monarchy.

We wish in a word to fulfill the requirements of nature, to accomplish the destiny of mankind, to make good the promises of philosophy . . . that France, hitherto illustrious among slave states, may eclipse the glory of all free peoples that have existed, become the model of all nations.... That is our ambition; that is our aim.

What kind of government can realize these marvels? Only a democratic government... But to found and to consolidate among us this democracy, to realize the peaceable rule of constitutional laws, it is necessary to conclude the war of liberty against tyranny and to pass successfully through the storms of revolution. Such is the aim of the revolutionary system which you have set up...
Now what is the fundamental principle of democratic, or popular government— that is to say, the essential mainspring upon which it depends and which makes it function? It is virtue: I mean public virtue... that virtue is nothing else but love of fatherland and its laws...

The splendor of the goal of the French Revolution is simultaneously the source of our strength and of our weakness: our strength, because it gives us an ascendancy of truth over falsehood, and of public rights over private interests; our weakness, because it rallies against us all vicious men, all those who in their hearts seek to despoil the people... It is necessary to stifle the domestic and foreign enemies of the Republic or perish with them. Now in these circumstances, the first maxim of our politics ought to be to lead the people by means of reason and the enemies of the people by terror.

If the basis of popular government in time of peace is virtue, the basis of popular government in time of revolution is both virtue and terror: virtue without which terror is murderous, terror without which virtue is powerless. Terror is nothing else than swift, severe, indomitable justice; it flows, then, from virtue.”

~Maximilien Robespierre