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The Ancien Régime and Obama — The More Things Change ...

The Telegraph's Nile Gardner, a Washington-based foreign affairs analyst for the British newspaper, has compared the Obama Administration to the ancien régime of Louis XVI and Marie Antoinette. French savant Alexis de Tocqueville, famous for his penetrating studies of both the French monarchy and early American society, would likely be "less than impressed with the extravagance and arrogance ... among the White House elites that rule America as though they had been handed some divine right to govern with impunity," writes Gardner. Michelle Obama's recent sumptuous trip to Spain is an act of indifferent profligacy worthy of Marie Antoinette — she who is alleged to have said, when informed that the poor of France had no bread, "Qu'ils mangent de la brioche!" ("Let them eat cake!").



The other famous utterance ascribed to the foolish, doomed little queen, is apter still: "Après nous, la déluge" ("After us, the deluge" — a reference to the Noachian cataclysm that wiped out nearly all of humanity and everything else on the globe.) As events turned out, of course, Antoinette was right. She herself was among the early victims of a deluge of madness that convulsed France for an entire generation, spilling the blood of hundreds of thousands of Frenchmen. In the end, the entire continent of Europe paid the penalty for France's implosion, with the dictator Napoleon inflicting misery on millions of souls from Spain to Russia. Nor did France's woes end with the fall of Napoleon. France was consumed by bloody revolts and changes of government several more times during the 19th century, only attaining a measure of stability and prosperity by century's end. The original French Revolution, however, also gave birth to the European (and American) revolutionary underground, whose terrible offspring included the Russian Revolution and the Mexican Revolution.

But what were the causes of the French Revolution itself? While Louis XVI and his queen usually get a lion's share of the blame, the roots of the French Revolution can be traced back a century earlier, to the time of Louis XIV (the "Sun King") and his seventy-three year reign, the longest of any European monarch. Admired for his magnificent public works, comprehensive government reforms, and personal opulence, the Sun King, with the help of a host of venal ministers like Richelieu and Colbert, spent France into insolvency. As historian Alfred Cobban summarized events:

Louis had not so much suppressed the declining aristocratic elements in the state as bought them off at a high price, by the perpetuation of their exemptions from the financial burdens and the grant of sinecures and pensions at the expense of the royal revenue. The taxable resources of



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France were further reduced by the creation and sale of a host of venal offices [i.e., new bureaucracies], carrying with them financial privileges, from which the royal treasury lost far more in the long run than it gained immediately. During Louis' reign the expense of his buildings strained and that of his wars ruined royal finances, and the concentration of taxes on the poorer part of the nation drove it to desperate rebellion. In the following two reigns [of Louis XV and XVI] every war brought a financial crisis, until the last one, culminating in political upheaval and coinciding with a famine, turned into a revolution.

Despite his reputation for magnificence, Louis XIV's long reign was disfigured by periodic famines and continual economic turmoil. He even persecuted his own subjects, the Huguenots, after revoking the Edict of Nantes, which protected French Protestants from persecution, in 1685.

Thus the prestige of France during the age of the Sun King was purchased at a very steep price. After his death, the precarious finances of France were further jeopardized by the notorious Mississippi and South Sea bubbles. By the time of Louis XVI, France had been bankrupt for several generations, and her hard-pressed monarchy was forced to tax her subjects at intolerable rates to stay afloat. The seeds that ultimately produced the French Revolution and all of the tragedy it begat were thus sown several generations before the storming of the Bastille.

If Louis XIV set in motion the forces that ruined France, FDR may have done the same for the United States of America. Like Louis XIV, FDR enjoyed unprecedented longevity in his office. Like the Sun King, FDR spent the country into near-insolvency with public works projects and in war. Like Louis also, FDR greatly increased the powers of the state and created a host of new government offices. FDR, like the Sun King, also ushered in an era of generous pensions and other emoluments for government employees, creating an entire class of people with a vested interest in bigger government and higher tax revenues — a sorry state of affairs that persists to our day. In a word, FDR, like Louis XIV, set most of the dials for the economic crisis that has engulfed our nation in the early 21st century.

Gardner's comparison of the Obamas with Louis XVI and his wife has more than a little merit. For President Obama, like the doomed French monarch of more than two centuries past, may yet be remembered as the last despairing acolyte of a government dedicated to the systematic spoliation of its own citizenry, an order in which the once-professed servant of the people has become its master, and in which the salaries and other privileges of the millions of citizens who work, not productively but for the state, have far outstripped the standard of living enjoyed by most of us in the so-called private sector.

No rational human being could gaze upon our gargantuan national debt, our reckless public spending, and our bloated federal and state governments, and fail to conclude that the deluge is now upon us. Yet Obama and his supporters in Congress continue to open the spigots of red ink wider and wider, and refuse to consider enjoining upon the federal government the same austerities they are happy to heap on the private sector. The fatal flaw of the Obama Administration, as Gardner so ably expresses it, is an "overarching disdain for the principles of limited government, individual liberty and free enterprise that have built the United States over the course of nearly two and a half centuries into the most powerful and free nation on earth."

Our *ancien régime* is in free fall, and what might lie at the bottom of our descent — what Marats, Robespierres, and Napoleons — is impossible to predict. But unless our government ceases and desists from its irresponsible spending and the unsustainable expansion of its own powers, revolution and autocracy may be our lot.



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Photo: Marie Antoinette as she is taken to the guillotine at the height of the French Revolution on October 16, 1793, for the crime of treason: AP Images



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