Maximilien Robespierre (1758-1794) was one of the most important figures during the French Revolution. His skills as an orator and his control of the influential Committee of Public Safety helped lead to the period known as the Reign of Terror, during which Robespierre and his political allies not only executed political rivals, but also encouraged the population through laws and example to practice their own persecution of fellow citizens deemed to be "counterrevolutionary." Thousands were executed by government tribunals without evidence, while many others were killed by mobs. Robespierre himself was executed by members of the National Convention on July 27, 1794. This excerpt from a speech he had delivered to the Convention several months earlier demonstrates Robespierre's extreme commitment to revolutionary values, even to the point of violence.

After having marched for a long time at hazard, and, as it were, carried away by the movement of contrary factions, the representatives of the people have at last formed a government. A sudden change in the nation's fortune announced to Europe the regeneration which had been operated in the national representation; but up to this moment, we must admit that we have been rather guided in these stormy circumstances by the love of good, and by a sense of the country's wants, than by any exact theory, or precise rules of conduct.

It is time to distinguish clearly the aim of the revolution, and the term to which we would arrive. It is time for us to render account to ourselves, both of the obstacles which still keep us from that aim, and of the means which we ought to take to attain it.

What is the aim to which we tend?

The peaceful enjoyment of liberty and equality; the reign of that eternal justice, of which the laws have been engraved, not upon marble, but upon the hearts of all mankind; even in the hearts of the slaves who forget...
them, or of the tyrants who have denied them! We desire a state of things wherein all base and cruel passions shall be eneemined; all generous and beneficent passions awakened by the laws; wherein ambition should be the desire of glory, and glory the desire of serving the country, wherein distinctions should arise but from equality itself; wherein the citizen should submit to the magistrate, the magistrate to the people, and the people to justice; wherein the country assures the welfare of every individual; wherein every individual enjoys with pride the prosperity and the glory of his country; wherein all minds are enlarged by the continual communication of republican sentiments, and by the desire of meritting the esteem of a great people; wherein arts should be the decorations of that liberty which they ennable, and commerce the source of public wealth, and not the monstrous opulence of some few houses. We desire to substitute morality for superstition, probity for honor, principles for usages, duties for functions; the empire of reason for the tyranny of fashion, the scorn of vice for the scorn of misfortune, pride for insolence, greatness of soul for vanity, the love of glory for the love of money, good citizens for good society, merit for intrigue, genius for cleverness, truth for splendor, the charm of happiness for the ennui of voluptuousness, the grandeur of man for the pettiness of the great, a magnificent people, powerful, happy, for a people amiable, frivolous, and miserable; that is to say, all the virtues and all the successes of a republic, for all the vices and all the follies of a monarchy.

What is the nature of the government which can realize these prodigies? The democratic or republican government.

Democracy is that state in which the people, guided by laws which are its own work, executes for itself all that it can well do, and, by its delegates, all that it cannot do itself. But to found and consolidate democracy, we must first end the war of liberty against tyranny, and traverse the storm of the revolution. Such is the aim of the revolutionary system which you have organized; you ought, therefore, to regulate your conduct by the circumstances in which the republic finds itself; and the plan of your administration ought to be the result of the spirit of revolutionary government, combined with the general principles of democracy.

The great purity of the French revolution, the sublimity even of its object, is precisely that which makes our force and our weakness. Our force, because it gives us the ascendancy of truth over imposture, and the rights of public interest over private interest. Our weakness, because it rallies against us all the vices; all those who in their heart meditate the robbery of the people; all those who, having robbed them, seek impunity; and all those who have rejected liberty as a personal calamity, and those who have embraced the deflection of the people by the route, because their object as we did, the republic, or your policy should be the interest of the people by its nature is virtue, the spirit of virtue and terror, virtue is powerless, inflexible! It is, then, a principal, than a constant to the most urgent necessities.

It has been said to you: Does yours then the hand of a hundred tyrants tyranny are armed mass may be the essential against tyranny, and also made to strike, Nature has imposed this, Innocence in the power of man there would not a army continue to and rebellion? He who is oppressed! Never! No! wretch! No! to the unhappy, pardon for ...

1. What are the reasons of the French Revolution? Cite evidence.
2. How does Robespierre distinguish the use of terror be directed?
3. Robespierre advocates for a revolutionary government. How does he justify this stance?
have embraced the revolution as a trade, and the republic as a prey. Hence the defection of so many ambitious men, who have abandoned us on our route, because they did not commence the journey to arrive at the same object as we did. We must crush both the interior and exterior enemies of the republic, or perish with her. And in this situation, the first maxim of our policy should be to conduct the people by reason, and the enemies of the people by terror. If the spring of popular government during peace is virtue, the spring of popular government in rebellion is at once both virtue and terror; virtue, without which terror is fatal; terror, without which virtue is powerless! Terror is nothing else than justice, prompt, secure, and infallible! It is, therefore, an emanation of virtue; it is less a particular principle, than a consequence of the general principles of democracy, applied to the most urgent wants of the country.

It has been said that terror is the instrument of a despotic government. Does yours then resemble despotism? Yes, as the sword which glitters in the hand of a hero of liberty, resembles that with which the satellitarians of tyranny are armed! The government of a revolution is the despotism of liberty against tyranny. Is force then only made to protect crime? Is it not also made to strike those haughty heads which the lightning has doomed? Nature has imposed upon every being the law of self-preservation. Crime massacres innocence to reign, and innocence struggles with all its force in the hands of crime. Let tyranny reign one day, and on the morrow there would not remain a single patriot. Until when will the fury of tyranny continue to be called justice, and the justice of the people barbarity and rebellion? How tender they are to oppressors, how inexorable to the oppressed! Nevertheless, it is necessary that one or the other should succumb: Indulgence for the Royalist! exclaimed certain people. Pardon for wretched! Not Pardon for innocence, pardon for the weak, pardon for the unhappy, pardon for humanity!

READING AND DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What are the aims of the French Revolution as Robespierre describes them? Are they achievable goals or unreasonable goals for society? Cite evidence to support your position.

2. How does Robespierre justify his vision of terror? Against whom should terror be directed?

3. Robespierre advocates for democracy. How might he define democracy? How does he imagine terror will help to achieve democracy?