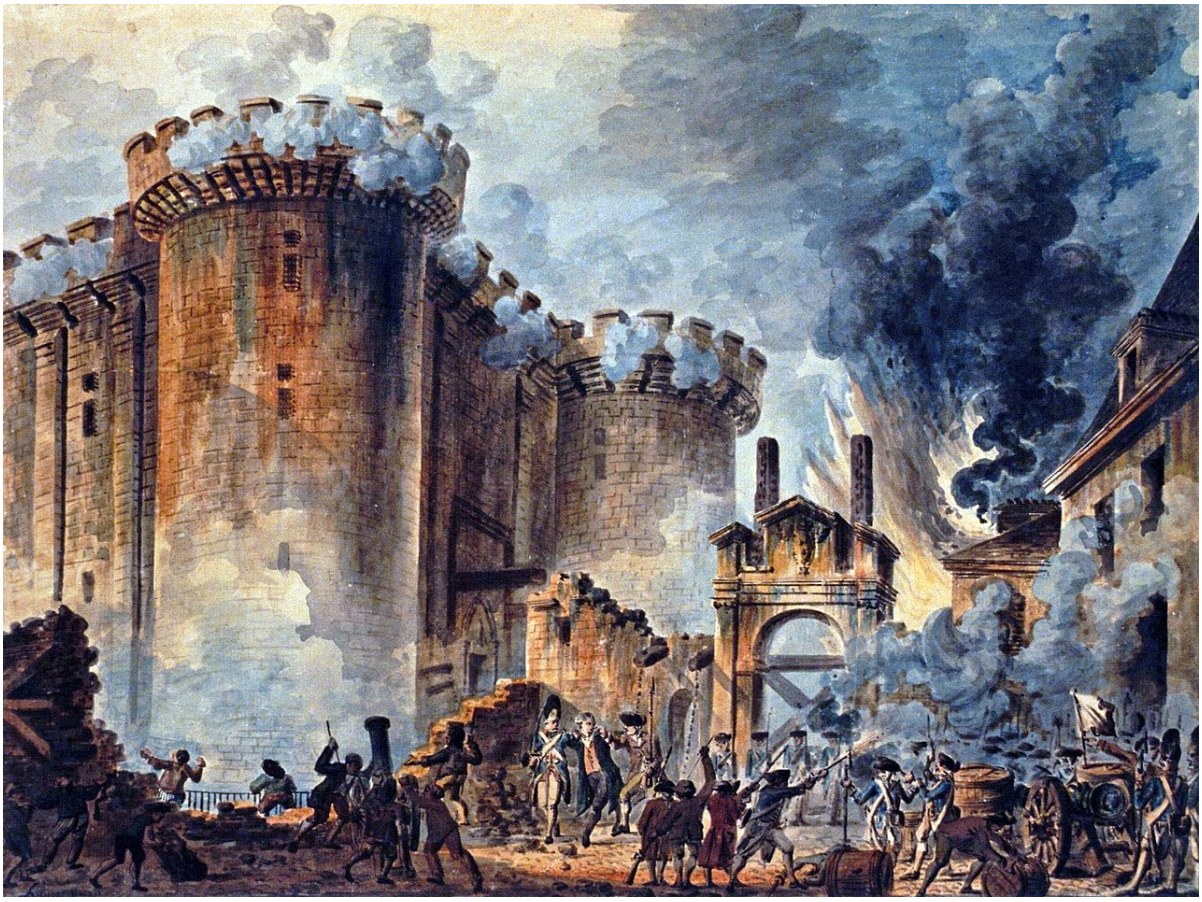
French Revolution - Storming the Bastille

The BBC has a series—called "Horrible Histories"—which takes us back in time (with an added bit of humor).

In this clip, we go to eighteenth-century France—on the 14th of July, 1789—as citizens of Paris storm (and eventally destroy) a prison fortress known as the Bastille.

Bernard-René Jourdan (Marquis de Launay) was commander of the prison on the day it was stormed. He initially tried to negotiate with two leaders of the gathering crowd (of about 900 people), but he was not skilled in such matters.

Seven prisoners were housed in the Bastille on the morning of July 14th. Another—the infamous Marquis de Sade—had been transferred to another location earlier in the month.



When de Launay was unable to manage the rising tensions, he was arrested.

On his way to the City Hall of Paris, de Launay was killed by the angry crowd.

Thereafter, a butcher cut-off de Launay's head, and it was placed at the top of a pike to be carried through the streets - like those of other alleged "traitors."

Storming the Bastille—a key event which marked the beginning of the French Revolution—is celebrated in France every July 14th as "Bastille Day." Born as a royal fortress, in the fourteenth century, its death symbolized the end of the monarchy and the birth of the modern French Republic.

How did America and, in particular, the U.S. federal government view the French Revolution? Having just concluded a revolutionary war itself, did American policies tend to support—or not support—events in France?

For answers to those questions, we turn to the U.S. Department of State where the “Office of the Historian” gives us some perspective on *The United States and the French Revolution, 1789–1799*:

> *The French Revolution lasted from 1789 until 1799. The Revolution precipitated a series of European wars, forcing the United States to articulate a clear policy of neutrality in order to avoid being embroiled in these European conflicts.*
>
> *The French Revolution also influenced U.S. politics, as pro- and anti- Revolutionary factions sought to influence American domestic and foreign policy.*

If the federal government itself remained neutral, what did the American people—on balance—think about the events in France?

> *When the first rumors of political change in France reached American shores in 1789, the U.S. public was largely enthusiastic. Americans hoped for democratic reforms that would solidify the existing Franco-American alliance and transform France into a republican ally against aristocratic and monarchical Britain.*
>
> *However, with revolutionary change* [in France] *also came political instability, violence, and calls for radical social change in France that frightened many Americans. American political debate over the nature of the French Revolution exacerbated pre-existing political divisions and resulted in the alignment of the political elite along pro-French and pro-British lines.*
>
> *Secretary of State Thomas Jefferson became the leader of the pro-French Democratic-Republican Party that celebrated the republican ideals of the French Revolution. Secretary of the Treasury Alexander Hamilton led the Federalist Party, which viewed the Revolution with skepticism and sought to preserve existing commercial ties with Great Britain.*
>
> *With the two most powerful members of his cabinet locked in opposition, President George Washington tried to strike a balance between the two.* ("The United States and the French Revolution, 1789–1799.")

It certainly wasn't the first, or the last, time that Jefferson and Hamilton disagreed about issues. And it wasn't the first time that Washington had to "strike a balance between the two."

Meanwhile ... as the French Revolution continued ... developments in France began to get radical. Really radical:

> *From 1790 to 1794, the French Revolution became increasingly radical. After French King Louis XVI was tried and executed on January 21, 1793, war between France and monarchal nations Great Britain and Spain was inevitable.*
>
> *These two powers* [Britain and Spain] *joined Austria and other European nations in the war against Revolutionary France that had already started in 1791. The United States remained neutral, as both Federalists and Democratic-Republicans saw that war would lead to economic disaster and the possibility of invasion.*
>
> *This policy was made difficult by heavy-handed British and French actions. The British harassed neutral American merchant ships, while the French Government dispatched a controversial Minister to the United States, Edmond-Charles Genêt, whose violations of the American neutrality policy embroiled the two countries in the Citizen Genêt Affair until his recall in 1794.* ("The United States and the French Revolution, 1789–1799.")

In 1794, events in France turned violent. Very violent. The "Terror" phase of the French Revolution had taken hold:

> *In 1794, the French Revolution entered its most violent phase, the Terror. Under foreign invasion, the French Government declared a state of emergency, and many foreigners residing in France were arrested, including American revolutionary pamphleteer Thomas Paine, owing to his British birth.*
>
> *Although U.S. Minister to France Gouverneur Morris was unable to obtain Paine's release, Morris was able to intercede successfully on behalf of many other Americans imprisoned during the Terror, including the American Consuls at Dunkirk, Rouen, and Le Havre.*
>
> *Once the Terror ended in late July of 1794, the arrests ended, and Paine, who had been scheduled to be executed, was released.* ("The United States and the French Revolution, 1789–1799.")

Did the radical ideas of French revolutionaries spread to America? Was the U.S. federal government worried about that?

Just in case French immigrants carried revolutionary ideas with them, to the States, the U.S. Congress passed laws—known as Alien and Sedition Acts—to put a damper on political dissent and to make it easier for the government to deport immigrants with radical ideas:

> *Although the French Revolution had ended its radical phase, Federalists in the United States remained wary of revolutionary ideology infiltrating the United States.*
>
> *Many French citizens, refugees from the French and Haitian revolutions, had settled in American cities and remained politically active, setting up newspapers and agitating for their political causes. A French spy, Victor Collot, traveled through the United States in 1796, noting the weaknesses in its western border.*
>
> *When a breakdown in diplomatic negotiations resulted in the Quasi-War with France, the Federalist-controlled Congress passed a series of laws known as the Alien and Sedition Acts, intended to curb political dissent and limit the political participation of immigrants by easing deportation and lengthening the time required for citizenship. A number of political radicals were arrested for sedition, including Congressman Matthew Lyon and newspaper editors James Thompson Callendar and William Duane.*
>
> *Many refugees, sensing American hostility, chose to return to France and Haiti since the political situation had temporarily calmed in both places.* ("The United States and the French Revolution, 1789–1799.")

Americans, who had just fought and won a Revolutionary War to be rid of governmental heavy-handedness (among other things), did not react well to their own government's imposition of the Alien and Sedition Acts. Showing their displeasure, at the ballot box, they voted-out the Federalists:

> *The Alien and Sedition Acts, originally intended to prevent a growth in pro-French sentiment, actually backfired for the Federalists.*
>
> *Taken aback by such extreme measures, swing voters in the presidential election of 1800 instead backed the pro-French Thomas Jefferson and his Democratic-Republican Party, instead of the Federalist John Adams, who was running for re-election as President. Adams had also alienated the anti-Revolutionary wing of his party by seeking peace with France, whose revolution had already been brought to a close by General Napoleon Bonaparte.*
>
> *Despite Federalist warnings that electing Jefferson would bring revolution to the United States, Jefferson instead chose to distance himself from political radicals and win over political moderates.*
>
> *The revolution in France was over, and while many American voters sympathized with the revolution in the abstract, they did not want the revolution's most radical changes put into effect in the United States.* ("The United States and the French Revolution, 1789–1799.")

What, after all, is the point of lobbing-off people's heads—and then placing them on public display—just because of differences in political opinions or ideas?

Credits:

In-text images:

In "The Storming of the Bastille," we see the arrest of Bernard René Jourdan (Marquis de Launay). Jean-Pierre Houël (1735–1813) created this watercolor, currently maintained by the National Library of France (Bibliothèque nationale de France), in 1789.

In the "Storming of the Bastille and arrest of the Governor M. de Launay, July 14, 1789," an oil-on-canvas by Jean-Baptiste Lallemand (1716–1803), we see another artistic interpretation of the arrest of the Bastille's governor, Marquis de Launay (whose birth name was Bernard René Jourdan). Created in 1790, the original painting is now maintained at the Château de Vizille (a castle in Vizille, a French town near Grenoble, France).

See Alignments to State and Common Core standards for this story online at:
http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/AcademicAlignment/French-Revolution-Storming-the-Bastille

See Learning Tasks for this story online at:
http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/AcademicActivities/French-Revolution-Storming-the-Bastille