Maximilien Robespierre, “Terror and Virtue” from *On the Moral and Political Principles of Domestic Policy* (1794)

Robespierre was the leader of the Committee of Public Safety, a body of twelve men elected by the National Convention to govern France during the state of emergency created by an economic crisis, war against the great European monarchies, and counter-revolutionary insurrection in France. Robespierre and the Committee of Public Safety enacted policies that brought stability to France and victory for its armies, but also unleashed a reign of terror against its perceived counter-revolutionary enemies. In the following excerpts of a speech given on 5 February 1794, Robespierre explains the rationale behind the policy of "terror." As you read, consider the following: what does Robespierre mean by ‘virtue'? According to Robespierre, what role does virtue play in a democratic republic? How does Robespierre characterize opponents to the revolutionary govt. and why is this characterization important to his argument? According to R., in a time of revolution, what is the relationship between ‘virtue’ and ‘terror'? Why is the latter necessary?

We set forth, some time ago, the principles of our foreign policy. We came today to develop the principles of our domestic policy. After operating for a long time at random and as if impelled by the movement of factions opposing one another, the representatives of the French people have finally shown a character and a government. A sudden change in the Nation's fortune told Europe that there had been a regeneration among the national representatives. But, up to the very moment when I am speaking, it must be agreed, we have been guided, in such stormy circumstances, by love of the good and by awareness of our country's needs rather than by a correct theory and precise rules of conduct, which we did not even have time to sketch.

It is time to mark clearly the aim of the revolution and the end we want to reach; it is time to take account of the obstacles which still separate us from it and of the means that we ought to adopt to attain it: a simple and important idea which seems never to have been noticed. Well, how could a weak and corrupt government have dared to implement it? A king, a proud senate, a Caesar, a Cromwell, must first of all cover their plans with a religious veil, compromise with all the vices, caress all the parties, crush the party of the good men, oppress or deceive the people, to attain the aim of their perfidious ambition. If we had not had a greater task to perform, if nothing were involved but interests of a faction or of a new aristocracy, we could have believed, like certain writers even more ignorant than they are perverse, that the plan of the French revolution was plainly written in the books of Tacitus and Machiavelli, and we could have looked for the duties of the people's representatives in the history of Augustus, Tiberius, or Vespasian, or even in that of certain French legislators; for, except for a few nuances of perfidy or cruelty, all tyrants are alike.

What is the end toward which we are aiming? The peaceable enjoyment of liberty and equity; the reign of that eternal justice whose laws have been graven not on marble and stone but in the hearts of all men, even the slave who forgets them and the tyrant who denies them.

What is the nature of the government that can effect these prodigies? Only that government which is democratic or republican: these two words are synonyms, despite the abuses of common diction; for aristocracy is no more republican than is monarchy.
Democracy is not a state in which the whole people, continually assembled, itself rules on all public business, still less is it one in which a hundred thousand factions of the people decide, by unrelated, hasty, and contradictory measures, on the fate of the entire society; such a government has never existed, and it could exist only to lead the people back to despotism.

Democracy is a state in which the sovereign people, guided by laws which are its own work, itself does all it can do well, and through delegates all it cannot do itself. It is, then, in the principles of democratic government that you must look for the rules of your political conduct.

But, to found and consolidate democracy, to achieve the peaceable reign of the constitutional laws, we must end the war of liberty against tyranny and pass safely across the storms of the revolution: such is the aim of the revolutionary system that you have enacted. Your conduct, then, ought also to be regulated by the stormy circumstances in which the republic is placed; and the plan of your administration must result from the spirit of the revolutionary government combined with the general principles of democracy.

Now, what is the fundamental principle of the democratic or popular government—that is, the essential spring which makes it move? It is virtue; I am speaking of the public virtue which effected so many prodigies in Greece and Rome and which ought to produce much more surprising ones in republican France; of that virtue which is nothing other than the love of country and of its laws. But as the essence of the republic or of democracy is equality, it follows that the love of country necessarily includes the love of equality.

It is also true that this sublime sentiment assumes a preference for the public interest over every particular interest; hence the love of country presupposes or produces all the virtues: for what are they other than that spiritual strength which renders one capable of those sacrifices? And how could the slave of avarice or ambition, for example, sacrifice his idol to his country? Not only is virtue the soul of democracy; it can exist only in that government.

Republican virtue can be considered in relation to the people and in relation to the government; it is necessary in both. When only the government lacks virtue, there remains a resource in the people's virtue; but when the people itself is corrupted, liberty is already lost.

Fortunately virtue is natural to the people, notwithstanding aristocratic prejudices. A nation is truly corrupted when, having by degrees lost its character and its liberty, it passes from democracy to aristocracy or to monarchy; that is the decrepitude and death of the body politic.

But when, by prodigious efforts of courage and reason, a people breaks the chains of despotism to make them into trophies of liberty; when by the force of its moral temperament it comes, as it were, out of the arms of the death, to recapture all the vigor of youth; when by turns it is sensitive and proud, intrepid and docile, and can be stopped neither by impregnable ramparts nor by the innumerable armies of the tyrants armed against it, but stops of itself upon confronting the law's image; then if it does not climb rapidly to the summit of its destinies, this can only be the fault of those who govern it.
From all this, let us deduce a great truth: the characteristic of popular government is confidence in the people and severity towards itself.

The whole development of our theory would end here if you had only to pilot the vessel of the Republic through calm waters; but the tempest roars, and the revolution imposes on you another task.

This great purity of the French revolution's basis, the very sublimity of its objective, is precisely what causes both our strength and our weakness. Our strength, because it gives to us truth's ascendancy over imposture, and the rights of the public interest over private interests; our weakness, because it rallies all vicious men against us, all those who in their hearts contemplated despoiling the people and all those who intend to let it be despoiled with impunity, both those who have rejected freedom as a personal calamity and those who have embraced the revolution as a career and the Republic as prey. Hence the defection of so many ambitious or greedy men who since the point of departure have abandoned us along the way because they did not begin the journey with the same destination in view. The two opposing spirits that have been represented in a struggle to rule nature might be said to be fighting in this great period of human history to fix irreversibly the world's destinies, and France is the scene of this fearful combat. Without, all the tyrants encircle you; within, all tyranny's friends conspire; they will conspire until hope is wrested from crime. We must smother the internal and external enemies of the Republic or perish with it; now in this situation, the first maxim of your policy ought to be to lead the people by reason and the people's enemies by terror.

If the spring of popular government in time of peace is virtue, the springs of popular government in revolution are at once virtue and terror: virtue, without which terror is fatal; terror, without which virtue is powerless. Terror is nothing other than justice, prompt, severe, inflexible; it is therefore an emanation of virtue; it is not so much a special principle as it is a consequence of the general principle of democracy applied to our country's most urgent needs.

It has been said that terror is the principle of despotic government. Does your government therefore resemble despotism? Yes, as the sword that gleams in the hands of the heroes of liberty resembles that with which the henchmen of tyranny are armed. Let the despot govern by terror his brutalized subjects; he is right, as a despot. Subdue by terror the enemies of liberty, and you will be right, as founders of the Republic. The government of the revolution is liberty's despotism against tyranny. Is force made only to protect crime? And is the thunderbolt not destined to strike the heads of the proud?

Indulgence for the royalists, cry certain men, mercy for the villains! No! mercy for the innocent, mercy for the weak, mercy for the unfortunate, mercy for humanity. Society owes protection only to peaceable citizens; the only citizens in the Republic are the republicans. For it, the royalists, the conspirators are null strangers or, rather, enemies. This terrible war waged by liberty against tyranny -- is it not indivisible? Are the enemies within not the allies of the enemies without? The assassins who tear our country apart, the intriguers who buy the consciences that hold the people's mandate; the traitors who sell them; the mercenary pamphleteers hired to dishonor the people's cause, to kill public virtue, to stir up the fire of civil discord, and to prepare political counter-revolution -- are all those men less guilty or less dangerous than the tyrants whom they serve? All who interpose their treasonous gentleness between those villains and the avenging sword of national justice resemble
those who would throw themselves between the tyrants’ henchmen and our soldiers’ bayonets; all the impulses of their false sensitivity appear to me only sighs of longing for England and Austria.

What is the remedy for all these evils? We know no other than the extension of that mainspring of the Republic: virtue.

Democracy perishes by two kinds of excess: the aristocracy of those who govern or the people's scorn for the authorities whom the people itself has established, scorn which makes each clique, each individual take over the public power and lead the people, through excessive disorders, to its destruction or to the power of one man.

The double effort of the moderates and the false revolutionaries is to drive us back and forth perpetually between these two perils.

But the people's representatives can avoid them both, because government is always able to be just and wise; and when it has that character, it is sure of the confidence of the people.

It is a truth which ought to be regarded as commonplace in politics that a great body invested with the confidence of a great people can be lost only through its own failings. Your enemies know this; therefore you can be sure that they are applying themselves above all to reawaken in your midst all the passions which can further their sinister designs.

We call for a solemn debate upon all the subjects of its anxiety and upon everything that can influence the progress of the revolution. We adjure it not to permit any hidden particular interest to use ascendancy here over the general will of the assembly and indestructible power of reason.

We will limit ourselves today to proposing that by your formal approval you sanction the moral and political truths upon which your internal administration and the stability of the Republic ought to be founded, as you have already sanctioned the principles of your conduct toward foreign peoples. Thereby you will rally all good citizens, you will take hope away from the conspirators, you will assure your progress and confound the kings’ intrigues and slanders, you will honor your cause and your character in the eyes of all people.

Give the French people this new gage of your zeal to protect patriotism, of your inflexible justice for the guilty, and of your devotion to the people's cause. Order that the moral and political principles which we have just expounded will be proclaimed, in your name, within and without the Republic.