

In the height of the Enlightenment, men influenced by the new political theories of the era launched two of the largest revolutions in history. These two conflicts, on two separate continents, were both initially successful in forming new forms of government. And yet, the two conflicts, though merely a decade apart, had radically different conclusions. How do two wars inspired by more or less the same ideals end up so completely different? Why was the American Revolution largely a success and the French Revolution largely a failure?

Historians have pointed to myriad reasons—far too various to be listed here. However, the most frequently cited are worth mentioning. For one, the American Revolution was far removed from the Old World; that is, since it was on a different continent, other European nations did not attempt to interfere with it. However, in the French Revolution, there were immediate cries for war from neighboring nations. Early on, for instance, the ousted king attempted to flee to neighboring Austria and the army waiting there. The newly formed French Republic also warred with Belgium, and a conflict with Britain loomed. Thus, the French had the burden not only of winning a revolution but also defending it from outside. The Americans simply had to win a revolution.

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Secondly, the American Revolution seemed to have a better chance for success from the get-go, due to the fact that Americans already saw themselves as something other than British subjects. Thus, there was already a uniquely American character, so, there was not as loud a cry to preserve the British way of life. In France, several thousands of people still supported the king, largely because the king was seen as an essential part of French life. And when the king was first ousted and then killed, some believed that character itself was corrupted. Remember, the Americans did not oust a king or kill him—they merely separated from him.

Finally, there is a general agreement that the French were not as unified as the Americans, who, for the most part, put aside their political differences until after they had already formed a new nation. The French, despite their Tennis Court Oath, could not do so. Infighting led to inner turmoil, civil war, and eventually the Reign of Terror, in which political dissidents were executed in large numbers. Additionally, the French people themselves were not unified. The nation had so much stratification that it was impossible to unite all of them—the workers, the peasants, the middle-class, the nobles, the clergy—into one cause. And the attempts to do so under a new religion, the Divine Cult of Reason, certainly did not help. The Americans, remember, never attempted to change the society at large; rather, they merely attempted to change the government.

- (1) Why and how did the Reign of Terror happen?
- (2) In what ways does the author suggest that the American Revolution was easier to complete than the French Revolution?
- (3) Of the challenges mentioned facing the French revolutionaries, which do you think had the greatest impact on their inability to complete a successful revolution? Why?
- (4) Of the strengths mentioned aiding the American revolutionaries, which do you think had the greatest impact on their ability to complete a successful revolution? Why?

(i)

The main reason for the Reign of Terror was political stratification among French nation. The French nation were not unified; there were deep divisions based on political differences. These divisions led to the rise of internal crisis and civil war. Thus, the Reign of Terror emerged during the French Revolution.

(ii)

The author suggests that the American Revolution was easier to complete than the French Revolution because it took place far from the Old World, which prevented interference from European nations. Unlike the French, the Americans did not overthrow or execute a king; they simply separated from British rule. Moreover, the Americans were united as a nation. These conditions made it easier for them to complete their revolution successfully.

(iii)

One of the main challenges faced by the French Revolution, which prevented it from

achieving success, was political stratification. The French nation was not unified, there were deep division based on political differences. These divisions caused internal crisis and civil war. Consequently, the Reign of Terror emerged during the French Revolution, further hindering to achieve revolutionary goals.

Limit answers to 5-7 lines.

(iv)

The greatest strength of the American Revolution, which helped it succeed, was the unity of its people. The Americans were united and faced no deep political division like those that weakened the French Revolution. This national cohesion enabled them to complete their revolution successfully and establish a stable political order founded on collective will and harmony.