I. Introduction: Purpose of the Lecture
   A. To define what is meant by “revolution”
      1. It is a topic that we will be looking at throughout the quarter—we are dealing with an “age of revolution”
   B. To relate the idea of revolution to the concepts introduced in the last two lectures (power politics, the rise of a revolutionary class and ideology)
   C. To examine the origins of the revolution, why it occurred at the time it did
   D. Finally, to look at its crucial first steps—which seem to have set up a sequence followed in the next years, in a sense “determining” them (though “personality” will also play a definite role)

II. Images of the French Revolution
   A. The French Revolution is something of enormous importance in modern history—and of staggering complexity
      1. It has inspired awe, excitement, and revulsion
   B. It conjures up scenes of great revolutionary armies chanting "the day of glory has arrived" as they marched into the field of battle
      1. of violent mobs, screaming and hysterical, booing, hissing, rampaging
      2. of the great blade of the guillotine, rushing down the block—and a dripping head held up to the "hurrah!" of the crowd
   C. This great event has exercised a tremendous fascination for all kinds of people ever since
      1. Few if any historical periods have been so studied, so argued over, so praised and so lamented
III. What is a revolution?

A. Why do we call the events of 1789-99 a "revolution"?
   1. What does this decade have in common with the Russian Revolution of 1917-21, with the Revolution of 1848, with the Chinese or Cuban revolutions?

B. The term "revolution" became utterly, almost comically debased by the latter half of the 20th century
   1. We talk of scientific revolution, industrial revolution, a revolution in sexual mores
   2. Once Madison Ave got hold of it, all stops were let out: We have revolutionary cleaning wax, even revolutionary underarm deodorants and laxatives

C. In short, it has come to convey little meaning beyond "new"

D. I will propose a much more exacting and useful definition
   1. A revolution is a successful challenge to established political authority (and by extension to social position)
      a) A "revolt" is an unsuccessful challenge

E. Social and economic factors
   1. The success of the challenge itself depends on profound social and economic (or "objective" or "structural") developments
   2. In other words, it depends on a changing historical reality that undermines the power of established classes and offers potential power to new classes
   3. This is the very kind of thing that we have been examining in the previous two lectures—France’s “weakness”
      a) The decadence or weakness of the old order is nearly always essential to the success of a revolution

F. Institutional aspects
1. Changing objective realities are not adequate to cause a revolution, or assure its success.

2. Organizations and institutions have to be created that can make use of these changing realities, that can direct them in effective, coherent ways.

3. In the specific case of the French Revolution, the growth of the bourgeoisie was not in itself enough, nor was the growing restiveness of the peasants, the festering conditions of the royal finances.

4. It was somehow necessary to focus these grievances.

5. and this was first accomplished by the parlements, although rather uncertainly and inadequately.

6. Newer institutions soon came to the fore: the Estates General, the National Assembly, the Jacobin Club, the Committee of Public Safety.

7. At any rate, revolutionary conditions do not necessarily or always find clear focus.
   a) Revolutionary demands may remained frustrated, unfulfilled, or achieved only much later.

8. Thus, institutional factors can be of great importance.

G. "Ideological-utopian" element

1. Revolutionaries need to have a powerful vision of a better world: A new value system (greater equality and justice, for example).

2. Implied here is a "left-wing" or progressive aspect to revolution.
   a) It is not a return to the past but an advancement to a better future.

3. However, this is a terribly tricky category.
   a) Much recent scholarship has shown how the masses in revolution are often "reactionary,"
or look to a return to the past (or an idealized vision of it)

b) It is rather their intellectual leaders who have embraced the ideals of historical progress

c) Similarly, recent research has shown how members of the privileged classes nonetheless play a key role in “progress”

4. Enmeshed in these ideas is the notion of a more "rational" world, one where human reason orders things—not custom, tradition, privilege, etc.—to make life on earth more enjoyable

a) And the revolutionary has confidence in the ability of human reason to reshape humanity's total environment

5. In the French case that meant replacing a “bad” past, “feudalism”—confused, complex, irrational—with whole new legal system

a) Similarly, new weights and measures, new names for the weeks, etc.

H. Similarities to Enlightened Despotism

1. The French revolutionaries were seeking to do what Enlightened Despots also were supposed to do: rationally reorder the state, society, economy, legal system—even the physical environment (dams, canals, roads, etc.)

2. The key difference: The masses are active; the "push" from below is what pushes the revolution forward

a) Under Enlightened Despotism the masses are acted upon

b) They are not considered capable of responsible, rational action on their own behalf

3. Revolutionaries, on the other hand, see themselves as the agents of people, acting in the people's name
a) Implicit here: a different conception of the common people

b) It is a difference between those who see a "mob" and those who see the people as good, reasonable, generous—the only safe and worthy foundation for political authority

IV. The "Success" of the revolutionaries

A. They succeeded where the Enlightened Despots failed

B. The new states and societies of the revolutionary decade (1789-99) eventually became far more efficient, more powerful, more "rationally organized" than any previous states

C. No doubt an important if ambiguous element of that success was the growing participation of the people

1. That participation became a new and awesome element in European power politics

2. All states came to understand that they had to tap popular enthusiasm in some way or lose in competition to other states that did

V. Overview of revolutionary developments: The first, decisive steps

A. Background mentioned in previous lectures:

1. Many have seen the rise of a "new" class, the bourgeoisie, with a new value system, resentful that it was not allowed to play its rightful role

2. Resistance of the old, privileged orders

   a) They tie up efforts at reform by the king and his ministers

   b) Especially the parlements: They blocked reform whenever it threatened the privileges of the nobility

3. France's military defeats

B. The role of the American Revolution
1. There is little question that the ideals and accomplishments of the American revolution had an impact on Europe (as European ideas had an impact on America).

2. But the financial dimension is most easily measured
   a) What France spent in supporting the American revolutionaries was probably the final blow, in terms of France overextending itself.
   b) The involvement in helping the Americans rendered the royal finances almost hopeless, on the edge of bankruptcy.

3. Now it was necessary to do something drastic—that is, tax the nobility.

4. Yet, the parlements would not allow that.

C. The beginning of a fatal cycle of events:
   1. First of all a revolt of the nobility in 1788
      a) It is not always recognized that the privileged classes "started it all," in a sense.
      b) They let the "genie of the revolution" out of the bottle.
      c) It was they that so effectively denounced "royal tyranny."
      d) This 1788 revolt is sometimes called the "pre-revolution."
      e) Representatives of the nobility said that if they were to be taxed, then the king should give them the right to supervise royal finances.
      f) They demanded the calling of the Estates General, which had not been called since the first part of the seventeenth century.
      g) The king refused, and the clash of wills led to demonstrations, led by the parlements.
This included mob violence instigated by members of the parlements, as a way of pressuring the king.

Again a certain irony here: Using the mob was a familiar reactionary device in the Ancien Regime.

The first stage, in sum, appeared as a very broad coalition against the king.

All classes seemed to join in support of the parlements and their protests.

Note the key role play by the institutional factor.

Without the parlements' leadership opposition might never have found an adequate focus.

The king finally gave in and agreed to call the Estates General.

Here, too, one must note the role of personality or mere chance: Other kings most certainly would not have given in so easily.

and Louis XVI would, time and again, make such decisions, apparently changing history.

The Second Stage (usually considered the first): the gathering of the Estates General.

Here was an institution even more capable of channeling or focusing revolutionary discontent.

One can speak even more confidently about the bottle being uncorked, the genie of revolution released.

Yet, there still seemed to be many possibilities; by no means was fundamental revolution inevitable at this point.

The king might well have been able to keep the Estates General under control—if he had been stronger, more intelligent, more courageous.

But he added blunder to blunder.
b) He first consented to a doubling of the Third Estate
c) He then agreed to combine the Estates into one body, a unified assembly, voting as a whole, rather than separately
d) Thus, the effective veto of the first two (conservative) estates was eliminated
e) Time and again Louis vacillated: Paradoxically, his weak personality may well have been the most decisive factor in the development of the revolution
f) Similar things might be said about Tsar Nicholas II in 1917

E. Growing momentum towards a radical revolution
   1. After the doubling of the Third Estate, combining them, and allowing them to vote as a whole, future developments began to look much more set or determined
   2. A moderate reform began to seem far less likely, and for several reasons:
      a) The logic or dynamics of French political and social life, pushing toward radicalization
      b) The workings of the balance of power

F. The logic of radicalization:
   1. Actually, at first a moderate revolution was espoused and confidently expected by many deputies
   2. The American model seemed to speak for such a path
      a) At this time, many spoke admiringly and quite openly of the American model
   3. However, that model was a deceptive one for France
The American separation of powers (executive, legislative, judicial) was not likely to be reproduced in France at this time. Nor would the American legislature be reproducible in France.

The upper house, or Senate, in France would inevitably be dominated by the old nobility. And it was widely believed that such a body would merely be obstructionist, like the parlements.

Here, the differences in French and American society were crucial.

Similarly, the executive, the office of the president in the United States, had to be the king in France. But the king was not elected, could hardly be impeached, and had life tenure. A king with the powers of the American president would be incomparably more powerful than the president—unacceptably powerful, in short. Thus, the king had to be made very weak, certainly weaker than the American president.

In short, the American model of a “moderate revolution” simply could not be followed and was not really a useful guide. At least, not if any substantial reform was to be accomplished—and many Frenchmen were determined to introduce major reform.

France’s different social structures, her history, what she had in place in 1789, all were crucially different from America. Therefore, the revolutionaries finally came up with a single house, and one that exercised very wide authority.
b) There were few checks on it, primarily because the revolutionaries believed that such checks would make any reform at all impossible

VI. The influence of power politics

A. This was another fundamental way that the American example was not a relevant one for France or any other European country
   1. The Americans lived far away, and were not much concerned with power politics, invasions by powerful neighbors

B. The program of reform that was started by the General Assembly was more and more resented by the privileged orders
   1. And France moved to the edge of civil war
   2. Since France seemed to be falling apart, its neighbors began to lick their chops
   3. In the past, when a country was afflicted by internal strife, that was a sign of weakness—and often a signal for aggression by its neighbors

C. Revealingly, as the danger of invasion from the outside grew, politics inside the country were radicalized
   1. Finally the more radical revolutionaries came to power, taking measures, in the name of national defense, that never would have been accepted in a time of peace

D. Thus, the logic of radicalization worked in two ways
   1. Internally, because of France's social classes and history (the privileged orders and the king made sweeping measures necessary)
   2. Externally, because of the growing threat of invasion, perhaps partition of the country

VII. Popular violence, 1789
A. This was yet a further factor pushing the revolution in a radical direction

B. It surprised the delegates to Versailles, even though it served their purpose (or at least the purpose of those who wanted major reform)
   1. And in fact popular pressures, the threat of popular violence would more and more limit the options of the delegates to the assembly

C. We may speak, then, of a third main stage of the revolution (after the actions of the parlements in 1788, after the calling of the Estates General and the formation of the National Assembly)

D. And even more the image of uncorking the bottle, of the genie of revolution taking over, seems appropriate

E. The process was not unprecedented and would occur many times later
   1. When authority breaks down and is widely condemned as unjust
   2. Even more crucially, when improvement suddenly seems a real possibility
   3. Then the passive can turn to the aggressive and violent
      a) That which was previously tolerated suddenly becomes intolerable

F. All of these tendencies were intensified, it should be noted, by another chance factor: The bad harvests that preceded the years of the revolution

G. But undoubtedly there was something somewhat unprecedented here (as bad harvests were not):
   1. There was an institution, in the National Assembly, that could approve and incorporate into law what popular rioting forced on the authorities

H. July 14: The Storming of the Bastille
   1. It was an old royal fortress and prison
2. A mob overwhelmed it and killed its defenders, taking weapons in the process
3. It became the great symbolic event: the fall of tyranny
   a) It is still the main national holiday

I. The Grande Peur
   1. At the same time (in July), in the countryside peasants began to burn down chateaux, destroy old feudal records, seize land
   2. Rumors spread wildly of "brigands" who were in the pay of the aristocracy, who wanted to stop the revolution

J. The Fourth-Fifth of August
   1. The National Assembly gives its stamp of approval to these events
   a) "feudalism" is formally abolished

K. The October Days
   1. A final and related step in this first wave of popular violence
   2. A Parisian, mob, actually encouraged by some members of the National Assembly, marched to Versailles (where king and assembly were), forced them to come to Paris, effectively putting them under immediate pressure from the popular forces in the capital
   a) Those forces will organize themselves in the "Commune"
   b) This really sets the stage for the terror of the following years, the ever growing radicalization of 1793-4

VIII. Conclusions
   A. This lecture has tried to offer some general remarks about revolution in general, its inner logic in France, etc.
1. Next time, I want to turn to what it finally accomplished, to its successes and its failures, about which Frenchmen have been passionately divided ever since