14

ON THE PRINCIPLES OF
POLITICAL MORALITY THAT
SHOULD GUIDE THE
NATIONAL CONVENTION IN
THE DOMESTIC
ADMINISTRATION OF THE
REPUBLIC

5 February 1794/18 Pluviôse Year II

(Maximilien Robespierre)

In the name of the Committee of Public Safety, Robespierre presented to the
Convention the constitutive moral principles for the French government, a
month before Saint-Just's Venetian decrees. The speech was set against the
'contrary factions' on both sides, the 'moderates' (Camille Desmoulins) and the
'ultra-revolutionaries' (Hébert).

Citizen people's representatives,

Some time ago, we laid down the principles of our external policy: we
are here today to develop the principles of our internal policy.

After walking aimlessly for some time, and being as it were carried
hither and thither by the movement of opposing factions, the represen-
tatives of the French people have at last displayed a character and a
government. An abrupt change in the nation's fortunes announced to
Europe the regeneration that had taken place within the national
representation. But it should be acknowledged that up to this very
moment we have been guided, in such stormy circumstances, by a love
of good and a feeling for the needs of the homeland, rather than by an
exact theory and precise rules of conduct, which we had not even the
leisure to draw up.

It is time to state clearly the goal of the revolution, and the conclusion
we want to reach; it is time for us to list for ourselves both the obstacles
that still separate us from it, and the means we should adopt to attain it: a
simple and important idea that seems never to have been thought of.
Well, how would a cowardly and corrupt government ever have dared
to do it? A king, a vainglorious Senate, a Caesar, a Cromwell must above
all veil their plans in a religious shroud, compromise with all the vices,
flatter all the parties, crush that of the upright men and oppress or deceive
the people, to reach the goal of their perfidious ambition. If we had not
had a greater task to fulfill, if all that was at issue here were the interests of
a faction or a new aristocracy, we might have been able to believe, like
certain writers who are more ignorant than perverse, that the plan for the
French Revolution was clearly written in the works of Tacitus and
Machiavelli, and looked for the duties of people's representatives in the
history of Augustus, Tiberius or Vespasian, or even that of some French
legislators; for, nuances of perfidy or cruelty apart, all tyrants are alike.

We have come here today to confide your political secrets to the
universe, so that all friends of the homeland may rally to the voice of
reason and the public interest; so that the French nation and its
representatives may be respected in all countries of the universe where
knowledge of their real principles can penetrate; so that the plotters who
are always seeking to replace other plotters may be judged in accordance
with sure and easy rules.

These precautions should be taken in good time to place the destinies
of liberty in the hands of truth which is eternal, rather than of men who
pass on, in such a way that if the government forgets the people's
interests, or falls into the hands of corrupt men, in the natural course of
things, the light of acknowledged principles would expose its betrayals,
and any new faction would die at the very thought of crime.

Happy is the people that can reach that point! For, whatever new
insults are being prepared for it, a few expedients do not suggest an order
of things in which public reason is the guarantor of liberty!

What is the goal we are aiming for? Peaceful enjoyment of liberty and
equality; the reign of that eternal justice whose laws are engraved, not in
marble and stone, but in the hearts of all men, even of the slave who
forgets them, and the tyrant who denies them.

We want an order of things in which all base and cruel passions would be fettered, and all beneficent and generous passions awakened by the laws; in which ambition would be a desire to merit glory and serve the homeland; in which distinctions are born only of equality itself; in which the citizen would be subject to the magistrate, the magistrate to the people and the people to justice; in which the homeland would ensure the well-being of every individual, and every individual would share with pride the prosperity and glory of the homeland; in which all souls would grow larger through the continual communication of republican sentiments, and the need to deserve the esteem of a great people; in which the arts would be decorations of the liberty that ennobled them, commerce the source of public wealth and not just the monstrous opulence of a few houses.

We want in our country to substitute morality for egoism, probity for honour, principles for practices, duties for proprieties, the rule of reason for the tyranny of fashion, contempt of vice for contempt of misfortune, pride for insolence, greatness of soul for vanity, love of glory for love of money, good people for good company, merit for intrigue, genius for fine wit, truth for brilliance, the charm of happiness for the boredom of luxury, the greatness of man for the pettiness of great men, a magnanimous, powerful, happy people for an amiable, frivolous and miserable people; in short all the virtues and miracles of the Republic for all the vices and absurdities of monarchy.

We want, in a word, to fulfil nature's wishes, to further the destinies of humanity, to keep the promises of philosophy, to absolve providence of the long reign of crime and tyranny. So that France, once illustrious among enslaved countries, eclipsing the glory of all the free peoples that have existed, may become the model for all nations, the terror of oppressors, the consolation of the oppressed, the ornament of the universe; and that in sealing our work with our blood, we may at least glimpse the shining dawn of universal felicity. That is our ambition, that is our goal.

What nature of government can achieve these prodigies? Only democratic or republican government: these two words are synonymous, despite the abuses of vulgar language; for aristocracy is no more republican than monarchy. A democracy is not a state in which the people, continually assembled, manages all public business for itself, still less one in which a hundred thousand fractions of the people, through isolated, precipitate and contradictory measures, would decide the fate of the whole society: no such government has ever existed, and it could only exist to take the people back to despotism.

Democracy is a state in which the sovereign people, guided by laws which are its own work, does for itself all that it can do properly, and through delegates all that it cannot do for itself.

It is therefore in the principles of democratic government that you should seek rules for your political conduct.

But to found and consolidate democracy among us, to achieve the peaceful rule of constitutional law, we must first end the war of liberty on tyranny and successfully weather the storms of the revolution: such is the goal of the revolutionary system you have adopted. So you should still be adjusting your conduct to the stormy circumstances that surround the republic; and the plan of your administration should be the product of the spirit of revolutionary government, combined with the general principles of democracy.

Now, what is the fundamental principle of democratic or popular government, the essential mainspring that supports it and makes it move? It is virtue; I am talking about the public virtue that worked such prodigies in Greece and Rome, and that should produce far more astonishing ones in republican France; that virtue that is none other than love of the homeland and its laws.

But as the essence of the republic or of democracy is equality, it follows that love of the homeland necessarily embraces love of equality.

It is also true that this sublime sentiment assumes the primacy of the public interest over all individual interests; which implies that love for the homeland also assumes or produces all the virtues: for what are they, but the strength of soul needed to make people capable of such sacrifices? And how could a slave of avarice or ambition, for example, sacrifice his idol to the homeland?

Not only is virtue the soul of democracy; it can only exist in that form of government. Under monarchy, I know of only one individual who can love the homeland, and who does not even need virtue to do it: he is the monarch. The reason for this is that of all the inhabitants of his states, the monarch is the only one to have a homeland. Is he not the sovereign, de facto at least? Is he not in the people's place? And what is the homeland, if not the country where one is a citizen and a member of the sovereign power?

Following the same principle, in aristocratic states the word homeland
means something only to the patrician families who have invaded sovereignty.

Only in a democracy is the state truly the homeland of all the individuals in it, and can count as many defenders interested in its cause as there are citizens. That is the reason for the superiority of free peoples over others. Athens and Sparta triumphed over the tyrants of Asia, and the Swiss over the tyrants of Spain and Austria; there is no need to look for any other reason why.

But the French are the first people in the world to have established true democracy, by calling all men to equality and the plentitude of citizens' rights; and that, in my opinion, is the reason why all the tyrants allied against the Republic will be vanquished.

At this point there are some important conclusions to draw from the principles we have laid out.

Since the soul of the Republic is virtue, equality, and your goal is to found and consolidate the Republic, it follows that the first rule of your political conduct should be to relate all your operations to the maintenance of equality and the development of virtue; for the legislator's first care should be to strengthen the principle of government. Thus, anything that tends to arouse love of the homeland, to purify morals, to elevate souls, to direct the passions of the human heart towards the public interest, should be adopted or established by you. Anything that tends to concentrate them on the abjectness of the personal self, to arouse crazes for small things and contempt for great ones, should be repressed or repressed by you. In the French Revolution's system, that which is immoral is impolitic, that which is corrupting is counter-revolutionary. Weakness, vices, prejudices are the path of royalty. Led too often perhaps by the weight of our old habits, as well as the imperceptible slope of human weakness, towards false ideas and pusillanimous sentiments, we need to defend ourselves far less against excesses of energy than excesses of weakness. Perhaps the most dangerous reef we have to avoid is not the fervour of excessive zeal, but rather the latitude of well-being, and fear of our own courage. So ceaselessly refit the sacred mainspring of republican government, instead of letting it drop. There is no need to add that I do not mean here to justify any excesses. Even the most sacred principles can be abused; it is for the wisdom of the government to examine circumstances, seize moments, choose ways and means; for the manner in which great things are prepared is an essential part of the talent for achieving them, as wisdom is itself a part of virtue.

We do not aspire to force the French Republic into the mould of the Spartan one; we do not want to give it either the austerity, or the corruption, of the cloisters. We have laid out for you, in all its purity, the moral and political principle of people's government. So you have a compass that can guide you amid the storms of all the passions and the whirlwind of intrigues that surround you. You have a touchstone against which you can assess all your laws, all the propositions that are put to you. By comparing them continuously with that principle, you can henceforth avoid the ordinary pitfalls of large assemblies, the danger of unexpected attacks, and of hurried, incoherent and contradictory measures. You can give all your operations the cohesion, unity, wisdom and dignity that should characterize the representatives of the world's foremost people.

The easy consequences of the principle of democracy have no need to be spelt out; what deserves to be developed is the simple and fertile principle itself.

Republican virtue can be considered in relation to the people, and in relation to the government: it is necessary in both cases. When the government alone is deprived of it, there remains a reservoir in the people; but when the people itself is corrupt, liberty is already lost.

Happily, virtue is natural to the people, whatever aristocratic prejudice may think. A nation is really corrupted when, having lost by slow degrees its character and its liberty, it moves from democracy to aristocracy or monarchy; that is the death of the body politic through decrepitude. When after four hundred years of glory avarice finally chased morality out of Sparta with Lycurgus's laws, 6 Agis 7 died in vain to have them repealed! Demosthenes could thunder all he liked against Philip. 8 Philip could find lawyers in the stews of degenerate Athens who were more eloquent than Demosthenes. Athens still has as many inhabitants as in the time of Miltiades 9 and Aristides; 10 but there are no Athenians among them. What matter that Brutus has slain the tyrant? Tyranny lives on in human hearts, and Rome exists only in Brutus.

But when, through prodigious efforts of courage and reason, a people breaks the fetters of despotism to make them the trophies of liberty; when, through the strength of its moral temperament, it returns, so to speak, from death's embrace to resume all the vigour of youth; when, by turns sensitive and proud, intrepid and docile, it can be stopped neither by the indestructible ramparts nor the numberless armies of the tyrants armed against it, and stops of its own accord before the image of the law;
then if such a people does not soar rapidly to the height of its destiny, it
may only be through the fault of those who govern it.

Besides, one might say that in a sense, the people has no need of great
virtue to love justice and equality; it is enough that it love itself.

But the magistrate is obliged to sacrifice his own interest to the
people’s interest, and the pride of power to equality. The law needs to
speak with authority above all to those who are its instruments. The
government needs to press down on itself, to keep all its parts in harmony
with equality. If there is a representative body, a primary authority
constituted by the people, it has the continuous task of supervising and
repressing all public officials. But who will repress the body itself, if not
its own virtue? The more elevated that source of public order is, the
purer it should be; so the representative body needs to start with itself, by
subjecting all its private passions to the general passion for public good.
Happy are the representatives when their glory and their very interests, as
well as their duty, attach them to the cause of liberty!

From all of this we should deduce a great truth: that the character of
popular government is to be trusting towards the people and severe with
itself.

Here the whole development of our theory would end, if you only
had to steer the vessel of the Republic in calm waters; but the tempest
howls; and the stage of revolution in which you are at present imposes
another task.

That great purity of the foundations of the French Revolution, the
very sublimity of its objective, is exactly what gives us our strength, but
also our weakness: our strength, because it gives us the ascendancy of
truth over fraud, and of the rights of the public interest over private
interests; our weakness, because it rally against us all vicious men, all
those who in their hearts meditate plundering the people, and those who
want to escape unpunished after plundering it, and those who reject
liberty as a personal calamity, and those who embrace the revolution as a
trade and the Republic as prey: hence the defection of so many
ambitious or greedy men who, since our beginning, have deserted us
on the road, for they had not started the journey with the same
destination in mind. One might say that the two opposed spirits that
have been represented as disputing the dominion of nature are fighting
during this great epoch of human history to decide the destinies of the
world once and for all, and that France is the theatre of that formidable
struggle. Outside, all the tyrants surround you; within, all the friends of
tyranny are conspiring; they will conspire until hope has been stripped
from crime. We must stifle the internal and external enemies of the
Republic, or perish with it; and in this situation, the first maxim of your
policy should be that the people are led by reason, and the enemies of the
people by terror.

If the mainspring of popular government in peacetime is virtue, the
mainspring of popular government in revolution is virtue and terror both:
virtue, without which terror is disastrous; terror, without which virtue
is powerless. Terror is nothing but prompt, severe, inflexible
justice; it is therefore an emanation of virtue; it is not so much a specific
principle as a consequence of the general principle of democracy applied
to the homeland’s most pressing needs.

It has been said that terror was the mainspring of despotic government.
So does yours resemble despotism? Yes, as the sword shining in the hands
of the heroes of liberty resembles the one wielded by tyranny’s satellites.
Let the despot govern his stupefied subjects through terror; he is right, as
despot: intimidate by terror the enemies of liberty; and you will be
right, as founders of the Republic. The revolution’s government is the
despoticism of liberty over tyranny. Is strength made only for the
protection of crime? And are not thunderbolts meant to strike vainglorious
heads?

Nature’s law is that any physical and moral entity must provide for its
own preservation; crime murders innocence to reign, and innocence in
the hands of crime struggles with all its might.

Let tyranny reign for a single day; the next day not a patriot will
remain. For how long will the rage of despots be called justice, and the
people’s justice be called barbarity or rebellion? How tender people are
towards oppressors and how inexorable towards the oppressed! Nothing
could be more natural: who does not hate crime cannot love virtue.

One or the other must succumb, however. Indulgence for the royalists,
cry certain people. Mercy for scoundrels! No: mercy for the innocent,
mercy for the weak, mercy for the unfortunate, mercy for humanity!

Social protection is due only to peaceful citizens; there are no citizens
but republicans in the Republic. Royalists and conspirators are foreign to
it, or rather they are enemies. Is not the terrible war waged by liberty on
tyranny indivisible? Are not the enemies within allies of the enemies
without? Assassins who ravage the homeland from the inside; intrigues
who lure the consciences of people’s representatives, and the traitors who
sell them; mercenaries bribed to dishonour the people’s cause, to
kill public virtue, to stoke the flames of civil dissension, to clear the way for political counter-revolution with moral counter-revolution; are all these people less culpable or less dangerous than the tyrants they serve? All who interpose their parricidal gentleness between these scoundrels and the avenging sword of national justice resemble those who would rush between the tyrants' henchmen and our soldiers' bayonets; all the fervours of their fake sensibility seem to me nothing but languishing sighs, directed towards England or Austria.

Well! For whom then could they be feeling such tenderness? Could it be for two hundred thousand heroes, the nation's elite, mown down by the steel of enemies of liberty or the daggers of royal or federalist assassins? No; those were only plebeians, patriots; to have a right to their tender interest you would have to be at least the widow of a general who has betrayed the homeland twenty times; to obtain their indulgence, you almost have to prove that you have sacrificed ten thousand Frenchmen, as a Roman general, I believe, had to have killed ten thousand enemies to obtain a triumph. They listen unmoved to the catalogue of horrors committed by tyrants against the defenders of liberty; our women horribly mutilated; our children massacred at their mothers' breasts; our prisoners expiating their touching and sublime heroism with horrible torments; yet they call it horrid butchery, the long-delayed punishment of a few monsters grown fat on the homeland's purest blood.

They bear patiently the misery of citizenesses who have sacrificed their brothers, their children, their husbands to the finest of all causes; but they lavish the most generous consolations on the wives of conspirators; it is accepted that they can charm justice unpunished, and contrary to liberty plead the causes of their husbands and their accomplices; they have been made almost into a privileged guild, creditor and pensioner of the people.

How good-natured we are, to be still duped by words! As aristocracy and moderatism still govern us through the murderous maxims they have given us!

The aristocracy is better defended by its intrigues than patriotism by its services. We want to govern revolutions with palace quibbles; we deal with conspiracies against the Republic like trials of individuals. Tyranny kills, and liberty pleads; and the code made by the conspirators themselves is the law by which they are judged.

Even with the salvation of the homeland at stake, the testimony of the universe cannot stand in for witness evidence, nor the obvious facts for documentary evidence.

The slowness of the trials is equivalent to impunity; uncertainty over sentences encourages all the culprits; and still people complain about the severity of justice; they complain about the detention of enemies of the Republic. They seek their examples in the history of tyrants, because they do not want to choose them from that of peoples, or draw them from the spirit of threatened liberty. In Rome, when the consul discovered the conspiracy and sniffed it out immediately with the death of Catalina's accomplices, by whom was he accused of having violated the proper forms? By the ambitious Caesar, who wished to swell his party with the horde of plotters, Piso, Clodius, all the bad citizens who feared for themselves the virtue of a true Roman and the severity of the law.

To punish the oppressors of humanity: that is clemency; to forgive them, that is barbarity. The rigour of tyrants has rigour as its sole principle: that of republican government is based on beneficence.

So, bad cess to him who would dare turn on the people the terror that should fall only on its enemies! Bad cess to him who, confusing the inevitable mistakes of public-spiritedness with the calculated errors of perfidy, or with the attacks of conspirators, abandons the dangerous plotter to prosecute the peaceful citizen! Perish the villain who dares to abuse the sacred name of liberty, or the formidable weapons it has entrusted to him, to strike bereavement and death into the hearts of patriots! This abuse has taken place, it cannot be denied. It has been exaggerated, no doubt, by the aristocracy: but even if there existed in the whole Republic just one virtuous man persecuted by enemies of the Republic, the government's duty would be to search anxiously for him, and avenge him in proper style.

But are we to conclude from these persecutions directed at patriots by the hypocritical zeal of counter-revolutionaries, that counter-revolutionaries should be set at liberty and severity renounced? These new crimes by the aristocracy simply demonstrate the need for severity. What does the boldness of our enemies show, if not the weakness with which they have been prosecuted? This is due in large part to the relaxed doctrine that has been preached recently to reassure them. If you were to listen to that advice, your enemies would reach their goal and receive from your own hands the price of the last of their crimes.

How frivolous it would be to regard a few victories won by patriotism as the end of all our dangers! Take a glance at our true situation; you will feel that vigilance and energy are more necessary to you than ever. A veiled malevolence counters the government's operations everywhere:
the deadly influence of foreign courts may be more hidden, but is just as active, just as disastrous. You can feel that crime intimidated has merely covered its workings with greater skill.

The internal enemies of the French people have split into two factions, as if into two army corps. They march under banners of different colours and by different routes: but they march towards the same goal; that goal is the disorganization of the popular government, the ruin of the Convention, in other words the triumph of tyranny. One of those two factions pushes us towards weakness, the other towards excess. One wants to change liberty into a bacchanale, the other into a prostitute.

Minor plotters, quite often good citizens who have been deceived, side with one or the other party: but the leaders belong to the cause of the kings or aristocracy and always unite against the patriots. Rogues, even when making war on each other, hate each other far less than they detest decent people. The homeland is their quarry; they fight each other for shares of it; but they are in league against those who defend it.

One party has been given the name of moderates; perhaps there is more wit than accuracy in the term ultra-revolutionaries which is used to designate the other. This name, which cannot be applied in any case to men of good faith whose zeal and ignorance may have carried them beyond sound revolutionary policy, is not an exact description of the perfidious men whom tyranny has bribed to compromise the sacred principles of our revolution, by applying them in a false and disastrous manner.

The fake revolutionary is perhaps more often behind the revolution than ahead of it: he is moderate; he is crazy about patriotism, depending on circumstances. What he is going to think the next day is decided in Prussian, English, Austrian and even Muscovite committees. He opposes energetic measures and exaggerates the ones he has failed to prevent; severe towards innocence, but indulgent towards crime; even accusing culprits if they are too poor to buy his silence and too unimportant to deserve his zeal; but careful never to compromise himself to the point of defending slandered virtue; sometimes uncovering uncovered plots, tearing the masks off unmasked or even decapitated traitors, but strongly recommending traitors who are still alive and of good standing; always eager to flatter prevailing opinion, and no less careful never to throw light on it, and above all never to offend it; always ready to adopt bold measures, provided they have a lot of drawbacks; slandering those that offer nothing but advantages, or cluttering them with amendments to render them harmful; speaking the truth with economy, only as much as necessary to acquire the right to lie with impunity; distilling the good a drop at a time, and pouring out the bad in torrents; full of fire for grand resolutions that mean nothing; more than indifferent to those that may honour the people's cause and save the homeland; much given to the forms of patriotism; very attached, like the devout whose enemy he declares himself, to foreign ways, he would rather wear out a hundred red caps than perform one good act.

What difference do you find between those people and your moderates? They are servants employed by the same master or, if you like, accomplices who pretend to be at odds the better to hide their crimes. Judge them, not by the difference of language, but by the sameness of the results. The one who attacks the National Convention in rabid speeches and the one who deceives it to compromise it, are they not in agreement? The same one who with unjust rigours forces patriotism to tremble for its safety, invokes amnesty for the aristocracy and treason. Another called on France to conquer the world, with no other aim than calling on the tyrants to conquer France. The hypocritical foreigner who for five years past has proclaimed Paris the capital of the globe was just expressing in different jargon the anathemas of the vile federalists wishing destruction on Paris. Preaching atheism is merely a way of absolving superstition and accusing philosophy; and declaring war on divinity is only a diversion in favour of royalty.

What other method remains for fighting liberty? Will anyone follow the example of the first champions of aristocracy by praising the sweetness of servitude and the benefits of monarchy, the supernatural genius and incomparable virtues of kings?

Are they going to proclaim the vanity of the rights of man and of the principles of eternal justice?

Are they going to exhum the nobility and the clergy, or assert the imprescriptible right of the upper bourgeoisie to succeed them both?

No. It is much easier to don the mask of patriotism and disfigure the sublime drama of the revolution with insolent parodies, to compromise the cause of liberty with hypocritical moderation or studied nonsense.

So the aristocracy is establishing itself in popular societies; counter-revolutionary pride conceals its plots and daggers under ragged clothes; fanaticism smashes its own altars; royalism exults in the Republic's victories; the nobility, weighed down with memories, tenderly embraces equality in order to stifle it; tyranny, stained with the blood of liberty's
defenders, heaps flowers on their tombs. If not all hearts have changed, how many faces are masked! How many traitors meddle in our affairs only to wreck them!

Do you want to put them to the test? Instead of oaths and declama-
tions, ask them for real services.

Do we need to act? They perorate. Do we need to deliberate? They want to act first. Are the times peaceful? They will oppose any useful change. Are they stormy? They will talk of reforming every-
ting, to overturn everything. Do you want to contain the rebels? They remind you of Caesar's clemency. Do you want to save patriots from persecution? They suggest Brutus's firmness as a model. They discover that someone used to be a noble when he is serving the Republic; they remember it no longer when he betrays it. Is peace useful? They draw your attention to the palms of victory. Is war necessary? They praise the sweetness of peace. Does the territory need to be defended? They want to cross the mountains and the seas to chastise tyrants. Do our fortresses need to be retaken? They want to take churches by storm and escalade heaven. They forget the Austrians to make war on the devout. Does our cause need the loyal support of our allies? They will declaim against all the govern-
ments in the world and suggest that you bring to trial the Great Mughal himself. Is the people going to the Capitol to thank the gods for its victories? They intone lugubrious dirges on our past reverses. Are new victories on the cards? They spread among us hatreds, divisions, persecution and discouragement. Should we achieve people's sovereignty and concentrate its strength in a strong and respected government? They find that the principles of government are dam-
ging to the people's sovereignty. Do we need to assert the rights of the people oppressed by the government? They speak only of respect for the law and obedience to the constituted authorities.

They have found an admirable expedient for seconding the efforts of the republican government: disrupt it, degrade it completely, make war on the patriots who have contributed to our success.

Are you seeking means to provision your armies? Are you trying to snatch from avarice and fear the supplies they are keeping scarce? They moan patriotically about public misery and announce a famine. The wish to forestall evil is always to them a reason for augmenting it. In the North the poultry were killed, depriving us of eggs, under the pretext that poultry eat grain. In the Midi, people wanted to uproot mulberry and

orange trees, on the pretext that silk is a luxury product, and oranges unnecessary.

You could never imagine some of the excesses committed by hypocritical counter-revolutionaries to blacken the cause of the revolution. Would you believe that in the areas where superstition has had most influence, not content with loading the operations concerning religion with all the forms most calculated to render them odious, they spread terror among the people by starting a rumour that all children under ten and all old people over seventy were going to be killed? That this rumour was spread particularly in former Brittany and in the departments of Rhine and Moselle? This is one of the crimes imputed to the former public prosecutor of the Strasbourg criminal tribunal. The tyrannical follies of this man make the stories about Caligula and Heligolabus seem convincing, but they are hard to believe, even after seeing the evidence. He carried his frenzy to the point of requisitioning women for his own use; they say he even employed this method to get married. Where did it come from all of a sudden, that swarm of foreigners, priests, nobles and intriguers of every sort, which at the same moment spread across the surface of the Republic to carry out, in the name of philosophy, a plan of counter-revolution that could only be stopped by the strength of public reason? An execrable design, worthy of the genius of the foreign courts allied against liberty and the depravity of the Republic's internal enemies!

That is how, to the continual miracles wrought by the virtue of a great people, intrigue always adds the baseness of its criminal schemes, a baseness ordered by tyrants, later using it as material for their ridiculous manifestos, to hold ignorant peoples in the filth of opprobrium and the chains of servitude.

But, ha! What can the crimes of its enemies really do to liberty? When the sun is veiled by a passing cloud, does it stop being the star that animates nature? Does the impure scum that the Ocean leaves on its shores make it any less imposing?

In perfidious hands all the remedies for our ills become poisons; whatever you can do, whatever you can say, they will turn it against you, even the truths we have just been developing.

Thus, for example, after having planted the seeds of civil war everywhere, with the violent attack on religious prejudices, they will seek to arm fanaticism and aristocracy with the very measures that sound policy recommended to you in favour of freedom of religion. If you had given
the conspiracy a free rein, sooner or later it would have produced a terrible and universal reaction; if you stop it, they will still try to profit from it, by arguing that you are protecting priests and moderates. It should not even astonish you if the authors of that scheme turn out to be the priests who have confessed their charlatanism most boldly.

If patriots, carried away by a pure but unthinking zeal, have been taken in here or there by their intrigues, they will put all the blame on those patriots; for the main point of their Machiavellian doctrine is to do away with the Republic, by doing away with the republicans, as one subjugates a country by destroying the army that defends it. From this one can understand one of their favoured principles, which is that men should be considered of no account; a maxim of royal origin, which means that all the friends of liberty should be left to them.

It is apparent that the destiny of men who seek only the public good is to become the victims of those who are self-seeking, something that has two causes: firstly, that intriguers attack with the vices of the old régime; secondly, that patriots only defend themselves with the virtues of the new one.

Such an internal situation should appear worthy of all your attention, especially when you reflect that at the same time you have the tyrants of Europe to fight, twelve hundred thousand men under arms to maintain, and that the government is obliged continually to repair, by force of energy and vigilance, all the ills that the numberless multitude of our enemies has prepared for us in the course of five years.

What is the remedy for all these ills? We know of none but the development of that general mainspring of the Republic: virtue.

Democracy perishes through two excesses, the aristocracy of those who govern, or the people’s contempt for the authorities it has itself established, a contempt that results in each coterie, each individual appropriating public power, and brings the people, through excess of disorder, to annihilation or rule by a single individual.

The double task of the moderates and the fake revolutionaries is to pull us perpetually back and forth between these two reefs.

But the people’s representatives can avoid them both; for the government is always capable of being just and wise; and when it has that character, it is sure of the people’s confidence.

It is certainly true that the goal of all our enemies is to dissolve the Convention; it is true that the tyrant of Great Britain and his allies have promised their parliament and subjects to rob you of your energy and the public confidence it has earned you; and that that is the primary instruction given to all their stewards.

But it is a truth that should be regarded as trivial in politics, that a great body invested with the confidence of a great people can only be ruined by its own hand; your enemies are not unaware of it, so you cannot doubt that they are applying themselves primarily to arousing among you all the passions that may forward their sinister plans.

What can they do against the national representation, if they do not manage to catch it in impolitic acts that might supply pretexts for their criminal ranting? They must therefore inevitably want to have two types of agent, one that will seek to degrade the representation in their speeches, the other, in its very heart, that will strive to mislead it, to compromise its glory and the Republic’s interests.

To attack it successfully, it was useful to start the civil war against the representatives in the departments that had justified your confidence, and against the Committee of Public Safety; so they were attacked by men who appeared to be fighting between themselves.

How could they do better than to paralyse the Convention government and jam all its machinery, at the moment that should decide the fate of the Republic and the tyrants?

Far be it from us to entertain the idea that there might still exist among us a single man cowardly enough to want to serve the tyrants’ cause! Still less would we consider the crime, for which we would never be forgiven, of deceiving the National Convention, and betraying the French people through culpable silence! For it is a happy thing for a free people that the truth, which is the scourge of despotism, is always its strength and its salvation. It is true that there still exists a threat to our liberty, perhaps the only serious threat it still has to face: that danger is a plan that existed to rally all the Republic’s enemies by reviving the spirit of party; to persecute patriots, to discourage, to ruin loyal agents of republican government, to ensure the failure of the more essential parts of the public service. They tried to deceive the Convention about men and things; they tried to mislead it on the causes of the abuses they exaggerate to render them irremediable; they took great pains to fill its ears with groundless terrors, to send it off course and paralyse it; they seek to divide it; they sought especially to divide the representatives on mission to the departments and the Committee of Public Safety; they tried to induce the first group to rescind measures decreed by the central authority, to cause disorder and confusion; they tried to embitter them
on their return, to make them the unknowing instruments of a faction. The foreigners turn all individual passions to their advantage, even deceived patriotism. At first they favoured heading straight for their goal, by slandering the Committee of Public Safety; at the time they were boasting openly that it would collapse under the weight of its arduous functions. The victory and good luck of the French people defended it. Since that time, they have chosen to flatter it while paralysing it and destroying the fruit of its labours. All that vague ranting against the Committee’s necessary agents; all the plans for disorganization, disguised under the name of reforms, and already rejected by the Convention, today being reproduced with a strange affectation; that eagerness to recommend intriguers whom the Committee of Public Safety has had to remove; that terror aroused in good citizens; that indulgence with which conspirators are caressed, that whole system of fraud and intrigue, whose principal author is a man you have expelled from your midst, is directed against the National Convention, and tends to fulfil the wishes of all enemies of France.

Since the time when that system was announced in the scurrilous sheets, and implemented through public acts, aristocracy and royalism have started to raise an insolent head, patriotism has been persecuted anew in part of the Republic, and national authority has met with a resistance for which the intriguers were starting to lose the knack. Besides, even if these indirect attacks had no other drawback than dividing the attention and energy of those who have to bear the immense burden you have placed on them, so that they are too often distracted from great public safety measures by the need to expose dangerous intrigues, they could still be considered a diversion useful to our enemies.

But let us take heart; this is the sanctuary of truth; here reside the founders of the Republic, the avengers of humanity and destroyers of tyrants.

Here, to destroy an abuse, it suffices to point it out. For advice on the pride or weakness of individuals, all we have to do is call, in the name of the homeland, on the virtue and glory of the National Convention.

On all the objects of its anxieties and all that might influence the progress of the revolution, we instigate solemn discussion; we entreat it not to allow any individual and hidden interest to usurp here the ascendancy of the Assembly’s general will and the indestructible power of reason.

We will limit ourselves today to proposing that you endorse with your formal approval the moral and political truths on which your domestic administration and the stability of the Republic should be based, as you have already endorsed the principles of your conduct towards foreign peoples: in that way you will rally all good citizens, you will deprive the conspirators of hope; you will ensure your advance, and you will confound the intrigues and calumnies of kings; you will honour your cause and your character in the eyes of all peoples.

Give the French people this new pledge of your zeal in protecting patriotism, your inflexible justice for culprits and your devotion to the people’s cause. Order that the principles of political morality we have developed here be proclaimed, in your name, inside and outside the Republic.
9 Mucius Scaevola (end of sixth century BC): legendary Roman hero who, during the war against the Etruscans, slipped into the enemy camp in order to kill Porsena. Imprisoned by the Etruscans, he let his right hand be burnt in the fire rather than denounced his accomplices.
10 See note 7 of chapter 9, this volume.
11 See note 4 of chapter 2, this volume.
12 Octavian, Antony and Lepidus: triumvirate who shared power in the Roman Republic after Caesar's death (44 BC).
14 Brutus and Cassius: the assassins of Julius Caesar.
15 Reference to Jean-Baptiste Drouet, deputy in the Convention, imprisoned by the Austrians at the end of October 1793.
16 Baille (Pierre Marie, 1750–93) and Beauvais (Charles Nicolas Beauvais de Préau, 1745–94): two représentants en mission sent to Toulon by the Convention and imprisoned by the royalists in July 1793. Baille commited suicide in prison and Beauvais died a few months after his liberation.
17 Gasparin: représentant en mission, killed in the town of Orange on 11 November 1793.

13 ON THE PRINCIPLES OF REVOLUTIONARY GOVERNMENT

2 See 'Revolutionary Government' in Glossary.
3 Toulon was taken back from the English on 19 December 1793.
4 The latter is a reproach vis-à-vis the 'ultra-revolutionaries', especially for their policy of 'dechristianization'.
5 Reference to Anarcharsis Cloots who was called 'the orator of the human race' and whom Robespierre criticized for his 'atheist' positions.
6 See note 11 of chapter 5, this volume.
7 Themistocles: Athenian magistrate who won the Battle of Salamis against the Persians (480 BC).
8 Scipio Africanus defeated Hannibal in 202 BC and captured Cathage, Rome's great rival.
9 See Glossary.
10 See Glossary.
11 Reference to Collot d'Herbois and Fouché who had repressed anti-revolutionary activity in Lyons; Fouché was accused of excesses.
12 See Glossary.
13 See note 9 of chapter 10, this volume.
14 See Glossary.
15 Baron de Dietrich (1748–93): supporter of a constitutional monarchy, he tried to raise Strasbourg in revolt after 10 August 1792 before emigrating; on his return he was condemned to death and guillotined.
16 Biron, Armand Louis de Gontaut (1747–93): a liberal noble, he held a number of military posts before being accused of a lack of enthusiasm by the Convention; he was condemned and guillotined in July 1793.
17 Bruiys (Ernault de Bignac des) 1757–1809: Chief of Staff of the three armies of the North, Belgium and the Ardennes in April 1793. Suspended in August 1793, arrested and imprisoned, he was only released after the fall of Robespierre. Barthélémie (Francois de) 1747–1830: French ambassador to the Swiss cantons 1792 to 1797.

14 ON THE PRINCIPLES OF POLITICAL MORALITY THAT SHOULD GUIDE THE NATIONAL CONVENTION IN THE DOMESTIC ADMINISTRATION OF THE REPUBLIC

2 The Ventôse decrees were supposed to sequester the goods of the 'enemies of the revolution' and share them out among the poor; they had only begun to be applied before they were cut short.
3 Roman historian (55–120 AD).
5 Tiberius and Vespasian: Roman emperors (14–37 AD) and (69–79 AD).
6 Lycurgus: mythical Spartan legislator (ninth century BC).
7 Agis: king of Sparta in the fourth century BC who tried to restore Lycurgus's laws.
8 Demosthenes was the Athenian leader (384–322 BC) who led the resistance against the Macedonian king, Philip.
9 Miltiades (540–489 BC): Athenian general who was commander at the Battle of Marathon (490 BC) against the Persians.
10 See note 5 of chapter 2, this volume.
11 See chapter 6, p. 42.
12 Caesar, Piso, Clodius: rival chiefs competing for power at the end of the Roman Republic (first century BC).
13 Reference to Anarcharsis Cloots; see note 5 of chapter 13, this volume.
14 Caligula and Heliogabalus: Roman emperors notorious for their great cruelty (37–41 and 218–222 AD).
15 Reference to Fabre d’Eglantine (1750–94), implicated in the French East India Company Affair (see Glossary) and arrested on 12 January 1794.

15 EXTRACTS FROM SPEECH OF 8 THERMIDOR YEAR II

2 See note 4 of chapter 7, this volume.
3 See Glossary.
4 See note 10 of chapter 6, this volume.
5 See note 8 of chapter 6, this volume. Cato the Younger supported Cicero against Catalina; he killed himself in 46 BC.
6 Reference to Carnot and Barère who tried to take the credit for the Republic’s military victories.
7 Reference to a decree of Autumn 1793 to confiscate all the English goods acquired in France.
8 Chabot, François (1756–94): an important figure in the Cordelier Club, deputy to the Convention, was condemned and guillotined for his involvement in the East India Company affair (see Glossary).
9 Lulier, Louis Marie (1746–94): member of the Commune, he was arrested during the trial of the Hébertists; he was acquitted but he committed suicide in prison.
10 See Glossary.
11 See Glossary.
VIRTUE
AND TERROR

MAXIMILIEN ROBESPIERRE

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London • New York
(2007)