

# Maximilien Robespierre

## Speech at the Trial of Louis XVI, 31 December 1792



[Introductory note: Maximilien Robespierre (1758-1794) entered French politics with the French Revolution and eventually would preside over its most radical phase (1793-1794). He made his first mark in 1788, when he published an *Adresse à la nation artésienne*, in which argued against voting by order in the upcoming assembly of the Estates General; in 1790 and 1791 he emerged as a leading radical in the Jacobin club and opponent to war with Austria; then in the autumn of 1792, Robespierre assumed a leading role among those delegates to the National Convention who argued that Louis XVI should not be tried but executed as an enemy of the Republic. In this speech, Robespierre makes his case against a proposal to submit the question of Louis' fate to a national referendum, warning against the dangers to the Republic that such a move would present. Robespierre got his way: the question of Louis' fate was not referred to the judgment of the people, but decided by the National Convention, acting on its behalf. Louis was sentenced to death, but only by the narrowest margin—361 to 360, with 72 abstentions.

Robespierre was elected to the Committee for Public Safety in July 1793 and in that capacity functioned as the public face and mouthpiece of the “Reign of Terror”. Eventually, Robespierre's zeal to purge the nation of counter-revolutionaries produced a backlash: on July 27, his enemies in the National Convention mounted a coup d'état against the Committee for Public Safety. Robespierre was arrested at 5:00 and guillotined without trial the following day, July 28, along with Saint-Just and twenty of their followers.

Image: Anon, *Maximilien de Robespierre* (ca. 1790). Oil on canvas, 600 x 490 cm. Musée de Carnevalet, Inv. CARP. 729].

[...] Citizens, let me call you back to the supreme interest of the nation: its safety. What is it that demands your attention to Louis? It is not thirst for a vengeance unworthy of the nation; it is the need to strengthen public liberty and tranquility through the punishment of a tyrant. Any manner of judgment, any system of delays which compromises public tranquility is in direct opposition to your aims. And it were better had you simply neglected to punish him than that his trial lay fuel upon our troubles and kindle civil war.

Each instant of delay brings us a new danger; all delays awaken guilty hopes and further embolden the enemies of liberty! They encourage dark defiance and cruel suspicions in the midst of this assembly. Citizens, the voice of the alarmed nation urges you to hasten the decision which is to reassure it. What scruple yet fetters your zeal? I can find a motive neither in the principles of the friends of humanity, nor in those of philosophers, nor in those of statesmen, nor even in those of the most subtle and profound casuist. The procedure has reached its final stage. The day before yesterday the accused declared to you that he had nothing further to say in his defense. He recognized that all the procedures he had desired had been carried out. He declared that he would ask no others. The moment when his justification is still fresh in our ears is the most favorable to his cause. There is no tribunal on earth which would not adopt such a system with a clear conscience. An unhappy man, taken in flagrante or simply accused of an ordinary crime, with proof a thousand times less striking, would have been condemned within twenty-four hours [...]

To delay your judgment, you have heard about the honor of the nation and the dignity of the Assembly. The honor of nations consists in being free and virtuous, in striking down tyrants and avenging reviled humanity. The glory of the National Convention consists in displaying a great character and sacrificing servile prejudices to the sublime principles of reason and philosophy. It consists in saving the nation and strengthening liberty by offering a great example before all the world. I can see its dignity reduced as we forget the vigor of republican maxims, as we are lost in a maze of useless and ridiculous chicanery, and as the speakers before this Assembly cause the nation to embark once again on the course of monarchy.

Posterity will admire or despise you according to the degree of vigor you show on this occasion; and that vigor will be the measure as well of the boldness or the pliancy with which the foreign despots treat you, It will be the wages of our servitude or of our liberty, of our prosperity or of our misery. Citizens, victory will decide if you are rebels or benefactors of humanity, and the greatness of your character will decide the victory.

Citizens, to betray the cause of the people and our own conscience, to deliver the nation to all the disorder which delay in such a trial must

awaken, that is the only danger we have to fear. It is time to leap over the fatal obstacle which has so long barred our course. Then doubtless we will march together toward our common aim of public felicity; then the hateful passions which mutter too often in the sanctuary of liberty will yield to love of public welfare and to the holy emulation of the friends of the land; and all the plots of enemies of public order will be confounded. But how far we still are from this goal if that strange opinion which at first we could hardly have dared imagine, which then we suspected, was, finally, in fact proposed openly. As for me, from that moment, I saw the confirmation of all my suspicions and all my fears.

At first we seemed to be troubled by the consequences which delays in the progress of this affair might bring. Now we risk rendering it interminable. We feared the unrest which each moment of delay might bring, and here we are guaranteed the overthrow of the Republic. Why, of what matter is it that a fatal plot be hidden beneath a veil of prudence or even beneath the pretext of respect for the sovereignty of the people? Such was the art of all tyrants under the mask of patriotism, who have until now assassinated liberty and been the cause of all our ills. These are not sophistical declamations, but results which you must weigh.

Yes, I say openly that I no longer see the trial of the tyrant as anything but a means to bring us back to despotism by way of anarchy. Citizens, I call you to witness. The first time there was any discussion of the trial of Louis the Last in the National Convention called expressly to judge him, when you left your departments enflamed with the love of liberty, filled with that generous enthusiasm which the recent proofs of the confidence of a magnanimous people inspired in you, which no foreign influence had changed, nay, at first when the question of opening this affair arose, suppose someone had said to you: You think that you will have done with the trial of the tyrant in a week, in two weeks, in three months; you are mistaken. It will not be you who will pronounce his sentence, who will judge him in the end. I hereby propose that you send this affair to the twenty or thirty thousand sections into which France is divided, so that they may all pronounce on this point; and you will adopt this proposal.' You would have laughed at the assurance of a man making a motion. You would have rejected such a motion as incendiary, designed to kindle civil

war. What is there to say! We are assured that tempers have changed. Such is the influence of a plague-ridden atmosphere among many of our number, that the simplest and most natural ideas are often stifled by the most dangerous sophisms [...]

Today, I admit, no one would have us absolve Louis. We are still too close to the tenth of August and the day when monarchy was abolished. But we are asked to adjourn the end of his trial at a time when foreign powers are about to descend upon us, and to allow him the resource of civil war. Today, no one would seek to declare him inviolable, but only to assure that he remains unpunished; they seek not to reestablish him on the throne, but merely to await events. Today, Louis still has this advantage over the defenders of liberty, that they are pursued with more vigor than is he. No one can doubt that they are now slandered with more care and at more cost than in July of 1791. And, certainly, the Jacobins were not more disparaged in the Constituent Assembly then than they now are in this body. Then, we were the factious men; today, we are the agitators and the anarchists. Then, Lafayette and his accomplices neglected to have us murdered; we must hope for the same clemency from his successors. Those great friends of peace, those famous defenders of the law have since been declared traitors. But we gain nothing from that, while their old friends, several members of the then majority, are here to avenge them by persecuting us. But there is a fact which no one has mentioned and which is nonetheless worthy of provoking your curiosity: after a preparatory pamphlet distributed according to the custom of all members, the speaker who proposed and elaborated with such art and feeling the system of taking the question of Louis to the primary assemblies, sprinkling his discourse with the usual declamations against patriotism, is precisely the same man who, in the Constituent Assembly, gave his voice to the dominant cabal to define the doctrine of absolute inviolability, and who vowed our proscription for having dared defend the principles of liberty...in a word, it is the same man who, and this must be said, two days after the massacre on the Champ-de-Mars, dared propose a decree which would have established a commission to judge, without appeal, as quickly as possible, the patriots who had escaped the assassins' swords. I do not know if, since then, the ardent friends of liberty who still today press for the condemnation of Louis have become monarchists, but I heartily doubt that the men of whom I speak have

changed their principles. It has been demonstrated to my satisfaction that under only slightly different circumstances, the same passions and the same vices tend irresistibly toward the same end. Then, intrigue gave us an ephemeral and vicious constitution; today, intrigue prevents us from writing a new one and leads us toward the dissolution of the State [...]

What is sure is that whatever the result of this fatal measure, it must be the advantage of their views. To provoke civil war the resolution need not even be executed completely. They trust to the unrest which is created within us by this stormy and endless deliberation. Those who do not wish to see Louis fall beneath the sword of law will not be sorry to see him sacrificed by a popular disturbance: they will neglect nothing in their attempts to provoke one.

Unhappy people! Your very virtues are used to lead you to your ruin. The masterpiece of tyranny is to provoke your just indignation, and later, make a crime not only of the indiscreet steps to which it brought you, but of the very signs of discontent which escape you. Thus, a perfidious court, with the aid of Lafayette, will draw you to the altar of the nation as to a snare where it will murder you. Yet, alas, if the many strangers who crowd within your walls, unknown to the authorities, or if the very emissaries of your foes attempt the life of the fatal subject of our deliberations, even that act would be imputed to you. Then they would raise the citizens of the other parts of the Republic against you, they would arm all France against you if possible, in recompense for having saved France.

Generous people! You served the cause of humanity too well to be held innocent in the eyes of tyranny. They would soon snatch us from your view to consummate their detestable plans in peace. In farewell, we leave you decay, misery and war, and the destruction of the Republic. Do you question this plan? Then you have never reflected on the system of defamation worked out in your midst and before your legislature. You do not know the history of our sad and stormy sessions.

The man who told you yesterday that we were progressing toward the dissolution of the National Convention by calumny, spoke the truth. Do you need proof other than that discussion itself? What other object does it now

seem to have, but to strengthen all the sinister fears which slander implanted to poison weak spirits by perfidious insinuations, to fan the fires of hate and discord?

Is it not evident that this is less the trial of Louis XVI than that of the staunchest defenders of liberty. Is it against the tyranny of Louis XVI that we revolt? No, it is against the tyranny of a small number of oppressed patriots. Are the plots of the nobility feared? No, it is the ambition of I know not which deputies of the people who stand ready to take the place of the aristocrats. The tyrant is to be preserved to furnish opposition to a few impotent patriots. Perfidious men control all public power and the state treasury, and they accuse us of despotism. There is no hamlet in the Republic where we have not been slandered with an unheard of impudence. The treasury is emptied to corrupt the public with a storm of pamphlets. They dare, in spite of public faith and the most holy laws, to violate the privacy of the mails to stop all patriotic dispatches, to stifle the voice of liberty, of truth, of outraged innocence. And they complain of slander! They despoil us of all, even to our suffrage, and they denounce us as tyrants! They represent as acts of revolt, the mournful cries of oppressed patriotism overwhelmed by perfidy, and they fill this sanctuary with cries of vengeance and fury!

Yes, doubtless there is a plot to degrade the Convention and perhaps to cause its dissolution as a result of this interminable question. This plot is not found among those who seek energetically the principles of liberty, not among the people who have sacrificed everything to it, not in the majority of the National Convention which seeks the good and the true, not even among those who are the dupes of intrigue and the blind instruments of foreign passions. This plot thrives among a score of rascals who hold the reins, among those who are silent about the greatest concerns of the nation, who abstain above all from announcing an opinion on the question of the last king, but whose silent and pernicious activity causes all the ills which trouble us and prepares all those who await us.

How can we escape this abyss if not by returning to our principles and to the source of our ills? What peace can exist between oppressed and oppressor? What concord can reign where even the freedom of the vote is

not respected? Any violation of such freedom is an attempt on the nation; a representative of the people does not permit himself to be stripped of the right to defend the interests of the people; no power can take this right from him without taking his life as well.

Already those who sought to assure continued discord, to control the deliberations, conceived the idea of dividing the assembly into majority and minority, a new means to insult and silence those who were designated as the latter. I do not recognize majority and minority here. The majority is composed of the good citizens. It is permanent since it belongs to no party; at each free deliberation it is renewed, since it belongs to the public cause and to eternal reason. And when the Assembly recognizes an error, the fruit of surprise, of haste, or of intrigue (which sometimes happens), then the minority becomes the majority. The general will is not formed in secret conventicles or around the tables of ministers. The minority retains an inalienable right to make heard the voice of truth, or what it regards as such. Virtue is always in the minority on this earth.

Without this, would not the earth be peopled by tyrants and slaves? Hampden and Sidney were of the minority, for they died on the scaffold. Critias, Anitus, Caesar, Clodius, were all of the majority; but Socrates belonged to the minority, for he swallowed the hemlock. Cato was of the minority, for he tore out his bowels. I know many men here who will, if need be, serve liberty in the manner of Sidney; and were there only fifty ... This thought alone must send a shiver through the base intriguers who wish to corrupt or to mislead the majority. Until that time, I ask at least that priority be given to the tyrant. Let us unite to save the nation and let the deliberation assume at last a character more worthy of us and of the cause, which we defend. Let us at least banish the deplorable incidents which do us dishonor. Let us not spend more time in self persecution than would be needed to judge Louis, and let us know how to gauge the subject which disquiets us. Everything seems to conspire against the public welfare. The nature of our debates agitates and embitters public opinion, and unhappily, that opinion reacts against us. The mistrust of the representatives seems to grow with the citizens' alarms. A proposal which we ought to hear calmly, irritates us; malevolence daily exaggerates, imagines, or creates tales whose aim is to strengthen prejudice; and the smallest causes can lead us to the

most terrible effects. The mere expression, sometimes too animated, of the feeling of the public, which should be easy to control, becomes the pretext for the most dangerous measures and for propositions which most threaten our principles.

People, spare us at least this disgrace; keep your applause for the day when we have passed one law that is of use to humanity. Do you not see that you give them pretexts to slander the sacred cause which we defend? Rather than violate these firm rules, turn your backs on the spectacle of our debates. Remember the ribbon which your hand but lately held as an insurmountable barrier around the fatal dwelling of our tyrant, then still on the throne. Remember that order has been maintained thus far without bayonets, by the virtue of the people alone. Far from your eyes we will not struggle the less for liberty. We alone must now defend your cause. When the last of your defenders has perished, then avenge them if you wish, and take on the charge of making liberty triumph.

Citizens, whoever you are, set up a watch around the Temple; arrest, if it is necessary, perfidious malevolence, even deceived patriotism, and confound the plots of our enemies. Fateful place! Was it not enough that the despotism of the tyrant weighed so long on this immortal city? Must his very safekeeping be a new calamity for it? Is the trial to be eternal, so as to perpetuate the means of slandering the people who took him from the throne?

I have proven that the proposal to submit the question of Louis to the primary assemblies would lead to civil war. If I cannot contribute to the salvation of my country, I wish at least to be recorded, at this moment, for the attempts I have made to warn you of the calamities which threaten it. I ask that the National Convention declare Louis guilty and worthy of death.