Gentrain Dialogue on Revolution and Reaction

Questions to Consider:

1) Does the French Revolution support Hobbes' theory of human nature—we are nasty, brutish and violent—or, Rousseau's—born trailing clouds of glory?
2) Can we justify revolution, which leads to tremendous suffering during a reactionary period? What sort of philosophical justification can be made, if any, for revolutions that are bloody and violent and tumultuous and that rip the cultural integrity of a country into pieces?
3) What could have been done, if anything, to have changed the course of revolution and reaction or even to avoid the necessity for revolution?
4) What does it take to control a revolution once underway and protect it from spinning either into anarchy on the one hand, or an authoritarian police state on the other?
5) What lessons does an understanding of the revolution and reaction cycle offer to us in the modern world?

Quotes to Consider:

1) "One of the legacies of Louis XIV had been an empty treasury, a problem which continued to plague France through the Napoleonic period and beyond…The royal administration, borrowing heavily in order to maintain itself and the New World venture, went deeper and deeper into debt. Necker, the Swiss banker and director-general responsible for this policy of borrowing, saddled his successors to such an extent that by 1786 loans to finance the debt could no longer be negotiated. The only recourse was to increase taxes. But who was to pay?...Calonne [the new Director-General] then summoned an Assembly of Notables for February 1787. Appealing to the nobles and higher clergy to concede to the abolition of a few tax privileges, he was met with a prompt and unambiguous defeat…This is the *revolte nobilitaire* against the monarchy, the opening move in what was to become the French Revolution, initiated, not by humanitarian insistence on human rights, not by bourgeois radicals rebelling against archaic injustices, but by reactionary opposition to reform on the part of a decayed nobility sensing its demise yet hoping against hope to go on living as it always had." (The Gentrain Syllabus, *Unit XI, Reaction and Revolution*, pp. 2-3.)
2) Abbe Sieyes, Jan. 1789, "What is the Third Estate," quoted in Gentrain Syllabus, p. 6.
   "What is the Third Estate? Everything. What has it been heretofore in the political order? Nothing. What does it demand? To become something therein…Obviously there are abuses in France; these abuses are profitable to someone; they are scarcely advantageous to the Third Estate…Now I ask if in this state of affairs it is possible to destroy any abuse so long as those who profit by it control the veto? … In every free nation there is only one way to terminate differences which arise over the constitution. Recourse must be

had not to the notables but to the nation itself…Where shall we find the nation? Where it is; in the 40,000 parishes which comprise all the territory, all the inhabitants, and all the tributaries of the commonwealth. There, without doubt, is the nation…There is no longer time to work for the conciliation of parties…How easy it would be to dispense with the privileged classes! How difficult to induce them to be citizens!...In vain would they close their eyes to the revolution which time and force of circumstances have effected…Formerly, the Third Estate was serf, the noble order everything. Today the Third Estate is everything, the nobility but a word….We have demonstrated the necessity of recognizing the general will only in the opinion of the majority….It follows therefrom that in France the representatives of the Third Estate are the true depositories of the national will. They may speak, then, without error in the name of the entire nation….The wishes of the Third Estate will always be good for the majority of the citizens, those of the privileged classes would always be bad….Meanwhile it is impossible to say what place two privileged bodies are to occupy in the social order. It is equivalent to asking what place is to be assigned, in the body of a sick man, to a malignant affliction that saps and torments it. It must be neutralized."

3) (Gentrain Syllabus on Napoleon's rise to power, pp. 12-13) "He substituted for the revolutionary slogan "liberty, equality, fraternity," his own phrase, "order and stability." Order and stability in his view depended on absolute centralization of power, carried to a point beyond that of the *ancient regime*. Popular sovereignty gave way to control by the state. Local self-governments were abolished, and magistrates of Napoleon's choosing acted as agents to the central government."

(Gentrain Syllabus, p. 15) "The attempt to institute a popular sovereignty guided by humanitarian ideals cut across the grain of private interests which were unwilling to make the concessions necessary for a lasting and stable government. And when the 'legitimate' basis of government, that of the king and his nobles and clergy, was destroyed, the basis for the 'legitimate' exercise of power went with it. The unsolved problem of Revolution was that of re-establishing the legitimate use of power guided by law. The excesses of fanatical republicanism and the Terror of '93-'94 have their legacy in the twentieth century. People were to look back to the Terror as a model of what revolution could achieve in the face of overwhelming odds. But people were also to look back to the Revolution in order to gain inspiration from the vision of human freedom contained therein and take heart from the achievement, even if only partial, of that freedom in society."