Rights Under Pressure

How a revolution's methods can threaten its goals

TOT.C.1.6.A "Explain how violent revolution tends to undermine the rule of law and may empower those more capable of oppression."

NAME _____ DATE _____

1 READ AND MARK

Read it twice

YOUR JOB Underline a legal protection the revolutionaries promised, circle two actions that weakened it, and number three linked steps from emergency to concentrated power to oppression.

When Rights Met Emergency

1. In July 1789, a crowd in Paris attacked the Bastille, a prison that stood for royal power. The French Revolution grew amid demands for fairer laws and limits on the king. Revolutionaries later issued the Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen, which promised legal equality and protection from arbitrary arrest. Yet France faced food shortages, war, and deep political conflict. By 1792, the monarchy had fallen. Replacing royal authority with reliable courts and rules proved harder than removing the king. People who disagreed about the revolution also disagreed about who should make and enforce the law.

2. In 1793, France's revolutionary government faced war abroad and rebellion at home. Its leaders argued that emergency action was necessary to protect the republic. The Law of Suspects allowed authorities to arrest people accused of opposing the revolution under broad rules. Revolutionary tribunals tried some of those arrested, and some were executed. When a person's words or associations could raise suspicion, the promise of protection against arbitrary arrest weakened. Fear also made it risky to criticize officials or defend an accused neighbor. Laws still existed, but the people enforcing them gained wide power to decide whom to treat as an enemy.

3. The Committee of Public Safety, whose influential members included Maximilien Robespierre, helped direct France's war effort and security policies. Officials could claim they were saving the revolution while using force against political opponents. Armed supporters and leaders who could command them gained an advantage over citizens seeking open debate and fair trials. Robespierre himself was arrested and executed in July 1794 after other leaders turned against him. His fall shows how quickly unchecked power could shift hands. The lesson is not that demands for rights caused oppression. Rather, violence, fear, and weak limits on officials made those rights difficult to protect.

2 ANSWER WITH EVIDENCE

Use the passage

1. How did the Law of Suspects weaken a protection promised in the Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen?

2. How did war and rebellion help leaders justify giving officials wider power?

3. Why might broad arrests and revolutionary tribunals make it easier to oppress political opponents?

4. What does Robespierre's fall suggest about relying on powerful leaders instead of stable limits on their power?

3 YOUR TURN

Your own words

Imagine a fictional country where rebels overthrow an unfair ruler and promise equal rights, but an armed council begins arresting critics without hearings. In one paragraph, explain how this change could undermine the rule of law and empower oppression, then propose one legal safeguard that could limit it.

ANSWER KEY

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HIGH SCHOOL · TOT.C.1.6.A

PART 1 · READ AND MARK

Underline a legal protection the revolutionaries promised, circle two actions that weakened it, and number three linked steps from emergency to concentrated power to oppression. Accept any marking that follows this job and points at the right text.

PART 2 · ANSWERS

#	QUESTION	ANSWER
1	How did the Law of Suspects weaken a protection promised in the Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen?	**The Declaration promised protection from arbitrary arrest, but the law permitted arrests under broad rules based on suspected opposition.**
2	How did war and rebellion help leaders justify giving officials wider power?	**Leaders argued that emergency action was needed to protect the republic, then allowed officials broad power to arrest suspected opponents.**
3	Why might broad arrests and revolutionary tribunals make it easier to oppress political opponents?	**Officials could treat opponents as enemies and arrest them under broad rules. Tribunals could then try them, while fear made others less willing to object.**
4	What does Robespierre's fall suggest about relying on powerful leaders instead of stable limits on their power?	**Power could shift suddenly when leaders turned on one another. Without strong limits, even a powerful leader could be arrested and executed.**

PART 3 · YOUR TURN (SAMPLE ANSWER)

The rebels promised equal rights, but the armed council now decides who is punished without giving people hearings. That means critics cannot rely on the same legal process as everyone else. Council members could call anyone who questions them a threat, then use arrests to silence opposition. People may become afraid to speak, leaving the council with even more power. A law requiring a prompt hearing before an independent judge would make the council explain each arrest and give accused people a chance to respond.

Accept explanations that connect emergency or violence to weaker legal protections and greater power to punish opponents. Students need not claim that every revolution produces oppression.