Welcome, ladies and gentlemen to my Theatre of History, also known as the Theater of the Absurd. The actors in this performance are paid no wages, the only remuneration they request is your willingness to leave behind old prejudices and a mind open to the truth.

This story profiles two women. Well, sort of. Certainly, Marie Antoinette was flesh and blood, a princess and queen. But the Guillotine was made of wood and steel. Like Athena, who sprang fully armed from the head of Zeus, this powerful instrument rose from the brain of Dr. Guillotin, ready to perform her grisly duties. The French call her la guillotine; perhaps that justifies how she became Madam in this drama. The events which brought together two such strange bedfellows were as turbulent as this bonding suggests. The great upheaval of 18th century European history, the French Revolution, yoked together a queen and an instrument of decapitation. They shared another distinction: both were the victims of malicious
propaganda. Madame Guillotine became a symbol of pitiless cruelty, the queen the personification of heartless self-indulgence. In a few minutes they will step upon the stage to tell their truths. Their accounts, however, will confuse rather than enlighten, unless some groundwork is laid. So, kindly allow me to furnish some highlights of the setting in which the tragedy was played out, namely the French Revolution.

What is a revolution? Historians define the word as an event which initiates radical and lasting change. At first glance one would assume that the most oppressed members of a society, the masses who have nothing to lose but their misery (apologies to K. Marx), would tear down an oppressive regime to make room for a new political order. A second glance, however, changes the focus. The suffering of the lower classes, the dispossessed, may explode into riots and insurrections, but rebellions rarely bring about permanent transformations. It is easy to topple a regime but difficult to institute a new one, one that will survive its enemies. The foresight, the planning and implementation of a new administration, require skills not usually found among the poor and oppressed. The most significant political upheavals of modern Western society have been the work of the middle class. Members of the bourgeoisie have the prerequisite tools to lay the foundations for long-range political change: realism, organization, leadership, education, self-confidence and financial backing. The ability to win the support of the working class, the small farmer and even the liberal aristocracy are important supporting elements which help a new system to establish roots. The pivotal revolutions of 1776 in America, 1789 in France, 1917 in Russia, and 1918 in Germany were the work of lawyers, businessmen, industrialists and their proponents, in other words, practical, educated men who understood what was possible and what was an unrealistic utopian vision.
The notion that in 1789 the French must have been the most oppressed people in Europe is a false assumption. Compared to the lives of Prussians and Russians, to the people of the Balkans and of Ireland, the French were better off. Serfdom had nearly disappeared, some members of the middle classes were getting wealthy, there was manufacturing, particularly of luxury goods, and universities produced men of accomplishment in the sciences and the arts. Everywhere the French models of etiquette, dress, architecture, literature, and painting set the style to be emulated.

So why did the French revolt? Hundreds of historians have considered the question and examined the social, the economic, the political malfunctions of the Old Regime. But the overthrow of the absolute monarchy required first and foremost a readiness of mind. Its advocates had to be convinced that the corruption and inequities of their society were not inexorable but should be, and could be fixed. Other Westerners, particularly the Americans and the English, had established a better system. The writers of the Enlightenment of the previous generation, Voltaire, Rousseau, Montesquieu, Diderot and many others had been persuasive in their call for reform of the French government. Just 13 years earlier the success of the Americans had demonstrated that republican ideals can be transformed into realities. Benjamin Franklin, when Ambassador to France, had been the most popular man in Paris. His seeming simplicity, his apparent frankness and modesty made him a favorite in the salons of the rich and he had won the admiration of ordinary Frenchmen. Of course, we know that he was highly intelligent and shrewd and appeared to be what his hosts found endearing. When Thomas Jefferson took the ambassadorial post, he too was feted as a celebrity. Meanwhile, across the Channel the English were proceeding toward representative government by limiting the powers of their monarch.
There is another connection between the birth of the United States and the death of the Old Regime: Money. When Louis XVI agreed to aid the fledgling United States win its freedom, he committed large sums toward that effort, money that the French could not afford. Why was this support given? Certainly it was not inspired by any love the king harbored for republican principles. The motivation was hatred of England, my enemy is your enemy, ergo, we are joined by our common hatred. Less than two decades before the Declaration of Independence was issued, the English had inflicted a crushing defeat on the French. The resulting losses of Canada and India were a running sore on the thin-skinned Gallic pride. The possibility of avenging this humiliation was irresistible. As a result, the French navy, the gallant Marquis de Lafayette and material assistance, no matter why given, facilitated the American victory.

The road to the French Revolution began with the bankruptcy of the government, partially due to the American outlay. Certainly the extravagance of maintaining the enormous court at Versailles was a great expense, but had the system of taxation been fair and required contributions from all Frenchmen, the finances of the state would not have become a critical problem. The entire system of assessments, however, was in desperate need of a complete overhaul. Only commoners were obligated to carry the burdens of the cost of governance. Called the Third Estate, this, the largest sector of society, included the poorest day laborers, the peasantry and the entire middle class. The First Estate consisted of members of the clergy who were basically exempt from taxation and so was the aristocracy, the Second Estate. The privileges of the church were justifiable, at least in theory, but the premise for absolving the nobility was invalid. Their exemption had been based on duties performed during the Middle Ages when overlords and kings were entitled to their vassals’ military aid. Such obli-
gations were no longer required as mercenary and national armies replaced the service of the knights. Thus, the owners of hereditary manors were now freed of their duties but not their privileges. Consequently, the wealthiest classes paid almost no taxes at all. Furthermore, the system of tax collection was riddled with fraud and wastefulness. Because the state was constantly in arrears with its bills, rich men advanced money to the national treasury with the proviso that they, private individuals, would reimburse themselves by collecting the debt. Of course, their “tax farming” methods consisted of squeezing as much out of the tax payers as their often ruthless, even brutal agents could manage.

To solve the financial crisis the king had no choice but to call into session a long unused representative body, the Estates General. Great excitement gripped the French when the news spread that a body of representatives, elected by the people, would gather in Versailles to find a solution to the financial emergency of the nation. Not for 175 years had this medieval assembly been convened. No one was sure of the protocol to be observed; historians scoured through dusty depositories of state papers to try to reconstruct how delegates were chosen and how their meetings were conducted. Members of all three Estates, the clergy, the nobility and all the rest of the French people hoped to use this opportunity to inform the king of their grievances.

The king himself, Louis XVI suggested that the people compile lists of their complaints to guide the government. These were gathered into notebooks, Cahiers in French, and together they create a portrait of conditions in France in 1789. Between February and April some 25,000 Cahiers were collected. In respectful, even pleading language, they summed up the distress of his majesty’s subjects. A brief sampling reads as follows: The confusing, often conflicting law codes needed standardization and simplification; the tax burden must fall on
all, not just commoners; the special privileges of the nobility should be revoked; the wealth, ostentation and idleness of the higher clergy should be curbed; and all people should have access to free public education. From the villages came the plea of the poor to have the right to hunt and trap animals in the forests and glean the fields after the harvest was in. Thousands of eloquent lines urged freedom of the press, and for regular consultation of the government with a representative legislative body. The Cahiers were the moderate voice of France calling for reform, not revolution.

How and why did these restrained requests for alleviation of wrongs develop into a violent revolution? A part of the answer is rooted in the unfortunate personality of Louis XVI. He might have been a footnote in the history of France had he ruled in peaceful times. Because his reputation too has suffered from a hostile press, he wishes now to defend himself against the misconceptions, the slurs and outright lies that have defamed his character. Let the curtain part and please give Louis XVI your courteous attention.

“History has not been kind to me, I suppose it rarely is to losers. I have been labeled as clueless and vain and too much under the influence of my wife. Those accusations are hurtful, but most painful is the indictment that I am responsible for the Revolution. I always tried to do my duty, which, I admit, I often found difficult. I had no illusions about my ability, and admit that I lacked the essential qualities of leadership. My personality was bland, a simple man without glamour, without the charm that often passes as ability. Would you call my appearance impressive? Hardly. My bearing is that of an ordinary man caught up in extraordinary events. But, mind you, I was not a man devoid of merit. In my faith in God I was steadfast and my devotion to my family unfailing. How often did I wish I had been born a man of the people, I would have made a fine locksmith. As much as I tried,
affairs of state were tiresome to me and I often fell asleep during ministerial discussions. My passions were hunting, dining well and the mechanics of locks. Simple pleasures for a simple man.

“I was accused of wasting the nation’s money, but I did not build that monstrous palace at Versailles. Nor did I set the fashion for the preposterous dress and hairstyles that were imitated all over Europe. All that pompous etiquette, the formality that isolated me from my people, these were excesses which my wife Marie and I tried to curb. But it was too late.

“When I became king at the age of 20, I inherited a number of exceedingly difficult problems. I was not equipped by temperament, inclination, or aptitude to solve them. I did try, but no credit is given for trying. I sought advice from those I believed wiser than I, but often they confused me. My wife and relatives urged against reform, some of my ministers pushed for changes. My grandfather and immediate predecessor, Louis XV, as well as my great grandfather, the illustrious Louis XIV, both had squandered the wealth of the nation on endless wars. The much maligned social distinctions and unequal taxation were not instituted by me. In fact, during my early reign I appointed the brilliant Jacques Turgot as chief financial officer. He tried to institute reforms but the regional Parlements – made up largely of the nobility – refused to register the new tax laws which would have placed some assessments on their wealth. Without their agreement no changes could be instituted. Later, I tried to solve our insolvency through the efforts of M Necker, a popular Swiss banker. His attempts also failed and I was obliged to dismiss him.

“My queen, Marie Antoinette will speak to you about our family life. I just want to say that I never believed any of the malicious gossip that clung to her like a shadow. We lost two children and mourned them deeply. When our eldest son died of consumption at seven years
of age, we were devastated. Our last few months together were a true test of our marriage. We were in prison, Marie and I confined to one room, our son and daughter next door. We spent our time together working on lessons, praying, and trying to keep each other from despair. After my trial and conviction, we wept together, held each other and as I left to meet Madame Guillotine, my little girl fainted. Marie and I joined her on the floor, we revived the child and then the guards made me leave. That is all I have to say. Wait, one more word, one I tried to say a moment before my execution: ‘I forgive all those who wished me ill and did me worse.’”

Thank you, ladies and gentlemen for your kind attention to the king. Your applause indicates your sympathetic courtesy. Now let us return to our history lesson.

When the king called the Estates General to assemble in Versailles, his popularity was at its height. But, alas, the king was not the man to provide leadership during such a perilous moment in history. His good intentions were not enough, in fact, they paved his road all the way to the scaffold. Louis had no clear picture of the ruler he wished to be. Reformer? Conservative? Limited monarch? Members of his inner circle and the rioters in the cities swayed him to and fro. Whoever applied the last or strongest pressure, found him yielding. Marie Antoinette’s influence to stay the course of absolutism caused him distress, she simply did not understand that the age of royal autocracy in France had ended. The cycle of first relenting and then retracting merely encouraged the people to escalate their demands.

An example of his vacillating attitudes involves the voting procedure adopted by the Estates General. The delegates made the momentous decision to abolish the class distinctions between them and established themselves as a National Assembly for all of France. Instead of casting their votes by Estates, they adopted a one-man one-vote reso-
Marie Antoinette and Madame Guillotine

The Tennis Court Oath was the turning point that propelled French political development from redress of grievances to revolution. The king’s reaction? He had to choose, either assert his authority and use the army to scatter the representatives or yield to them. When the streets of Paris exploded into rioting in support of the Assembly, he capitulated and permitted the members to convene.

This was not the last time his irresolution encouraged the mobs. On July 14 rumors circulated that the king had ordered troops to disband the National Assembly. Many thousands of Parisians left their homes and shops to search for weapons, ostensibly to protect their delegates. A roaming crowd came upon an ancient fortress that was also used as a prison, known as the Bastille. Believing that arms might be stored within its walls, they stormed the stronghold. The seven prisoners inside, all criminals, were joyously freed, the guards and their commander were killed. Then the structure was literally pulled down, stone by stone. (Lest you wonder how such an unsavory event became the national holiday celebrating French freedom from tyranny, I suggest you examine the facts surrounding our own Boston Tea Party …)

The Assembly, consisting of many lawyers with a sprinkling of liberal nobles and clerics, set to work. Their goal: to create a limited monarchy. And they actually created a government headed by a monarch who wielded considerable executive powers but shared law making duties with an elected legislature. A series of constitutional rights guaranteed basic civil liberties patterned after the American and
English models. For a brief moment it seemed that a relatively bloodless maneuver had placed France on the road to political evolution.

The night of August fourth deserves to be remembered as an unprecedented event. One after another, delegates from the aristocracy and the church rose from their seats to triumphantly surrender their privileges. They, its most favored sons, destroyed the old regime, relinquishing their right to collect feudal dues from their peasants, calling for abolition of the tithe, renouncing their tax exempt status. They spoke eloquently of their love of France and its rebirth without class distinctions, without preferential treatment for anyone in courts of law, or in the procurement of government positions. The capstone of this monumental event was the Declaration of the Rights of Man, a statement of ideals which resembles our own Declaration of Independence. The proclamation states that all men are born free and equal with rights to liberty, property, security and resistance to oppression. All citizens are entitled to participate through their elected representatives in making the nation’s laws; all are equal before the law and are granted freedom of speech, press and religion. The king, irresolute and unsure of the loyalty of his army, signed the Declaration. Thus, he acknowledged that his subjects had become citizens. It seemed to many that the revolution had ended victoriously. But what of the initial cause of calling the Estates General, the bankruptcy of the government?

The Assembly addressed that problem in a controversial, certainly radical move which seemed to promise a solution to two problems by annulling the privileged status of the church and ending the bankruptcy of the state. The Assembly voted to deprive the Catholic Church of its tax exemption and to confiscate its extensive land holdings. Furthermore, the clergy was prohibited from collecting the tithe, and priests became paid employees of the government. In effect, this
action separated the French church from the papacy. Appointments of
the clergy were no longer a prerogative of the Vatican as priests were
to be elected by their congregations. The confiscated church property
was sold at auctions and used to refill the empty treasury of the nation.
Some of the well-to-do peasants were able to take advantage of this
rare opportunity to buy land, but most of the property ended in the
hands of speculators. The poorest villagers were unable to purchase
the few acres they so eagerly hoped for.

When the Assembly instituted these fundamental changes in the
religious traditions of the nation, it took a dangerous risk. Such radi-
calism could not remain unchallenged. Obviously, the pope objected
vehemently and condemned these revisions, most of the clergy
denounced the changes and many refused to swear allegiance to the
new regime. In addition, many devout Catholics decried this reorga-
nization known as the Civil Constitution of the Clergy. The newly
established government thus generated a large number of well organ-
ized enemies.

In 1791 the National Assembly had completed its task, it had writ-
ten a constitution. Elections were held and a new body, the Legislative
Assembly convened in 1789. Because the life of the limited monar-
chy was so short, we need not detail its provisions; with one excep-
tion: it gave only taxpaying citizens the right to vote, a restriction
which generated a vehement protest by the unenfranchised. The num-
ber of disillusioned revolutionaries was growing. According to their
particular discontent, they organized into clubs to disseminate their
own objectives and gain converts. Among the most effective factions
was the Jacobin Club whose leaders played a major role in the com-
ing years.

But, perhaps the greatest enemy of the limited monarchy was the
royal couple. The vacillations of the king had cost him the goodwill
Up Close and Personal

the king and queen in the capital where they could keep an eye on them. Nor did they return empty handed, singing and jeering they accompanied the royal carriages carrying the “baker and the baker’s wife” to Paris. Again he had exposed his weakness to the populace. Then, in 1791, Louis destroyed any hope that he might govern his rebellious people. He tried to flee the country.

The circumstances of that unfortunate attempt require a glance at foreign developments. Events in France had created great anxiety in Continental Europe, the Austrians and Prussians in particular worried that their people might be infected with liberal ideas. Marie Antoinette, born an Austrian princess, was the aunt of Emperor Francis II, who ruled her homeland and was soon replaced by her brother Leopold II. She was certain in her conviction that a king ruled by the grace of God, not the approval of his subjects. Perhaps unaware that her actions were treasonous, perhaps uncaring, she appealed to her brother to use his armies to restore the French monarchy to its absolute power. Her pleas fell on sympathetic ears and the first of many coalitions against France was formed when Prussia joined Austria in declaring war.

In June of 1791 the king and queen made the fateful decision to escape. During a rainy night the little group slipped out of the Tuileries palace through an unguarded door, the king, his sister known as Madame Elizabeth, the queen, the two children and a few servants. The king was dressed as the valet, the queen wore an outfit suitable for a governess. The carriages lumbered toward the north-eastern border where Austrian troops would welcome them. At the small town of Varennes, not far from the Austrian Netherlands, a pro-Revolution postmaster recognized the king, he had seen his image on paper
money. The return to Paris was a preamble to the tragedy that awaited them. Escorted by the curses and threats of men and women on the roadside, the little caravan of frightened captives were taken back to Paris. From this moment on they were prisoners.

The hope that France would be governed by a constitutional monarchy foundered under the pressure of foreign and domestic opposition and the ill advised action of the royal pair. The invasion of the Austrian and Prussian armies and opponents from within France continued to radicalize the enemies of the crown. The attempted flight had closed the door on the limited monarchy, a door that had barely cracked open. The resulting shift was to give France a Republican form of government. But the birth pangs of this new regime, called the Convention, delivered a detestable offspring, born in violence and finally destroyed by violence: the Reign of Terror.

This phase of the revolution was initiated in August when Parisians attacked the Tuileries where the royal family lived. The king’s Swiss guards were murdered and the rioters might have killed the king and queen had they not fled to the safety of the National Assembly. No matter, the fate of the monarchy was sealed. Louis was suspended from office and he and his family were confined under guard. In September the wave of mass killings escalated, the Parisian police collapsed under the weight of hysterical mobs who roamed the streets to find and execute supposed enemies of the people. Of particular abhorrence was the mutilation of the queen’s best friend, the Princess de Lamballe. Her body was mutilated, her head stuck on a pike and paraded in front of Marie Antoinette’s window.

The newly elected members of the Convention enacted several noteworthy reforms such as the repeal of imprisonment for debt, the abolition of Negro slavery in the French colonies, the adaptation of the metric system, and a plan for free public education. These measures were
particularly noteworthy because the First French Republic found itself in the crossfire between foreign invaders and native opponents. The leaders who dominated this era, Marat, Danton and Robespierre sought to save the revolution by crushing all actual and suspected opponents. Charges of treason were tantamount to conviction and death sentences were imposed by ad hoc tribunals of hysterical citizens. The years 1793–1794 are aptly called the Reign of Terror and its symbol was Madame Guillotine. She will now speak for herself:

“I was named for my inventor, a good man, a doctor of medicine who hoped to serve humanity. Dr. Guillotin believed that even convicted criminals were entitled to a humane death. Hanging and axing were unacceptable cruelties he wished to ameliorate. As early as 1789 he had submitted a drawing of my silhouette to the Assembly with specifications of my framework and my abilities. But he hoped to accomplish more than improve the method of execution, he proposed laws to enact equal justice. The nature of the crime, not the social position of the criminal, should determine the sentence imposed by the courts. He further urged an end to the practice of confiscating the property of a convict’s family and allow relatives to give the condemned criminal a decent burial. In the name of justice and compassion he prevailed upon the Assembly to outlaw the use of torture during interrogation. His aim was always to alleviate unnecessary suffering. It is probable that the great speed of my blade caused no pain. The head is severed from the body within 2/100 of a second. Certainly, this method was more merciful than the often inexpert use of the gallows or cleaver.

“The Assembly approved Dr. Guillotin’s proposal and he was allotted money to manufacture the first instrument. It is ironic, is it not, that he sought and was given technical assistance from a harpsichord maker. In November of 1792 the first prototype was set up. After
some tests with corpses, the blade was adjusted to strike the victim obliquely instead of squarely. Before long, the machines, as they were called, were erected in cities all over France. Depending on whose statistics you wish to believe, between 20,000 and 40,000 men and women were put to death during the Reign of Terror, though not all by beheading.

“I am not self-conscious to divulge my personal statistics. I weigh about 1200 lbs., my steel blade tips the scales at 88 lbs. I am rather taller than you would expect, my side supports reach 14 ft. Generally, I stood on a platform that was reached by a short ladder. Most of my victims had their hands bound behind them, sometimes their eyes were covered with a piece of black cloth. Some of my victims were stoical, some cried, cursed or prayed. Each was told to lie face down with his neck below the blade. The knife was released and its weight detached the head which fell into a waiting basket. It was customary for the executioner to grab it by the hair and show it to the cheering crowd.

“My creator, the good doctor, believed his work would benefit mankind and what a disappointment I was to him. Who were my victims? Who had condemned them? They came from all walks of life. Anyone even vaguely associated with the government of the Old Regime was suspect; even the little seamstress who sewed the pearls on the queen’s gown and the stable boy who fed the king’s horses. What crimes had they committed? None. Aristocrats whose loyalty to the Republic was questionable and their entire families were brought to me, often in open two wheeled carts that clattered on the cobblestones. Wealth created suspicion and a mere accusation usually sealed one’s fate. Decent Frenchmen hated the sight of me and that of my many sisters who were employed throughout the nation. How did the virtuous Robespierre, prime mover of the Terror, defend this blood letting? Let me cite an excerpt from a speech he made on February 7,
1794 to vindicate my busy occupation:

‘To establish and consolidate democracy, to achieve the peaceful rule of constitutional laws, we must first finish the war of liberty against tyranny … We must annihilate the enemies of the republic at home and abroad, or else we shall perish. If virtue is the mainstay of democratic government in time of peace, then in time of revolution a democratic government must rely on virtue and terror … Terror is nothing but justice, swift, severe, and inflexible; it is the emanation of virtue … The government of the revolution is the despotism of liberty against tyranny.’

‘What a way he had with words. On the day he too was dragged to lie beneath my blade, however, he was unable to speak because bloody bandages covered much of his face.

‘When it was my ill fortune to behead the king of France in January of 1793, I thought I had completed my work. The trial that preceded his conviction was a drama worthy of its victim. Political extremists were pitted against moderates and after 100 hours of voting in the Convention, the radicals prevailed. Louis was found guilty of treason. The death sentence was carried out without delay. He had lived without courage, but died with fortitude and dignity. In his last words he offered forgiveness to those who had condemned him. He was trying to say more, but an order to sound a drum roll drowned out his voice.

‘Louis was not my only memorable victim. No, I am not referring to the queen who will speak in her own behalf. I am thinking of another woman, a murderess I greatly admire, one who was actually guilty. Her name was Charlotte Corday. She was 25 when the dreaded tumbril brought her to me.

‘Charlotte was a strikingly good looking woman. Her family was from Caen, of minor nobility and she was well educated. In fact, she was a direct descendent of our famed dramatist, Pierre Corneille.
Perhaps she inherited a flair for the theatrical from him. Although she favored a republican government, she was deeply troubled by the excesses of its radical leaders. The Jacobins’ anti-Catholic abuses had reached into her life when her family’s priest was literally hunted down by dogs. He had been among those who would not swear to support the new government’s Civil Constitution of the Clergy. Like thousands of other priests, he was condemned to die. Charlotte became convinced that it was her destiny to stop the outrages of the Terror. Her most intense hatred was reserved for its most diligent tracker of suspected counter-revolutionaries, Jean-Paul Marat. Marat was a physician turned journalist and then professional agitator; a healer become executioner and influential member of the paradoxically named Committee of Public Safety. Charlotte came to Paris and rented a room. She learned that Marat was afflicted with a skin disorder of painful sores, usually described as loathsome (we now call this malady arthritic psoriasis). His condition caused him to spend his days immersed in his bath tub. On her way to his lodgings she stopped to buy a kitchen knife with a 5 inch blade which she hid inside her blouse.

“Marat’s servant accepted her claim she wished to deliver a petition. He escorted her into the bathroom where Marat often received visitors. Left alone the two chatted amicably. Then Charlotte pulled out the knife and struck at him just once, severing the carotid artery. Then she calmly sat down to await her arrest. She died bravely, certain that she walked in the footsteps of Joan of Arc.

“Ah, martyrdom, who can solve its enigma? Born worlds apart in life, but sisters in death, Marie Antoinette also believed she died for a holy cause; not for her country, but for God. She will be your final witness. But, before I go, I concede with pleasure that I have become old and rusty, a museum piece. You can see me in London at Madame Tussaud’s. Most western nations, with the notable exception of the
USA have abolished the death penalty.

“I delight in my retirement and with that, I wish you adieu.”

Our stage of history is empty for but a moment. A woman wearing tiers of long skirts, a gilded bodice, blonde hair piled high around an attractive face, has entered. She does not resemble the drawing made by Jacques Louis David of her as the widow Capet on her way to her execution. Our guest is younger and still handsome. She speaks immediately, like one who has long waited to have her say.

“I am a Habsburg, one of the oldest dynasties of Europe. My mother, the much loved Maria Theresa, was archduchess of our sprawling Austrian lands and queen of Hungary. My father held the title of Holy Roman Emperor, a position more honorary than actual. Theirs was a perfect marriage, I never saw greater affection between two people. I was born in Vienna on November 2, 1755 and was christened Maria Antonia. As the youngest of ten siblings, yes, ten, I was spoiled by my governess and doted on by my loving parents. My early childhood was idyllic, I was petted, admired, protected, told that I was beautiful. Although my mother was personally involved in the governing of the realm and enacted many reforms, she was never too busy to supervise her children’s education. Alas, I was an indifferent student and she was not always happy with my lack of attention to my schoolwork. My tutors believed that I was quite intelligent, but too frivolous to work on my lessons. Looking back, I now realize that I was often stubborn, willful and spoiled. Perhaps the knowledge that I would be married to the future king of France and surely live happily ever after, distracted me from my studies. My marriage to the dauphin of France had been arranged as a diplomatic alliance between our countries.

“My childhood was over after my 14th birthday when I was sent to France to meet my future husband. We were married in 1770. My 15 year old groom was squarely built, awkward and shy. He was a good
man, though clearly not a fairy tale prince.

“We both were twenty when his grandfather, King Louis XV died and he became king. Unfortunately, he was never interested in affairs of state and so it was natural that he sought my advice. I always believed that royalty was a gift and a burden given by God, one that could not be abrogated because a king ruled by divine right and not the whim or wish of the masses. My honesty brought me only grief. But as a young bride I endured a different heartache. For seven years I did not become pregnant. As was customary, the blame for infertility fell on the woman. What people did not know, and certainly I could not make public, was that my husband had a medical condition called phimosis which prevented him from fathering children. All that was needed to rectify the problem was a minor operation, something akin to a circumcision. How I begged him ... but he was so fearful. When finally he had the surgery, I had no problem conceiving.

“During the early years of my marriage I often acted the silly teenager. I giggled when I should have been serious. It annoyed members of the court that I insisted on going out with just a few friends, enjoyed theatrical performances and rebelled against the ceremoniousness of the court. I refused to wear stays and corsets and rejected the elaborate dresses then fashionable. But as soon as I became a mother, I changed. Louis and I were devoted to our children and they were the center of our happiness.

“I did not realize at first that no matter how well I behaved, there was a group of nobles at Versailles who had opposed the Franco-Austrian alliance and disapproved of me per se. Their rebuke of my very existence filtered down to the populace and I became the lightning rod for all their discontent. Rumors were treated as truth and once they had spread, nothing could rectify their hurtful impressions. I was accused of adding to the financial woes of the nation, but, in
fact, I reduced the number of do-nothings at the court. I certainly
never made that stupid remark, ‘Let them eat cake.’ Such cruelty is
completely out of character for me but forever more I was identified
with that lie. Among other charges whispered behind my back was the
fiction that I had an enormous sexual appetite. Had I entertained but
half the lovers assigned to me, I would have been busy day and night.
Pamphleteers and cartoonists contributed to my unpopularity with
crude and malicious accusations that I could neither acknowledge nor
deny. To be called ‘Madam Deficit’, or the ‘The Austrian whore’ inful-
riated me and yet I had to smile sweetly.

“Most harmful to my reputation was an incident in which I had no
part at all, the diamond necklace affair. Whatever shred of good will
I still had, evaporated when I was falsely but oh, so cleverly implicat-
ed in this ludicrous business. The plot began with a contract negotiat-
ed by Louis XV, my husband’s grandfather and predecessor to the
throne. He wished to purchase an outrageously gaudy and expensive
necklace for his favorite mistress, Mme Du Barry. The piece, with its
647 brilliants and 2,800 carats of diamonds, was not delivered
because the king died before it was completed. The jeweler tried to
sell it to me but I was not interested in such ostentation. During the
summer of 1785 and for the next year this unclaimed piece of jewel-
ry became the center of a sensational drama involving a dissolute car-
dinal, a prostitute in a blonde wig, and a couple of adroit swindlers.

“The cardinal, Louis de Rohan, had become persona non grata at
Versailles and he was eager to be reinstated in our good graces. A
woman of questionable background who called herself Countess de la
Motte offered to help him. Claiming to be on friendly terms with me
(actually, I did not know her), she told de Rohan that for a fee she could
arrange a meeting between him and me. And, as far as the Cardinal
knew, such a rendezvous was fixed. Actually, the counterfeit countess
contrived to dupe the cardinal. I nearly choke on these words, but I will say them: She hired a prostitute to impersonate me. Dressed and wearing a blonde wig to resemble me, the street walker met with de Rohan at night in the garden at Versailles. She had been prompted to say one sentence only and disappear quickly. As she handed the cardinal a single rose, she said ‘You know what that means’.

“The Cardinal was mystified. La Motte, or whatever her real name was, was glad to interpret the cryptic message: The queen wants you to act as intermediary in purchasing the fabulous necklace. She even produced a letter (forged of course) to support this despicable lie. The Cardinal was delighted to do me a service. Believing that I would repay him, he acquired the necklace and handed it to the false Countess to deliver it to me. But, of course, that never happened. Her husband took it to London, where it was broken up and sold piecemeal.

“The jeweler had not been paid and now the whole preposterous plot became public. The police were called, arrests made, and a trial held. The duped Cardinal, the La Mottes, husband and wife, the hireling who played queen for one night, all were convicted. But I was the real casualty. The lawyers for the defendants fell over each other to blame me for the sordid episode. It was alleged that I concocted the whole scheme in order to avenge myself. For what? Incredibly, I was accused of making indecent advances to the Cardinal but he, that paragon of virtue, had rejected me. That, supposedly, had infuriated me and I plotted vengeance by concocting this theatrical performance.

“People believe what they wish, and they wished me guilty. My reputation was shattered. In the minds of my enemies, the step from schemer to traitor was a short one, and since justice was long dead, another victim of the Revolution, my fate was sealed.

“It was but a matter of time until the madness of the Terror reached the royal family. My husband and my poor, innocent children were
shifted from prison to prison. Each time we moved, the quarters got worse. When we were confined to the Temple, we were permitted to remain together and Louis and I could give some comfort to our daughter, Therese Charlotte and our boy, Louis Charles. After my husband so bravely met his destiny in the arms of Madame Guillotine, I was separated from the children. To intensify my misery, our son, who was often sick, was placed into a cell directly below mine. I could hear him coughing and weeping; I raged one moment, despaired in the next one, and prayed on my knees for God to end my misery in whatever way he saw fit.

“By the time my so-called trial was convened, I did not recognize myself when I passed by a glass. I had grown so old and haggard I wondered who was the crone looking back at me. I was 38 years old. My trial was a travesty. I was accused of sexual orgies, of teaching my son to masturbate, that I had treasonable correspondence with my Austrian family, and that I, a shrunken, white haired little woman, was some sort of animal that required speedy extermination. After the inevitable sentence, I returned to my cell, I wept and my hair was cropped. Someone asked me if I would be able to look upon the great blade of the guillotine with courage. I replied:

‘Courage! I have shown it for years; think you not I shall lose it when all my sufferings are to end?’

“My husband had been taken to his execution in a closed carriage, I hoped for the same. But no, I was driven through the streets in an open cart, a spectacle for the crowds in the streets. I regret that for a moment, for just a moment, my legs did tremble. The date was October 16, 1793. As I walked toward the wooden board that was to be my last resting place, I accidentally stepped on the executioner’s foot. With all the dignity I could muster, I begged his pardon and assured him that I did not do it on purpose.
“I died knowing that though the human race had lost its bearing, I, like so many others who suffered an undeserved fate, would be welcomed by the heavenly father and judged with righteousness and mercy.”

Without waiting to hear the applause, Marie has hurried from the stage. The theatre is dark but full of noise, cries, laughter, the sound of guns and thud of the blade of the guillotine. Pandemonium. Now images appear in flashes of light. For an instant we see scenes of the Convention at work destroying not only the Old Regime, but the very foundations of French culture. There flares a page from the newly devised calendar, men and women addressing one another as Citizen and Citizeness; a dazzling moment for the statue of the Goddess of Reason, trying to supplant the Christian faith. The Radicals are exiting the drama, Reaction is driving them out and let loose its own White Terror. Hungry children appear, hands outstretched, inflation has caused starvation among the city poor. A new government, the Directory, tries to cope with internal chaos and foreign enemies. The pictures before us grow dim and dissolve in seconds. But suddenly a beam is focused upon a single figure. His right hand rests between buttons of his vest, he is looking directly at us. Did he just wink an eye? M. Napoleon Bonaparte, I do believe you winked.