

Liberte, Egalite Et Veal Chops



— Arthur Hoppe

IT WAS the best of times. It was the worst of times. Throughout France in that uneasy year of 1789, the peasants and the bourgeoisie were rioting over the high cost of bread and meat.

"Let me make one thing perfectly clear," said the ill-fated Louis XVI. "If I thought for one moment that imposing price controls on food would work, I'd do it. For I've always believed, rightly or wrongly, in doing what's right — right for every Frenchman — no matter how many Frenchmen may criticize me for it, which is their right, rightly or wrongly. And that's my judgment on this."

The members of the King's court did their best to publicly support his stand on the issue.

"Let them," said Marie Antoinette, the chairman of his Council of Economic Advisers, "eat cheese."

When it was pointed out that cheese cost as much as meat, she frowned. "Let them," she said, "eat less. It's good for your figure."

Unfortunately, few wage earners could even afford to bring less home to cook in their kitchens. "Then let them," said Marie Antoinette brightly, "eat out."

"Maybe you should advise them to eat cake," said the King, helping himself to a petit-four.

"Don't be silly," said Marie Antoinette. "Cake's fattening."

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MEANWHILE, trouble loomed. The National Assembly met in an ugly mood, complained that the King was usurping its powers and demanded an investigation.

The King, citing the sacred doctrine of Executive Privilege, refused to cooperate.

"Le Coach et le Quarterback," he said in an historic statement, "c'est moi."

"Après vous," said the National Assembly with a shrug, "le deluge." And they announced they would arrest the King's courtiers and maybe even himself.

The turbulence increased. The price of gold soared. The Gnomes of Zurich bought the French louis for peanuts. Food costs rose out of sight.

On July 14, a Paris mob, incited by the cost of living index, stormed the Bastille Supermarket, shouting what was to become the stirring slogan of the Revolution: "Liberte, Egalite et Veal Chops!"

Royal troops sent to disperse the rioters were overcome by the rare sight of les bifteks free for the taking and refused to fire.

The Reign of Terror began. One by one the courtiers went to the guillotine — the Comte de Chapin, the Duke de Mitchell. As their heads fell, Madame La Trish sat grimly needlepointing the Royal Coat of Arms as a present, she said, "for Daddy."

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THE DEMOCRATS, led by the aging Hubert H. Robespierre and young Edward (Teddy) Danton, took over. And the ancien regime was not to be restored until the coronation of that grandson of a great general, King David Napoleon I, who had been looking for a job anyway.

At last it was King Louis XVI's turn. "I shall face this mob as I have always faced mobs," he said bravely. "I shall send a surrogate."

And so it was that Prince Spiro T. Agnew took the King's place in the tumbrel.

"'Tis a far better thing I do," he said, just before the blade fell, "than I have ever done before."