ON February 22, 1848, Richard Rush, the American 
Minister to the Court of the Tuileries, noted in his diary 
that he had just returned from a soirée at the Roche-
foucaulds'. The party was not large but very agreeable. There 
was some talk about a political "banquet" that had been organ-
ized to further the cause of electoral reform. The company 
present were not enthusiastic about these banquets, but there 
was nothing to be worried about. After all, only the middle class 
attended the banquets, and the proposed reforms would merely 
enfranchise another section of this middle class. Why should 
anyone be uneasy? If King Louis Philippe were known to be 
suffering from a cold there might be some cause for anxiety, but 
every diplomat in Paris knew that as long as the King was well 
there could be no serious disturbance. His health was the key to 
the political stability of Europe.

Forty-eight hours later the King and Queen had fled, the 
Tuileries had been completely gutted, the whole seemingly solid 
structure of government had crumbled to pieces, and such 
families as the Rochefoucaulds were probably wondering whether 
once again the mob would be lusting for their blood. Within a 
week Mr. Rush, acting on his own initiative — there was no 
transatlantic cable yet — had recognized the new Republic. 
Lord Normanby, the British Ambassador, thought that Mr. 
Rush had acted too hastily, but President Polk subsequently 
commended him for being the first ambassador to welcome 
France into the family of republics. What could be more gratify-
ing than the knowledge that Europe at last was following in the 
footsteps of the United States! Public opinion in America was 
convinced that Europe too was now to enjoy the blessings of 
liberty and justice. Resolutions were offered in the Senate and 
in the House tendering the congratulations of the Senate and the 
House to the French people. Among those who voted in favor 
of the resolutions were Jefferson Davis in the Senate, and 
Abraham Lincoln in the House. A monster meeting held in City 
Hall Park on April 3 to rejoice over the freedom of France was 
described by Bayard Taylor as "one of the most sublime meetings 
I ever beheld." Cheers were given for Pope Pius IX, for Lamar-
tine, for the Swiss and for Poland. “At seven o’clock the City Hall was illuminated on all sides except the north with 1,500 sperm candles — one to each pane of glass — and produced a most magnificent appearance.”

Meanwhile, some of the wreckage of the Revolution had drifted over to England. The first to arrive was Guizot, Louis Philippe’s prime minister. He was a man whose personal integrity nobody had ever questioned, but his indifference to the thoughts and aspirations of the working man, his placid assumption that political intelligence was only to be found among people of substantial wealth, had made him one of the most hated men in France. Guizot honestly believed that a constitutional monarchy in which the voters were limited to the aristocracy and the upper bourgeoisie represented the summit of enlightenment. Let the people sit back and enjoy their blessings. The government was maintaining order at home and peace abroad. The country was on the right track; the rich were growing richer, and eventually prosperity would seep down to the lowest stratum of society. Guizot had found “a little house close to London, at Brompton, which is almost in the country.” There he had settled down, imperturbable as ever, to write a constitutional history of England.

Within a few weeks Louis Philippe and his family were installed in a Surrey villa, while a certain Herr and Frau von Meyer, better known as Prince and Princess Metternich, were occupying rooms in a Hanover Square hotel. Nearby, staying with the Palmerstons, was the Prince of Prussia, a fugitive for the moment who had had to be smuggled out of the country. Twenty-three years later, Bismarck crowned him Emperor of Germany. The French royal princes and princesses had also fled the storm and found refuge in England. The last to arrive were the Prince de Joinville and the Duc d’Aumale, forced to abandon Algeria in the very hour of victory. History is full of dramatic reversals of fortune, but seldom have they been as abrupt as those of 1848.

The fall of Louis Philippe is all the more remarkable because in many ways he was a shrewd man, not a hero or a coward, but a good bourgeois who had apparently profited by the mistakes of his predecessors. During the last two years of his life — he died in 1850 — Louis Philippe was to spend much of his time explaining why during the critical days of February 1848 he had not acted
more heroically. The explanation was really quite simple. He could not bring himself to shed blood. What he did not explain, probably because he did not understand it himself, was that the very circumstances which made him politically merciful made him also politically unprincipled. At the end of his life his shrewdness gave way to obstinacy, but at no time in his 77 years was his conduct ever dictated by passionate conviction. His policy on all occasions, as a republican historian described it, was toute provisoire. His last two years were not unhappy. He lived quietly and unostentatiously, surrounded by his children and grandchildren. British visitors were impressed by his philosophic indifference to misfortune. As he stood up to carve the roast beef for dinner — he never surrendered that prerogative of the head of the family to anyone else — it must have been hard to realize that this big bourgeois père de famille, whom Daumier found so supremely ridiculous, had been a general before the world had ever heard of Napoleon. He had been a member of the Jacobin Club, he had shot rapids on the Ohio river, he had been a Swiss schoolmaster, a Twickenham taxpayer, and a king of the French people — not king of France. The distinction was an important one to the French mind. The title, “king of the French,” transferred the emphasis from the old territorial principle to the human element, thus paying a subtle tribute to the sovereignty of the people. On August 26, 1850, this “painful life voyage,” as Carlyle called it, was brought to an end by an attack of pleurisy. If he had set his sights a little higher he might have died in the Tuileries, but the code he lived by — chacun pour soi, chacun chez soi — represented everything that liberal Europe hated. Liberal Europe was bent on revolution, and Louis Philippe personified those characteristics of a conservative society — family solidarity, acquisitiveness and material prosperity — that every revolution is bound to destroy.

II

All over the Continent men were struggling to be free, but there was no agreement as to what freedom meant. In 1848 it was more than ever a chameleon word changing its color to suit the demands of those that used it. In France “freedom” meant universal suffrage, which in turn implied a republic that guaranteed a living wage to all workers. To the Prussian bourgeois, as Karl Marx said, this boasted freedom meant nothing more
than establishing exactly the sort of government that the French had just upset. In Bavaria it meant getting rid of a Scotch dancer who called herself Lola Montez and with whom King Ludwig was hopelessly infatuated. Royal mistresses do not necessarily make for revolution, but Lola’s demand for the removal of the University from Munich was more than even the good-natured Bavarians could tolerate. When finally Ludwig and Donna Maria de Dolores de los Montes were driven into exile, the church, the army and the nobility of Bavaria settled back to enjoy their freedom.

A Hungarian patriot like Kossuth felt there could be no genuine freedom in Europe until Hungary and Austria were recognized as separate entities, whereas Palacký, the intellectual pioneer of Czech rebirth, was convinced that only within a strong Austrian empire could the Slavs ever be free. If the Austrian Empire did not exist, it would be necessary to create it. An Italian in Milan thought he would enjoy perfect freedom as soon as the hated Austrians had been driven back across the mountains. An Italian in Rome was not disturbed by the presence of an Austrian garrison in Lombardy. For him freedom was a matter of hustling the new Pope, Pius IX, who believed in trusting the people as far as possible, into one concession after another until the temporal power of the papacy had been completely whittled away. An Italian in Palermo harbored no grievance against Austria or against the Papacy. The arch-enemy of the Sicilians was the Neapolitan Government, and more particularly King Ferdinand II who earned the name of “Bomba” for having ordered the bombardment of Messina, in those days an act of unheard-of cruelty.

Early in 1848 it looked as if the storm of revolution would engulf all Europe. From Sicily to the Baltic, rulers were tumbling over themselves in their hurry to grant the reforms demanded by their peoples. In every state existing ministers were jettisoned and more liberal ministers appointed. Except in Russia and in England, the two empires that flanked the Continent, it looked as if the peoples of Europe had got the bit in their teeth and were running away with their rulers. In Italy it was said to be raining constitutions. The spark kindled by Sicily spread through the peninsula at such a pace that within the course of 35 days four states—Naples, Tuscany, Piedmont and Rome—had all agreed to give the people the precious scrap of paper they were clamoring
“Everything is demanded of us,” wrote the distracted Duke Ernest of Saxe-Coburg, “even the establishment of perfect health and the gift of long life!” Young Benjamin Disraeli made a speech in the House of Commons about the “modern, new-fangled, sentimental principle of nationality” that was threatening one nation after another with civil war. There was a disturbing element of truth in what he said. Within the Austrian Empire, Poles and Hungarians, Croats and Italians, were striving to assert their right to a separate nationhood.

The word “self-determination” had not yet been coined, but the idea was already familiar, and men were beginning to wonder as they have been wondering ever since how far down the scale the principle of self-determination applies. If Hungary was to be allowed to break away from Austria, why should not Ireland break away from England, and supposing Hungary and Ireland were allowed to go in peace how could they in turn resist the demands for independence of their minorities—the Croats within Hungary, and the Ulstermen within Ireland? The Croat Diet refused to accept its abolition by Hungary and retorted by proclaiming the independence of Croatia from Budapest, just as 70 years later Ulster refused to accept the domination of Dublin. Russia’s answer to insurgent minorities was a definite, uncompromising “no.” There could be no permanent peace in the world unless great nations were kept intact. So it was that when America came to be threatened with disunion, Russia was the only Great Power in Europe that would have no truck with the Confederacy. Not that the Russian Government was inspired by any hatred of slavery or any admiration for the American Constitution, but the revolt of a province, secession—call it what you will—was a principle to be crushed whenever it raised its head.

Lord Palmerston’s answer to the cry of nationalism followed the traditional pattern of British foreign policy. His method was always to compromise, to grant popular demands while they were moderate so as not to be compelled to grant much more extreme demands later. Like the soft answer that turns away wrath, a constitution would turn away revolution. Palmerston’s policy was supported by the people of England because at a time when England was becoming the workshop of the world, and when her merchants were to be found in every country in Europe, it was natural that she should dread any policy that interfered
with trade abroad. It was for this reason that Palmerston, when he saw Metternich doing everything in his power, as he believed, to make revolution inevitable, set out to check him and to encourage those reforms in which he saw the only guarantee of a peaceful, prosperous Europe. Palmerston's highest ambition for Italy was that each one of the separate states should have two houses of Parliament and a free press. What he did not understand was that a proud people could never be permanently satisfied with merely administrative, or even political, reforms, that the very presence of Austrian garrisons in Italy prevented the growth of the liberal institutions he advocated. Mazzini's mystical faith in the regenerating power of nationality meant little more to him than it did to Metternich.

But there were other questions besides nationality that were troubling men's minds in this year of revolution. It was in 1848 that Karl Marx published his Communist Manifesto exhorting the workers of the world to unite. He told them that they had no country, that they were being exploited, that with the disappearance of classes within the nation the state of enmity between nations would come to an end, that they had a world to win and nothing to lose but their chains. It was in 1848 that Bakunin, the aristocratic Russian revolutionary, prophesied a Russian as well as an Austrian revolution and launched his project of a great Slav federation stretching from the Urals to the Adriatic. 1848 drove the Pope from the Vatican, and brought Garibaldi hurrying back from South America to fight for a free Italy — free not only from the foreigner but from the rule of priests. The shortlived Roman Republic set men wondering whether Catholicism would be swamped by nationalism, or whether the Holy See could denationalize itself and emerge, as it finally did, shorn of its temporal power but exercising a greater spiritual authority than ever before. It was in 1848 that France tried to solve the problem of unemployment by establishing national workshops, and that a seedy-looking adventurer with nothing to recommend him but the magic of the name Napoleon was elected President of France. During the years of revolution, 1848 and 1849, half a million emigrants from Europe poured into the United States. These newcomers were not political refugees but, for the most part, Irishmen driven from their country by hunger. In a country
like Ireland, where over half the population lived off potatoes, the failure of the potato crop was a catastrophe to which emigration or death seemed to be the only answers. Disraeli was hardly exaggerating when he said that "the mysterious but universal sickness of a single root changed the history of the world." In 1848 a Swiss emigrant discovered gold in California; an American army fought its way into Mexico City, thereby concluding a war that added a million square miles to the national territory. President Polk in his farewell address contrasted the anarchy in Europe with "the sublime moral spectacle presented to the world by our beloved country."

In England the Chartists presented a petition to the House of Commons demanding certain reforms which were regarded by the Government as preposterous, but all of which with the exception of annual parliaments have long since been adopted. The British Government, warned by events in France, had made extensive preparations, and the demonstration from which the Paris radicals expected great things turned out to be a fiasco. "Every gentleman in London," wrote Greville in his diary, "is become a constable ... it is either very sublime or very ridiculous." That determined apostle of progress, Lord Macaulay, contrasted the stability of England with the chaotic confusion of the rest of Europe, but even in England men wondered whether the monarchy would be able to ride out the storm. Though the Channel might be a barrier to an invading army it was no barrier to revolutionary doctrines. Radical members of the House of Commons were already protesting that "the Russells, Greys and other scions of great families monopolized every place to the exclusion of men of practical experience who would do the business of the country much better." Matthew Arnold thought that the hour of the hereditary peerage and immense properties had struck. Emerson gave it another five years.

In Austria the days of the Hapsburg empire seemed to be numbered, but the young Prince Francis Joseph who came to the throne in 1848 was still ruling the empire when he died in 1916. While the various races of the Austrian empire almost split apart, the separate states of Germany nearly came together. If King Frederick William IV of Prussia had not decided that he would rather be king by the grace of God than Emperor by the grace of democracy, the Germany invented by Bismarck might never have been born.
In 1848 there was still no such thing as Germany. The great shapeless area stretching across the middle of Europe included four kingdoms and innumerable duchies, grand duchies, and even republics. There was a German language spoken by 25,000,000 Germans; there was a German art and a German culture, but there was no such thing as a German flag or a German state. In the eyes of the law the three most brilliant men in Germany, Schopenhauer a citizen of Hamburg, Wagner a Saxon, and Heine a Jew from the Rhineland, had no more in common than an Englishman and a Turk. On May 18, a number of distinguished men gathered together in the old church of St. Paul in Frankfort to rectify this situation by binding the various German states into a nation. Never had any people elected such dignified representatives. There was only one laboring man among them, a Polish peasant from Silesia. All the rest were well educated men, most of them products of university education. There were 49 university professors, 57 professors and other teachers from higher schools, 157 judges, 118 civil servants, 66 lawyers, and a liberal sprinkling of Catholic priests, Protestant pastors, mayors, doctors, diplomats and librarians — all in all an imposing gathering, though perhaps too academic for the rough and tumble business of making a nation. "Too much of a university and not enough of a political stock exchange" was the terse comment of one German historian. Nevertheless for a moment it looked as if the long-standing disputes between the rulers themselves, and between the rulers and their peoples, would be melted away by the eloquence of these learned men. The spring of 1848 was indeed the Völkersfrühling, the people's springtime. The wise men at Frankfort would give the patient, hard-working Germans everything they wanted — their princes and their freedom, the little states and the great Fatherland, a benevolent Germany and elected representatives, a strong army and peace between nations, German unity without sacrificing German neighborliness, a democratic state with a crowned emperor at the head of it.

Why did these dreams never come true? Partly because the King of Prussia never overcame his terror of democracy. To him it was always a Jacobin thing born of the French Revolution. Partly, too, because the German people were, as indeed they still are, politically inept. They had been excluded from all participation in government for so long that political liberty
seemed to them a matter of philosophic speculation in which only the highly educated could indulge. Germany had its brilliant men in 1848, men of brains, generosity and eloquence, but unfortunately they were not statesmen. In Austria the counter-revolution produced a statesman in Prince Schwarzenberg who resuscitated the empire with amazing efficiency, but it was only for a moment, only for his lifetime. In Germany, Bismarck was still too young to play anything but a minor rôle. The 23-year-old Pomeranian squire watched the birth pangs of German democracy with undisguised contempt. Years later, he phrased that contempt in memorable words: “Not by speeches and resolutions of majorities are the great questions of the time decided — that was the mistake of 1848 and 1849 — but by blood and iron.”

The popular movement to unite Germany ended in the conviction that nothing could be accomplished by persuasion, that the give and take of democracy was a synonym for chattering inefficiency. That was the real tragedy of the revolution. Nothing remained but the idea of force, and this idea has remained at the helm of German history ever since. Many of the Forty-eighters, disillusioned with politics, withdrew into their laboratories, and served Germany by applying science to practical needs. Others, and among them men like Carl Schurz and Franz Sigel whom Germany could least afford to spare, emigrated to America and were lost to the Fatherland forever.

In France the abdication of Louis Philippe had left the road open for Louis Napoleon. Before the old King had smuggled himself out of the country the Prince was on his way to Paris, to the Assembly, to the Presidency and to the Empire. His arrival marked the beginning of a propaganda campaign that has served as a model for all the dictatorships of the twentieth century. Every trick of the trade was used — persuasion and intimidations, the simultaneous appeal to the noblest sentiments and the basest instincts, and a blaring publicity that kept the people whipped up to such a frenzy of excitement that the shrewdest peasant and the most cautious bourgeois were finally convinced that Napoleon was the only guarantee of security for the family or of safety for the state. Starting with no other assets than his name, no money and no influential friends, and not even possessed of that eloquence which counts for so much in French
political life, he built up a machine that crushed every attempt at opposition. The Napoleonic legend was given a slight twist to the left. As long as the mood of the Provisional Government was so definitely republican the regret for the past glories of the Empire had to be played down. Louis Napoleon cleverly emphasized the duties inherent in his name rather than the rights.

The success of the campaign amazed everyone. In the June elections to the Assembly 200,000 people voted for him. They had neither seen him nor heard him, but he was the symbol of what they thought they wanted. In one Department whole villages with the mayor at their head marched to the voting booth to the sound of the drum, shouting Vive l'Empereur! and À bas la République! Would he be allowed to take his seat, or would the Assembly invoke the law under which all Bonapartes were banished from France? Rather than cause a situation the Prince refused the honor that had been accorded him. The Government apparently resented his election. All right, he would remain in exile until he could return to France as an ordinary private citizen devoted to the welfare of his country. Re-elected in September by five constituencies, this time he took his seat, and read out a brief address affirming his devotion "to the defense of order and the strengthening of the Republic."

By the time the Presidential election was held, on December 10, it was obvious that France had succumbed once more to the magic of the Napoleonic name. Out of the 7,500,000 votes cast Louis Napoleon received 5,500,000. Lamartine — poet, orator, and leader in the Provisional Government — found himself much to his surprise at the bottom of the poll with a mere 17,000. What was to be the effect on France of the election of another Bonaparte? How far would his election satisfy them? It was the first time that the people had chosen their ruler. George Sand confessed that the prospect of universal suffrage bewildered her. She spoke of it in a letter to Mazzini much as we today might speak of the atomic bomb. It was a new force let loose in the world. Man had created something he was powerless to control. For one thing the election of Louis Napoleon represented the victory of equality over liberty. The instinct of liberty, which had been the driving force behind the Paris bourgeoisie as long as the vision of a republic beckoned to them, was suddenly thwarted. The instinct of equality with its implication of social revolution, which would affect not only the well-to-do but the
mass of people as well, swept everything before it. To the peasants and the working men of France democracy meant the abolition of privilege, and that was what Napoleonic rule promised. The fact that universal suffrage had inadvertently designated a candidate for the Empire instead of merely electing a President was not realized until 1851.

The history of France during the 10 months that elapsed between the fall of Louis Philippe and the election of Louis Napoleon can be interpreted in many ways. To the cynic it will appear that France had made a political somersault. By December 31, 1848, the situation was not so very different from what it had been on January 1. Louis Napoleon's first set of ministers were surprisingly like the ministers of Louis Philippe. No one of them had played any part in the setting up of the Provisional Government or in the founding of the Republic. The budget was no smaller, the army certainly no less powerful. There were more deputies in the Chamber and they were more noisy, but they exercised no more influence in the country than the Chamber of 1847. Louis Philippe, his children and grandchildren, had been bundled out of the Tuileries. Louis Napoleon had moved into the Elysée Palace. It was 33 years since his uncle had abdicated in this same palace in favor of the young King of Rome. Madame de Pompadour, Murat, Napoleon after the return from Elba, the Duke of Wellington, and the Tsar Alexander, had all lived there. Now it was to be his home, the official residence of the President of the Republic. As his eye wandered over those rooms so full of Napoleonic memories he must have contemplated his own achievement with a good deal of satisfaction. The campaign that had swept him into the Presidency had been no less skillfully planned, no less brilliantly executed, than the campaigns of Jena or Austerlitz. It still remained to be seen whether Frenchmen could take up any intermediate position between political torpor and revolutionary violence. In February, Baudelaire had welcomed the Revolution as offering him a chance to shoot his stepfather. The cynic might well wonder whether the mood he represented could ever be affected by a change in the political régime.

And yet there is another, less cynical and perhaps more plausible, interpretation of these crowded months. The Revolu-
tion of 1848 can not be dismissed as a mere flash in the pan. It produced solid results though these results were not immediately apparent. After 1848, in spite of their defeat on the barricades, the workers had acquired a new status in the community. Never again could a politician suggest that the men in the factories and the workshops should accept their lot with humble resignation. Heaven knows the Revolution of 1848 did not put an end to political corruption, but at least it did put an end to the idea that any administration could perpetuate itself by working exclusively through the meaner and more selfish impulses of mankind. Guizot had thought it absurd to maintain that all men should be allowed to exercise political rights. He believed that two or three hundred thousand big landowners and prosperous business men adequately represented the whole of France. That belief, honestly and tenaciously held, coupled with an indifference to social reform, precipitated a revolution. By a strange quirk of fortune the Republic that was born out of that revolution was destroyed by too blind a faith in the virtue of universal suffrage. The optimists of 1848, untouched by any hint of skepticism, never dreamed of the dangers latent in an enormous ignorant electorate. They believed that liberty and social justice could be conjured into being by winged words, by their idealization of France and French popular instincts. Later on they blundered into the opposite mistake. They persuaded themselves that dictatorships, because they sometimes abolish specific evils, can therefore create lasting good in their place.

The Frenchman's fear of a strong executive, against which de Gaulle is now battling, dates from 1848. The revolution did not succeed, any more than any subsequent revolution has succeeded, in reconciling liberty with order; but it did sound the death knell of the night-watchman theory of government, the notion that if a political régime maintained order it had done everything that could be expected of it. Those who believed that the fall of Louis Philippe marked the beginning of a new era were not entirely mistaken. The Revolution of 1848 was the first social revolution of the modern age. Never again could a government stand idly by while men worked 11 to 13 hours a day, and received for their toil often not more than five or six hundred francs a year. By the end of the year the forces of reaction were back in the saddle, but the working man had acquired an importance in the eyes of the politician that he has never since lost.