After several decades of research centering on the structural origins and outcomes of the French Revolution, historians began to turn to the question of the French Revolution as an event, a pivotal occurrence in its own right. Through impressive archival research, Tackett brings to life the first year of the French Revolution and, in the process, offers a new perspective on both the relationship between the old regime and Revolution and the development of a revolutionary psychology.

Drawing on a wealth of Parisian and provincial archival material, Tackett has amassed the most thorough data base on the deputies to the French National Assembly to date. His samples include the deputies' reading habits, publishing records, educational background, religious affiliation, age and previous political experience. From this information, he concludes that the men of 1789 were not impractical visionaries, as Tocqueville claimed; rather they were pragmatic individuals who could draw on a wide variety of experience in local institutions like town government, judicial courts, clerical assemblies, and chambers of commerce. According to Tackett, the abstract ideas of enlightened philosophes seem to have had little influence on the deputies political positions. Instead, Tackett argues that the impetus to adopt a revolutionary ideology arose from the deputies' prior political and social experiences.

Tackett also rightly takes issue with revisionist historians who argued that before the Revolution nobles and wealthy commoners were forming a plutocratic elite bound together by wealth and education. This position made it seem that the fighting between the privileged orders and Third Estate during the early Revolution was a mistake. Tackett shows that status conflict, not class conflict, was the underlying issue. From an economic viewpoint, non-noble deputies might be the equal of noble deputies. From the perspective of status, however, it was clear that there was an unbridgeable gulf between the nobles, who were determined to preserve their superiority, and members of the Third Estate, who bitterly resented a social system that perpetually relegated them to a position of inferiority. One of the central dynamics of the early Revolution was the non-nobles' deep-seated desire for revenge for the humiliating treatment they had suffered.

Despite a desire to reform government and curtail social abuses, most deputies could not be called revolutionary in 1789. Tackett argues that a revolutionary mindset developed during the course of events in response to group dynamics, the encouragement of Parisian crowds, and the obstinacy of the privileged orders. Tackett's approach to the study of revolutionary political culture is empirically grounded and pragmatic. Implicitly, he makes a strong case against the conservative, Burkean position, according to which the Revolution was inherently radical from the beginning, the product of fanatics bent upon destroying everything associated with the old regime. For Tackett, the early Revolution had a far more moderate flavor and its success a far more contingent quality. The momentum of the Revolution was constantly being called into doubt by the strength of conservatives, and continued revolutionary advance owed a great deal to the intervention of the crowd and superior tactical ability of the emerging Jacobin leadership. Sometimes the pressure of events forced deputies to adopt positions they did not really support. The dire fiscal crisis of 1789 made it imperative to seize church lands or face bankruptcy and destruction of all the Revolution had already achieved. Intense factionalism, furthermore, made compromise nearly impossible and hardened positions that might otherwise have been subject to arbitration.

All in all, Tackett's analysis is a refreshing alternative to analyses of revolutionary culture that have focused almost exclusively on symbolic and discursive practices. In Tackett's skillful hands, the reader sees a revolutionary political culture emerge from a combination of prior habits, structural problems, social conflict, instrumental decisions, and evolving circumstances. His book helps to make the Revolution comprehensible as an event constructed by human actors rather than a process dictated by preordained forces.