Name: _____ Date: _____

Directions: Read the passage below and answer the questions that follow on a separate piece of paper.

ROBESPIERRE: ARCHITECT OF TERROR

On July 27, 1794, Maximilien Robespierre, leader of France's Committee of Public Safety, was arrested by order of his political opponents. Together with other extremists, Robespierre was executed. His death ended the Reign of Terror that he had begun ten months before.

During this period, special courts ordered the execution of many thousands whom Robespierre and his associates considered "enemies of the republic." His victims included aristocrats, clergy, and ordinary people suspected of treason, even if no actual proof existed. At their trials, they were given no chance to defend themselves. Their deaths at the guillotine were public spectacles.

For Robespierre and other members of the 12-man Committee of Public Safety, the Reign of Terror was necessary. They believed they had to defend the gains made by the French Revolution by eliminating all those who might oppose or even criticize the National Convention. (It governed France during this stage of the revolution.) Today, the Reign of Terror is regarded as a grim chapter in French history, one dominated by fanatics and extremists.

Robespierre was a highly educated lawyer who joined the revolutionary government after a brilliant legal career. Elected to the Estates General in 1789, he became known as a skillful public speaker. His passionate protests against royal absolutism and his demands for reform of French government and society made many enemies. In 1792, Robespierre was elected by the citizens of Paris to head their delegation to the National Convention. He was also president of the Jacobin Club, the most extreme of the revolutionary groups. Execution of King Louis XVI and replacement of the monarchy with a republic were two of his strongest demands. Robespierre forced the Girondists to be expelled from the National Assembly. Moderates, they were attempting to save the life of the ex-king.

In July 1793, Robespierre became leader of the Committee of Public Safety. This enabled him to control the French government. It was a time of disorder in which the revolution was threatened by a range of military and financial problems. The committee rapidly put into effect policies that stabilized the economy. It began the formation of a successful army to oppose the foreign powers attacking the borders of France. Counterrevolutionary uprisings, especially in the south and west of the country, also had to be put down. This action began the Reign of Terror.

Robespierre would not tolerate disagreement with his policies. As the Terror claimed more victims and Robespierre's speeches became more aggressive, members of the National Convention began to fear for their lives. Both moderates and extremists formed a conspiracy to overthrow him. Robespierre was barred from speaking in the National Convention and was arrested in July 1794. After a rescue attempt by some of his Paris supporters failed, Robespierre attempted to commit suicide. Badly wounded, he and some of his followers were taken to the guillotine to which he had sent so many others.

Directions: On a separate piece of paper, in paragraph form.
Argue for or against the description of Robespierre as a dictator:
1) Why do you think many regard Robespierre as a great leader? Explain your answer in detail.
2) If you had lived in France in 1793 would you have supported Robespierre? Explain your answer in detail.