Absolutism and the “Ancien Régime”

-Key Concepts-
I. The Emergence of the Modern State

- Old Feudal Notion of the State
- The Modern Conception of the State
  -- “governed” and “those who govern”
II. A Definition of Absolutism

- The ruler as the embodiment of the state
  -- “L’état c’est moi” = “I am the state!”
- The Divine Right of Kings
III. The Tasks of the Absolutist State

- To Secure Obedience
- To Exert Control over Economic Life
- To Protect its Territory and the Expansion of its Claims
  --Louis XIV as military hero
- To Create a State Bureaucracy
III. The Tasks of the Absolutist State (con’t)

- To Enlist the Service of the Church
  -- “One King, One Law, One Faith”

- To Employ Culture to Exalt the State
  -- French Classicism
III. The Tasks of the Absolutist State (con’t)

- To Gain the Loyalty of the Nobility
  -- The Old Aristocracy with landed wealth
  -- The New Aristocracy with commercial ties

- Structured social inequality
IV. Creating a “Spectacle”

- To be seen was the supreme social duty of the nobility
- To shine at court was to keep the rest of the world at a distance
- The monarch created the spectacle, or theater, for this social drama
Louis XIV: The Sun King

- Reign from 1643 to 1715 remains longest by any monarch in European history
- Became king at the age of 4 (born in 1638)
- Louis XIV did not actually take control until 1661
Yes, he’s wearing heels!
VII. Versailles: A Model Palace of Baroque Absolutism

“You gaze, you stare, you try to understand that it is real, that it is on earth, that it is not the Garden of Eden”

--Mark Twain
Versailles Palace features . . .

- Baroque planning
- Conformity to the King’s will
- Geometry reigned supreme
The Grounds and Gardens

- The triumph of man over nature
- Acres and acres of formal gardens
- Massive canal and 1400 formal fountains
The King’s Chamber
The Hall of Mirrors

- 357 total mirrors
- Marble and bronze art
The Chapel

- Mass held at 12:30 p.m. each day
- The people worshipped the King while the King worshipped God
The Chapel (again)
“Versailles was more than a royal residence; it was a statement: its scale was meant to dwarf, stupefy, and intimidate Louis’s friends and enemies.”
Life at Versailles

- Tedious and extremely expensive
- Only those at Court had any influence with Louis XIV
An Imaginary World

- Versailles was the great theater upon which the drama of absolute power was staged.
- Ideas were treated as realities—the “make believe world” of the powerful and rich.
- Real people, real cities, and real problems were treated as if they were imaginary.