

# *“the liberty of the whole earth”*

## **Reading Set A: Jefferson and the French Revolution, 1789-1792**

**Introduction:** *These documents record Jefferson’s views on the French Revolution in its early years, including the end of his tenure as US Minister to France, which ended in September of 1789, the assault on the Bastille (July 1790), The Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen (August 1790), the proclamation of the French Republic (September, 1792), and execution of the royal family (January, 1793).*

**Directions:** Read the short background essay first, which provides historic context, then read the following documents and answer the questions which follow.

### **Document Section I**

**Document A1: 1789 August 3** (Jefferson to Diodati, offering his prediction of the course of the French Revolution)

Reflection will probably make them (French Revolutionaries) sensible that the security of all depends on the dependance of all on the national legislature. I have so much confidence in the good sense of man, and his qualifications for self-government, that I am never afraid of the issue where reason is left free to exert her force; and I will agree to be stoned as a false prophet if all does not end well in this country. Nor will it end with this country. Here is but the first chapter of the history of European liberty.

**Document A2: 1789 October 14** (Jefferson to Tom Paine, from England on his way back to America, offering his insight on the latest developments in Paris ,which included the issuance of the Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen in August, the fear of Parisians that the King would not sanction those rights and their storming the palace at Versailles and effectively imprisoning the royal family in Paris on the 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> of October).

. . . I have no news but what is given under that name in the English papers. You know how much of these I believe. So far I collect from them that the king, queen, and national assembly are removed to Paris. The mobs and murders under which they dress this fact are like the rags in which religion robes the true god.

**Document A3: 1790 April 4** (Jefferson to Lafayette) Our last news from Paris is of the 8th. of January. So far it seemed that your revolution had got along with a steady pace: meeting indeed occasional difficulties and dangers, but we are not to expect to be translated from despotism to liberty, in a feather-bed. I have never feared for the ultimate result. . . I have never feared for the ultimate result, tho’ I have feared for you personally. Indeed I hope you will never see such another 5th. and 6th. of October. Take care of yourself, my dear friend.

## Document Section II

**Document A4: 1791 February 4** (Jefferson to George Mason, commenting on the connection of the French Revolution to domestic events in the US and the world) I look with great anxiety for the firm establishment of the new government in France, being perfectly convinced that if it takes place there, it will spread sooner or later all over Europe. On the contrary a check there would retard the revival of liberty in other countries. I consider the establishment and success of their government as necessary to stay up our own and to prevent it from falling back to that kind of Halfway-house, the English constitution. It cannot be denied that we have among us a sect who believe that to contain whatever is perfect in human institutions; that the members of this sect have, many of them, names and offices which stand high in the estimation of our countrymen. I still rely that the great mass of our community is untainted with these heresies, as is it's head. On this I build my hope that we have not laboured in vain, and that our experiment will still prove that men can be governed by reason.

**Document A5: 1792 June 19** (Jefferson to Thomas Paine, who had written extensively in support of the French Revolution)

Would you believe it possible that in this country there should be high and important characters who need your lessons in republicanism, and who do not heed them? It is but too true that we have a sect preaching up and panting after an English constitution of king, lords, and commons, and whose heads are itching for crowns, coronets and mitres.

**Document A6: 1792 March 12** (Jefferson, Memoranda of Consultations with the President) Why indeed says he [Washington] I begin to doubt very much of the affairs of France. There are papers from London as late as the 10th. of Jan. which represent them as going into confusion.—He read over the letter he had signed, found there was not a word which could commit his judgment about the [new French] constitution, and gave it me back again.—This is one of many proofs I have had of his want of confidence in the event of the French revolution. The fact is that Gouverneur Morris [US minister to France], a high flying Monarchy-man, shutting his eyes and his faith to every fact against his wishes, and believing every thing he desires to be true, has kept the President's mind constantly poisoned with his forebodings. That the President wishes the revolution may be established I believe from several indications. I remember when I recd. the news of the king's flight and capture, I first told him of it at his assembly. I never saw him so much dejected by any event in my life.

**Document A7: 1792 June 16** (Jefferson to Lafayette) Behold you then, my dear friend, at the head of a great army, establishing the liberties of your country against a foreign enemy. May heaven favor your cause, and make you the channel thro' which it may pour it's favors. While you are exterminating the monster aristocracy, and pulling out the teeth and fangs of it's associate monarchy, a contrary tendency is discovered in some here. A sect has shewn itself among us, who declare they espoused our new constitution, not as a good and sufficient thing itself, but only as a step to an English constitution, the only thing good and sufficient in itself, in their eye. It is happy for us that these are preachers without followers, and that our people are firm and constant in their republican purity. You will wonder to be told that it is from the Eastward chiefly that these champions for a king, lords and commons come. They get some important associates from New York, and are puffed off by a tribe of Agioteurs [speculators] which have been hatched in a bed of corruption made up after the model of their beloved England. Too many of these stock jobbers and King-jobbers have come into our legislature, or rather too many of our legislature have become stock jobbers and king-jobbers. However the voice of the people is beginning to

make itself heard, and will probably cleanse their seats at the ensuing election.

### **Document Section III**

**Document A8: 1792 November 7 (The National Gazette,** Americans had just received the news about the “September Massacres” of that year, in which Parisian mobs seized the prison in which many aristocratic families were being held and executed over a 1000 trapped prisoners, including women and children. Here is how the newspaper **The National Gazette**, which promoted Jefferson’s view of the French Revolution, reported the news)

The great scene that has passed in the capital of France is a lesson worthy of the serious attention of every monarch in Europe. It is sickening to hear our prostituted prints call the French barbarous and inhuman; because when justly incensed they have made examples of two or three thousand scoundrels, to rescue the liberties of millions of honest men. . .

**Document A9: 1793 January 3** (Jefferson to William Short, commenting on the latter’s negative reports from Paris about the executions of the royal family and other aristocrats)

The Jacobins (as since called) yielded to the Feuillants and tried the experiment of retaining their hereditary Executive. The experiment failed completely, and would have brought on the reestablishment of despotism had it been pursued. The Jacobins saw this, and that the expunging that officer was of absolute necessity, and the Nation was with them in opinion, for however they might have been formerly for the constitution framed by the first assembly, they were come over from their hope in it, and were now generally Jacobins. In the struggle which was necessary, many guilty persons fell without the forms of trial, and with them some innocent. These I deplore as much as any body, and shall deplore some of them to the day of my death. But I deplore them as I should have done had they fallen in battle. It was necessary to use the arm of the people, a machine not quite so blind as balls and bombs, but blind to a certain degree. A few of their cordial friends met at their hands the fate of enemies. But time and truth will rescue and embalm their memories, while their posterity will be enjoying that very liberty for which they would never have hesitated to offer up their lives. The liberty of the whole earth was depending on the issue of the contest, and was ever such a prize won with so little innocent blood? My own affections have been deeply wounded by some of the martyrs to this cause, but rather than it should have failed, I would have seen half the earth desolated. Were there but an Adam and an Eve left in every country, and left free, it would be better than as it now is.

**Document A10: 1793 March 18** (Jefferson to Joseph Fay)

We have just received here the news of the decapitation of the king of France. Should the present ferment in Europe not produce republics every where, it will at least soften the monarchical governments by rendering monarchs amenable to punishment like other criminals, and doing away that aegis of insolence and oppression, the inviolability of the king’s person. We I hope shall adhere to our republican government, and keep it to it’s original principles by narrowly watching it. I am with great & sincere affection Dear Sir your friend & servt

## DOCUMENT QUESTIONS:

### Document Section I

1. As the French Revolution begins in 1789, how does Jefferson assume it will proceed, based on his letter to Diodati?
2. In his letter to Thomas Paine, Jefferson writes, “The mobs and murders under which they dress this fact are like the rags in which religion robes the true god.” What do think Jefferson meant by that? What to him is “the true god”?
3. In his letter to Lafayette in 1790, what does Jefferson mean by “we are not to expect to be translated from despotism to liberty, in a feather-bed”? How does that compare to his prediction of the course of the revolution in the Diodati letter (Doc A1)?

### Document Section II

4. How does Jefferson interpret the stakes of the French Revolution in these documents?
5. How has the revolution in France shaped his thinking about American politics?
6. To what extent does Jefferson seem to think that he is actively involved in the same struggle for freedom and rights as are the French revolutionaries? Explain.

### Document Section III

7. Many Americans were shocked by the violent turn of the French Revolution in September, 1792, and especially by the execution of the royal family in January, 1793. How does Jefferson (and Jeffersonians, in the case of **The National Gazette**) react to news of the violence?
8. What does Jefferson seem to think about the relationship between the struggle for human freedom and the use of violence to achieve it?

### Summative Questions

9. Does Jefferson’s interpretation of the French Revolution seem to change over time? Explain.
10. Cite examples of religious language that Jefferson uses to describe the struggle the French are engaged in. What does the use of this language tell about how Jefferson interpreted the significance of the French Revolution?
11. Do you agree with Jefferson’s views about the relationship between violence and the struggle for human freedom? Should the United States support violent uprisings to gain freedom (such as several countries during the Arab Spring revolutions), or should the United States seek to discourage such violence and promote alternative means for reforms?

12. Based on these documents, to what extent did Jefferson live up to his view of himself as a champion of the freedom and equal rights of man around the world and his right to revolution?