

# *“the liberty of the whole earth”*

## **Reading Set B: Jefferson and the French Revolution, 1793-1796.**

**Introduction:** *These documents record Jefferson's views from the beginning of the wars between Republican France and Austria, Prussia, the Netherlands and Great Britain (which lasted until 1799), through the radicalization of the Revolution with the rise of Maximilien Robespierre and the Jacobins, and the Reign of Terror, during which between 16,000 and 40,000 were killed.*

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

### **Document Section I**

**Document B1: 1793 May 5** (Jefferson to James Monroe; In 1793 Republican France pre-emptively attacked Austria, resulting in wars with several monarchical nations including Austria, Prussia, Great Britain and the Netherlands. President George Washington declared a US policy of neutrality despite the Franco-American treaty of 1778. As Secretary of State, Jefferson was charged with implementing that policy. This letter to James Monroe shows Jefferson's personal view of the stakes of the European wars and his interpretation of the neutrality policy)

The war between France and England seems to be producing an effect not contemplated. All the old spirit of 1776. is rekindling. The newspapers from Boston to Charleston prove this; and even the Monocrat papers are obliged to publish the most furious Philippics against England. A French frigate took a British prize off the capes of Delaware the other day and sent her up here. Upon her coming into sight thousands and thousands of the yeomanry of the city crowded and covered the wharfs. Never before was such a crowd seen there, and when the British colours were seen reversed, and the French flying above them they burst into peals of exultation. I wish we may be able to repress the spirit of the people within the limits of a fair neutrality.—In the mean time H. [Alexander Hamilton] is panick struck if we refuse our breach to every kick which G. Brit. may chuse to give it. He is for proclaiming at once the most abject principles, such as would invite and merit habitual insults. And indeed every inch of ground must be fought in our councils to desperation in order to hold up the face of even a sneaking neutrality, for our votes are generally 2½ against 1½.

**Document B2: 1793 May 13** (Secretary of the Treasury Alexander Hamilton letter intended for newspaper publication concerning the arrival of Edmond Charles Genet, Minister Plenipotentiary from France. In it, Hamilton characterizes what he sees as the difference between the American and French Revolutions)

The cause of France is compared with that of America during its late revolution. Would to Heaven that the comparison were just. Would to heaven that we could discern in the Mirror of French affairs, the same humanity, the same decorum the same gravity, the same order, the same dignity, the same

solemnity, which distinguished the course of the American Revolution. Clouds & Darkness would not then rest upon the issue as they now do.

I own, I do not like the comparison. When I contemplate the horrid and systematic massacres of the 2d. & 3d. of September—When I observe that a Marat and a Robespierre, the notorious prompters of those bloody scenes—sit triumphantly in the Convention and take a conspicuous part in its measures—that an attempt to bring the assassins to justice has been obliged to be abandoned—When I see an unfortunate Prince, whose reign was a continued demonstration of the goodness & benevolence of his heart, of his attachment to the people, of whom he was the Monarch—who though educated in the lap of despotism, had given repeated proofs, that he was not the enemy of liberty—brought precipitately and ignominiously to the block,—without any substantial proof of guilt, as yet disclosed—without even an authentic exhibition of motives, in decent regard to the opinions of mankind—When I find the doctrines of Atheism openly advanced in the Convention and heard with loud applauses—When I see the sword of fanaticism extended to force a political creed upon citizens who were invited to submit to the arms of France as the hargingers of Liberty—When I behold the hand of Rapacity outstretched to prostrate and ravish the monuments of religious worship erected by those citizens and their ancestors. When I perceive passion tumult and violence usurping those seats, where reason and cool deliberation ought to preside—I acknowledge, that I am glad to believe, there is no real resemblance between what was the cause of America & what is the cause of France—that the difference is Dno less great than that between Liberty & Licentiousness. I regret whatever has a tendency to confound them, and I feel anxious, as an American, that the ebullitions of inconsiderate men among us may not tend to involve our Reputation in the issue.

## Document Section II

**Document B3: 1793 July 23** (Jefferson, Notes on a Cabinet Meeting on French Minister Charles Edmond Genet, who aggressively recruited American support France among Americans despite the US policy of neutrality. In these minutes of a meeting of President Washington's cabinet, Jefferson records Alexander Hamilton's opinion of the domestic stakes involved in the conflict between those who supported Minister Genet's efforts to enlist the United States as an ally of France in July 1793).

The Presidt. mentioned that we must shortly determine what was to be done with Mr. Genet, that in his own opinion his whole correspondence should be sent to G. Morr' (American minister to France Gouvenour Morris) with a temperate but strong representation of his conduct, drawing a clear line between him and his nation, expressing our friendship to the latter, but insisting on the recall of Genet, and in the mean time that we should desire him either to withdraw or cease his functions. Hamilton hereon made a long speech exhorting the Presidt. to firmness, representing that we were now in a crisis whereon the continuance of the [U.S] government or it's overthrow by a faction depended, that we were still in time to give the tone to the public mind by laying the whole proceedings before them, and that this should be done in addition to what he had proposed. That as yet the great body of the people could be kept on the right side by proper explanations, but that if we let the incendiaries go on, they would soon have taken side with them.

*(Supporters and opponents of the French Revolution sponsored a propaganda war to win over public opinion in the form of highly partisan newspapers. The Federalists published their views in **The Gazette of the United States**, edited by John Fenno, while Thomas Jefferson recruited Philip Freneau to*

*rebut those views. Below are two excerpts which reflect Jefferson's role in the propaganda campaign. In the first document, Jefferson comments on Washington's request that he fire Freneau, whom Jefferson had hired as a translator in the State Department. A few months later, Secretary of War Henry Knox showed President Washington a recent copy of Freneau's **The National Gazette**. Jefferson recorded Washington's response.)*

**Document B4: 1793 May 23** (Jefferson, Notes on a Conversation with George Washington,) He [Washington] adverted to a piece [*sic*] in Freneau's paper of yesterday, he said he despised all their attacks on him personally, but that there never had been an act of the government, not meaning in the Executive line only, but in any line which that paper had not abused. . . He was evidently sore and warm, and I took his intention to be that I should interpose in some way with Freneau, perhaps withdraw his appointment of translating clerk to my office, but I will not do it: his paper has saved our constitution which was galloping fast into monarchy, and has been checked by no one means so powerfully as by that paper. It is well and universally known that it has been that paper which has checked the career of the Monocrats, and the President, not sensible of the designs of the party, has not with his usual good sense, and sang froid, looked on the efforts and effects of this free press, and seen that tho some bad things had passed thro' it to the public, yet the good had preponderated immensely.

**Document B5: 1793 August 2** (Jefferson, Notes on a Cabinet Meeting On Edmond Charles Genet): Knox in a foolish incoherent sort of a speech introduced the Pasquinade lately printed [a satirical cartoon], called the funeral of George W—n and James W—n, king and judge &c. where the President was placed on a Guillotin. The Presidt. was much inflamed, got into one of those passions when he cannot command himself. Run on much on the personal abuse which had been bestowed on him. Defied any man on earth to produce one single act of his since he had been in the government which was not done on the purest motives. That he had never repented but once the having slipped the moment of resigning his office, and that was every moment since. That by god he had rather be in his grave than in his present situation. That he had rather be on his farm than to be made emperor of the world and yet that they were charging him with wanting to be a king. That that rascal Freneau sent him 3. of his papers every day, as if he thought he would become the distributor of his papers, that he could see in this nothing but an impudent design to insult him. He ended in this high tone.

### Document Section III

**Document B6: 1794 May 1** (Jefferson to Tench Coxe, regarding the continuing war between Republican France and her European foes) Your letters give a comfortable view of French affairs, and later events seem to confirm it. Over the foreign powers I am convinced they will triumph completely, and I cannot but hope that that triumph and the consequent disgrace of the invading tyrants is destined in the order of events to kindle the wrath of the people of Europe against those who have dared to embroil them in such wickedness, and to bring at length kings, nobles and priests to the scaffolds which they have been so long deluging with human blood.

**Document B7: 1795 June 1** (Jefferson to Tench Coxe)

This ball of liberty, I believe most piously, is now so well in motion that it will roll round the globe. At least the enlightened part of it, for light and liberty go together. It is our glory that we first put it into motion, and our happiness that being foremost we had no bad examples to follow. What a tremendous obstacle to the future attempts at liberty will be the atrocities of Robespierre!

**Document B8: 1796 December 31** (Pierre-Auguste Adet, French minister to the United States, to the Foreign Ministry in Paris)

I don't know whether, as people told me, we shall find in him a man entirely devoted to our interest. Mr. Jefferson likes us, because he detests England: he tries to be on good terms with us because he is less afraid of us than of Great Britain: but he would perhaps change his feelings towards us, if tomorrow Great Britain ceased to frighten him. Jefferson, although a friend of liberty and fairness, although an admirer of the efforts which we have made to break our chains and dissipate the cloud of ignorance which weighs down on the human race—Jefferson, I say is American and, as such he cannot sincerely be our friend. An American is the enemy of all the European Peoples.

## DOCUMENT QUESTIONS:

### Document Section I

1. Based on the letter to James Monroe in 1793, how does Jefferson seem to apply the United States' neutrality policy regarding France and its enemies? Who are the "monocrats" and why does Jefferson deplore them? What does the phrase "And indeed every inch of ground must be fought in our councils to desperation" imply about Jefferson's views of his role in France's wars?
2. How does Secretary of the Treasury characterize the differences between the American and French Revolutions? What does he mean when says that "the difference is no less great than that between Liberty & Licentiousness"?

### Document Section II

3. In Jefferson's Notes on a Cabinet Meeting on French Minister Genet (July, 1793), he writes, "Hamilton hereon made a long speech exhorting the Presidt. to firmness, representing that we were now in a crisis whereon the continuance of the [U.S] government or it's overthrow by a faction depended." What do you think Hamilton meant by that? What was this "faction"? Using your knowledge of the political disputes of the 1790s, why would Hamilton think this faction was threatening the overthrow of the US government?
4. What do the two excerpts of Jefferson's description of Washington's reaction to newspaper propaganda suggest about how Jefferson has applied the struggle of the French Revolution to the United States? What does Jefferson seem to see as his role in that struggle? Given that Jefferson was a member of Washington's administration at the time and also the chief sponsor of the anti-government propaganda, do you approve of Jefferson's behavior? Explain.

### Document Section III

5. By the middle of 1794, Jefferson's comments in his letters about the French Revolution and its ongoing European wars diminishes greatly. Why might that have been?

6. What does Jefferson mean when he says, “What a tremendous obstacle to the future attempts at liberty will be the atrocities of Robespierre!”? How might this represent a shift in Jefferson’s attitude about the French Revolution? How might that sentiment explain Jefferson’s relative silence about France after 1795?

7. What’s French Minister Adet’s judgment about the role Jefferson has played as a friend of France? Why might he take that attitude?

### **Summative Questions**

8. Why do Jefferson and Hamilton seem to think the French Revolution was important for the future of the United States?

9. Does Jefferson seem to be genuinely interested in the plight of the French people, or only in his views of the ideas that they struggled for? Explain.

10. Considering evidence in the documents and in your knowledge of US foreign policy of the 1790s, what kinds of actions did Jefferson take to support France? In your opinion, were those actions appropriate? Should he have done more or less to support the French? Explain.

11. Based on these documents, was 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?