

“the liberty of the whole earth”

Reading Set D: Jefferson and the Rebellion in Saint-Domingue/Haiti 1799-1806

Introduction: *These documents reflect Jefferson’s views toward the slave rebellion in Saint-Domingue after Napoleon Bonaparte came to power in France. Napoleon planned to re-establish French power in the Caribbean, which would begin with wresting control over Saint-Domingue from Toussaint L’Ouverture, and possibly re-establishing slavery there. The Adams administration tried to undermine these French efforts by formalizing trade relations with L’Ouverture’s government, providing him with much needed supplies. Under President Jefferson, these tentative overtures to Saint-Domingue came to an end. Despite that, black forces on Saint-Domingue defeated the French and declared the Republic of Haiti (meaning “home” in the Arawak language of the original inhabitants of the island) in 1804.*

(NOTE: Jefferson and other Americans refer to Saint-Domingue at times as St. Domingo.)

Directions: Read the following documents and answer the questions which follow.

The outbreak of the Quasi-War with France in 1798 led Congress to ban all trade with the French empire. Toussaint-Louverture, desperate for supplies to consolidate the independence of his fledgling government, proposed to ban French privateers preying on American commerce from using ports in Saint-Domingue in exchange for the re-opening of trade with the United States. The Adams administration welcomed this proposal and the provision, known as “Toussaint’s Clause,” stirred fierce debate in Congress.

Document D1: 1799 January 23. (Jefferson to James Monroe). A clause in a bill now under debate for opening commerce with Toussaint and his black subjects now in open rebellion against France, will be a circumstance of high aggravation to that country, and in addition to our cruising round their islands will put their patience to a great proof. One fortunate circumstance is that, annihilated as they [the French] are on the ocean, they cannot get at us for some time, and this will give room for the popular sentiment to correct the imprudence.

Document D2: 1799 February 5. (Jefferson to James Madison). An attack is made on what is called the Toussaint’s clause, the object of which, as is charged by the one party and admitted by the other, is to facilitate the separation of the island from France...Rigaud, at the head of the people of colour, maintains his allegiance [to France]. But they are only twenty-five thousand souls, against five hundred thousand, the number of blacks. The treaty made with them by Maitland* is (if they are to be separated from France) the best thing for us.

*British General Thomas Maitland proposed that the United States agree to a blockade of all trade with Saint-Domingue, in order to undermine L’Ouverture’s government, and prevent France from taking it

back. Britain hoped to topple L'Ouverture, seize Saint-Domingue as its colony, with slavery re-established.

Document D3: 1799 February 11 (Jefferson to Aaron Burr) The Southern states do not discover the same care however in the bill authorising the President to admit Toussaint's subjects to a free commerce with them, & free ingress & intercourse with their black brethren in these states. however if they are guarded against the Cannibals of the terrible republic, they ought not to object to being eaten by a more civilized enemy.

Document D4: 1799 February 12. (Jefferson to James Madison). The bill continuing the suspension of intercourse with France and her dependencies has passed both houses, but the Senate struck out the clauses permitting the President to extend it to other powers. Toussaint's clause was retained. Even South Carolinians in the H. of R. voted for it. We may expect therefore black crews, and supercargoes and missionaries thence into the southern states; and when that leven begins to work, I would gladly compound with a great part of our northern country, if they would honestly stand neuter. If this combustion can be introduced among us under any veil whatever, we have to fear it.

Document D5: 1799 May 5 (Federalist Secretary of State Timothy Pickering to William Smith). He [Toussaint] is a prudent and judicious man possessing the general confidence of people of all colours. . . Nothing is more clear than if left to themselves that the Blacks of St. Domingo will be incomparably less dangerous than if they remain the subjects of France. . .France with an army of those Black troops might conquer all the British isles [in the Caribbean] and put in jeopardy our southern states.

As president in 1801, Jefferson suspended the official relations with Toussaint-Louverture's government by sending a minister without the proper accreditation and denying him any diplomatic powers.

Document D6: 1801 August 22 (Jefferson to James Madison) Toussaint's offence* at our sending no letters of credence with mr Lear [Jefferson's diplomatic appointee to Saint-Domingue] is not regular, such letters are never sent with a Consul, nor to a subordinate officer. The latter point, I doubt not, is that of the offence.

***Toussaint's Offence:** The July 1801 constitution for Saint-Domingue made Toussaint-Louverture governor for life. When Tobias Lear arrived on the island that month, Toussaint initially refused to look at Lear's commission as U.S. commercial agent instead of "minister plenipotentiary." Taking offense that Jefferson had not formally addressed him as head of state, Toussaint said "that his Colour was the cause of his being neglected, and not thought worthy of the Usual attentions."

Finally at peace with Britain, Napoleon Bonaparte now made plans to re-conquer Saint-Domingue and (perhaps) re-establish slavery there. The French minister to the US sought the Jefferson administration's opinion of this military endeavor.

Document D7: 1801 July 22 (French Minister to the United States Louis Pichon to French Foreign Minister Talleyrand, reporting on a conversation he had with President Jefferson) [Jefferson said that] "nothing would be easier than to furnish your army and fleet with everything, and to reduce Toussaint to starvation."

By 1804, Napoleon's military adventure in the Caribbean was at an end, crushed by disease and the military resistance of black armies. He had also concluded that he had no use for Louisiana, which he sold to the United States in 1803. Thus, by 1804, French power in the hemisphere was insignificant, and the victorious black forces in Saint-Domingue had declared the independent Republic of Haiti.

Document D8: 1804 October 31 (John Quincy Adams *Memoirs, Vol I, 314*) The President conversed with me. . respecting the trade carried on by some of the merchants with the blacks at St. Domingo. This he appears determined to suppress, and I presume a law will pass for the purpose at the approaching session.

In December of 1805, at the behest of the Jefferson Administration, Senator George Logan of Pennsylvania introduced a bill to ban all trade with Haiti which would in effect end all United States contact with the Black republic.

Document D9: 1805 December 20 (Senator George Logan of Pennsylvania, speech in Congress) Whilst we are anxious to have our own national rights respected, is it honorable to violate the rights of a friendly Power [France] with whom we are at peace? or is it sound policy to cherish the black population of St. Domingo whilst we have a similar population in our Southern States?

After much debate both houses of Congress approved the trade embargo of Haiti, with all Federalists (northern and southern) voting no and Republicans voting yes. Here is how the Federalist senator from New Hampshire William Plumer explained the vote.

Document D10: 1806 (Senator William Plumer's *Memorandum, 435.*) Several of the Senators from the southern States declared that almost the only reason that reconciled them to the bill was the fatal influence that the independence of the Haytians would have on their own slaves.

Document D11: 1806 February 24 (Rep. Joseph Nicholson of Maryland, a Democratic-Republican, speaking on the Haitian embargo bill, *Annals of Congress, 9th Congress, 1st Session, 498.*)

If we are sincere in our declarations, let us make the bill so strong that the intercourse will be stopped. If we are inclined to favor the revolt of the blacks in St. Domingo, let us make the bill such that it cannot stop the intercourse. If we are enemies of the revolters, let us make the provisions of the bill such as that they cannot be eluded, as that the intercourse will be effectually stopped.

Document D12: 1806 February 28 (President Thomas Jefferson signed Haitian Embargo Bill)

An Act to suspend the commercial intercourse between the United States, and certain parts of the island of St. Domingo

Section 1. Be it enacted by the Senate and House of Representatives of the United States of America, in Congress assembled, that all commercial intercourse between any person or persons resident in the United States, and any person or persons resident within any part of the island of St. Domingo not in possession, and under the government of France, shall be, and is hereby, prohibited.

DOCUMENT QUESTIONS:

1. Based on the first two letter excerpts (doc D1 and D2), what does Jefferson think of Adams' policy of opening trade with Saint-Domingue? What seem to be his reasons for that position? What do you think is guiding his policy decisions?
2. What does Jefferson's letters to Aaron Burr (doc D3) and James Madison (doc D4) reveal about why Jefferson opposed "Toussaint's Clause"? What does the reference to "Cannibals of the terrible republic" tell about Jefferson's views of Toussaint L'Ouverture and his supporters?
3. What does Secretary Pickering's letter (doc D5) suggest about Federalists' motives in wanting to establish trade with L'Ouverture's government? How do his views about the free black leaders of Saint-Domingue compare to Jefferson's? What do you think accounts for the difference?
4. Why do you think President Jefferson failed to send a minister to Saint-Domingue without the proper credentials, and why did Toussaint L'Ouverture take offense?
5. What does President Jefferson seem to be suggesting to the French Minister about US actions if Napoleon launched a military invasion of Saint-Domingue? Using your knowledge of this period (refer to your text if necessary), what did President Jefferson actually do to fulfill his promises? What might account for that?
6. What do John Quincy Adams' comment (doc D8) and the law signed by Jefferson (doc D12) in February, 1806 suggest about Jefferson's policy toward Haiti after it was declared a republic in 1804?
7. According to the comments of the two senators and on congressman (docs D9, D10 and D11), what were the reasons the Jefferson administration pursued this policy?

Summative Questions

8. How would you describe Jefferson's policy toward Saint-Domingue/Haiti over these years? Are they consistent or do they change? Explain.
9. What seems to have been Jefferson's primary concern in formulating his attitudes towards events in Saint-Domingue?
10. In the event of similar popular revolutions like this around the world, what do you think the United States' policy should be? Would you support Jefferson's policy? Explain.
11. 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?