

# Thomas Jefferson on the French and Haitian Revolutions, 1792

## Introduction

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When Thomas Jefferson wrote this letter to the Marquis de Lafayette, three revolutions—the American, French, and Haitian—occupied the minds of these two renowned leaders. While the American Revolution had been won nearly a decade earlier, the US Constitution had been in effect for only three years and the survival of the United States as a republic remained in doubt.

The French Revolution had been in progress for three years and Jefferson congratulated Lafayette on “exterminating the monster aristocracy, & pulling out the teeth & fangs of it’s associate monarchy.” But the radical Jacobins were becoming increasingly violent and unstable. Two months after this letter was written, King Louis XVI would be deposed and Lafayette would be imprisoned.

Closer to home for Jefferson, slaves in the French colony of Saint-Domingue (Haiti) had violently overthrown the plantation system, slave holders, and the government. In the letter Jefferson, as secretary of state, inquired about the policies of France’s new rulers toward the French colonists and the revolutionaries.

What are you doing for your colonies? They will be lost if not more effectually succoured. Indeed no future efforts you can make will ever be able to reduce the blacks. All that can be done in my opinion will be to compound with them as has been done formerly in Jamaica.

## Questions for Discussion

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Read the introduction, view the image, and read the transcript of Jefferson’s letter. Then apply your knowledge of American and world history as well as the contents of the letter to answer the following questions:

1. Why did Thomas Jefferson congratulate the Marquis de Lafayette regarding the revolution in France?
2. Explain Jefferson’s very serious concerns about the slave revolt in Saint-Domingue (Haiti).
3. How did Jefferson suggest minimizing or reversing the effects of the Haitian slave revolt?
4. Select specific passages in Jefferson’s letter to Lafayette and in the Declaration of Independence to develop an argument about Jefferson’s commitment to equality.

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## Image

Philadelphia June 16. 1792.

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, & pulling out the teeth & 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 & sufficient thing itself, but only as a step to an English constitution, the only thing good & sufficient in itself, in their eye. it is happy for us that these are preachers without followers, and that our people are firm & 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 & commons come. they get some important associates from New York, and are puff'd off by a tribe of Agitateurs who have been hatched in a bed of corruption made up after the model of their beloved England. too many of these stock jobbers & king-jobbers have come into our legislature, or rather too many of our legislature have become stock jobbers & king-jobbers. however the voice of the people is

M. de la Fayette

Thomas Jefferson to Marquis de Lafayette, June 16, 1792, page 1. (The Gilder Lehrman Institute, GLC08063)

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is beginning to make itself heard, and will probably cleanse their seats at the ensuing election. — The machinations of our old enemies are such as to keep us still at bay with our Indian neighbors. — What are you doing for your colonies? they will be lost if not more effectually succoured. indeed ~~nothing~~ no future efforts you can make will ever be able to reduce the blacks. all that can be done in my opinion will be to compound with them as has been done formerly in Jamaica. we have been less zealous in aiding them, lest your government should feel any jealousy on our account. but in truth we as sincerely wish their restoration, and their connection with you, as you do yourselves. we are satisfied that neither your justice nor their distresses will ever again ~~be~~ permit ~~them~~ them being forced to seek at dear & distant markets those first necessities of life which they may have at cheaper markets placed by nature at their door, & formed by her for their support: — What is become of M<sup>de</sup> de Tefoy and M<sup>de</sup> de Sott? I have not heard of them since they went to Switzerland. I think they would have done better to have come & reposed under the Poplars of Virginia, pour into their bosoms the warmest effusions of my friendship & tell them they will be warm and constant unto death. accept of them also for M<sup>de</sup> de La Fayette & your dear children — but I am forgetting that you are in the fields of war, & they I hope in those of peace. ~~that~~ Adieu my dear friend! God bless you all. yours affectionately

T. Jefferson

Thomas Jefferson to Marquis de Lafayette, June 16, 1792, page 2. (The Gilder Lehrman Institute, GLC08063)

## Thomas Jefferson on the French and Haitian Revolutions, 1792

### Transcript

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Thomas Jefferson to Marquis de Lafayette, June 16, 1792. (The Gilder Lehrman Institute, GLC08063)

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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 [*sic*] favors. while you are exterminating the monster aristocracy, & pulling out the teeth & 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 & sufficient thing itself, but only as a step to an English constitution, the only thing good & sufficient in itself, in their eye. it is happy for us that these are preachers without followers, and that our people are firm & 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 & commons come. they get some important associates from New York, and are puffed off by a tribe of Agioteurs which have been hatched in a bed of corruption made up after the model of their beloved England. too many of these stock jobbers & King-jobbers have come into our legislature, or rather too many of our legislature have become stock jobbers & king-jobbers. however the voice of the people [2] is beginning to make itself heard, and will probably cleanse their seats at the ensuing election. – the machinations of our old enemies are such as to keep us still at bay with our Indian neighbors. – what are you doing for your colonies? they will be lost if not more effectually succoured. indeed no future efforts you can make will ever be able to reduce the blacks. all that can be done in my opinion will be to compound with them as has been done formerly in Jamaica. we have been less zealous in aiding them, lest your government should feel any jealousy on our account. but in truth we as sincerely wish their restoration, and their connection with you, as you do yourselves. we are satisfied that neither your justice nor their distresses will ever again [*struck*: be] permit[*struck*: ed] their being forced to seek at dear & distant markets those first necessities of life which they may have at cheaper markets placed by nature at their door, & formed by her for their support: – what is become of M<sup>de</sup> de Tessy and M<sup>de</sup> de Tott? I have not heard of them since they went to Switzerland. I think they would have done better to have come & reposed under the Poplars of Virginia. pour into their bosoms the warmest effusions of my friendship & tell them they will be warm and constant unto death. accept of them also for M<sup>de</sup> de la Fayette & your dear children – but I am forgetting that you are in the fields of war, & they I hope in those of peace. Adieu my dear friend! God bless you all.

Yours affectionately Th:Jefferson