

The New Criterion

Features

January 1997

Jefferson on race & revolution

by [Hadley Arkes](#)

On The Long Affair: Thomas Jefferson & the French Revolution, 1785–1800 by Conor Cruise O'Brien

Edmund Burke remarked famously—and often—on those men, seized with grand theories, who busied themselves making, unmaking, and remaking the French Revolution. They were counting, he said, on “bungling practice [to correct] absurd theory.” For Burke, the sweeping proclamations on “the Rights of Man” were belied by a spirit of lawlessness; a passion to resist authority running so deep that it would finally detach itself from all manner of moral and legal restraints. But for Thomas Jefferson, viewing France from afar—delivered from the embassy in Paris, installed now as secretary of state in the administration of George Washington—the same record of mayhem did not produce the same impressions or inspire the same judgments. The French Revolution would lurch from confiscation to murderous violence, and yet nothing in this record would mar, for Jefferson, the beauty of the idea itself. The idea was, of course, & ...

Hadley Arkes is Ney Professor of Jurisprudence and American Institutions at Amherst College and Vaughan Fellow in the Madison Program at Princeton University.

[more from this author](#)

This article originally appeared in The New Criterion, Volume 15 January 1997, on page 26

Copyright © 2012 The New Criterion | www.newcriterion.com

<http://www.newcriterion.com/articles.cfm/Jefferson-on-race---revolution-3403>