

COMMON SENSE

1776

"We have it in our power to begin the world over again."

(Appendix to the Third Edition, paragraph 15.)

Overview



By the close of 1775, after years of antagonism between the American people and the British governments, not a single patriot had yet stepped forth to passionately argue the case for refusing the control of the empire centered across the Atlantic Ocean. All of that changed with Thomas Paine's pamphlet *Common Sense*. The pamphlet was first published and distributed in the city of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, on January 9, 1776, nine months after the first shots in the prelude to the American Revolution had been fired, in Lexington and Concord, Massachusetts. Six months after the publication of *Common Sense*, the Continental Congress formally issued Thomas Jefferson's *Declaration of Independence*, and the Revolutionary War officially began.

Paine himself was, in fact, an Englishman who had been in North America for only about a year when he wrote *Common Sense*—and as such he was perhaps in a good position to understand the illegitimacy and absurdity of his home country's rule in the New World. Americans were angered by excesses in taxation, extensive restriction on trade, and the many recent atrocities inflicted on them by the British troops ("Redcoats"), such as the slaying of five civilians at the Boston Massacre in 1770. Nevertheless, separation from Britain simply was not widely discussed as an option—until the publication of *Common Sense*.

Context

With the end of the Seven Years' War in 1763, antagonism between the American colonies and their governing nation across the Atlantic gradually grew so great that it could not be ignored. Perhaps the most widespread grievance among colonists was that they did not enjoy the same general rights as those living in Great Britain. When Patrick Henry famously demanded either "liberty" or "death" in 1775, after the incidents at Lexington and Concord, he wished for his fellow colonists not independence but simply equal rights as Englishmen. In July of that year, the Continental Congress tried to end hostilities in extending the Olive Branch Petition to the King, seeking

reconciliation; however, the King declined to receive the petition, and to demonstrate his authority he instead issued a Declaration of Rebellion against the colonies.

Thus, frustration with and resentment over the rule of the British was nearly universal in America by 1776, but a consensus regarding the most appropriate way for the colonies to proceed was not. Conflict, occasionally violent, had been taking place, but the majority of the population desired only greater liberty within the existing political structure, not a complete dismantling of it. England was seen as a loving, if stern and unfair, parent, and many rejected the notion of independence for fear of demonstrating ingratitude and irrationality.

The citizens of the various colonies, meanwhile, found themselves in a range of circumstances. While Virginia and Massachusetts, in particular, were suffering economically as a result of imperial policies, others, such as New York, Pennsylvania, and South Carolina, were flourishing. Certain colonies even bore rivalries with each other, such as over the delineations of borders. Many people believed that only the continued oversight of the "mother" country could sustain any unity among the religiously and socially diverse American populace. Indeed, an alternate form of government had essentially yet to be envisioned; in some circles *democracy* was simply another word for "mob rule."

About the Author

Thomas Paine was born in Norfolk, England, in 1737, and largely lived in the working-class world in which he was raised, despite his elementary education and marked intelligence. He served two years aboard one of the many privateers operating as both merchant and pirate ship during the Seven Years' War with France, thus gaining a degree of experience in combat with the common man. Upon returning to England, he began his own corset-making business and attempted to start a family, but his first wife died after only a year of marriage, perhaps while giving birth to their premature infant. He and his second wife separated after several years. Following these setbacks he gained work as a tax collector, a position he later lost for failing to perform adequately. Nevertheless, he was later rehired and served



Timeline	
1763	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> February 10 Treaty of Paris signed, ending Seven Years' War, essentially opening hostility between Americans and British
1770	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> March 5 Boston Massacre; five colonists killed
1773	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> December 16 Boston Tea Party
1775	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> March 23 Patrick Henry delivers famed "liberty" speech to Virginia House of Burgesses April 19 First shots fired between Redcoats and Patriots at Lexington and Concord, Massachusetts; thenceforth, fighting continues intermittently throughout colonies July 5 Second Continental Congress issues <i>Olive Branch Petition</i>, seeking reconciliation with the British Crown July 6 Congress also issues <i>Declaration of the Causes and Necessity of Taking Up Arms</i>, offering justification for military resistance in the name of liberty (though not necessarily independence) August 23 King George III issues <i>Declaration of Rebellion</i> against colonies
1776	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> January 9 <i>Common Sense</i> published June 7 Virginia's Richard Henry Lee offers a resolution for independence to the Continental Congress July 2 Lee's resolution approved July 4 Continental Congress issues Thomas Jefferson's <i>Declaration of Independence</i>

for some seven years, before being fired again sometime after petitioning (vainly) the British Parliament for higher salaries for those in his line of work. In that petition, *Case of the Officers of Excise*, he commented at length on the unjust discrepancies between the lives of the rich and the poor, which were especially sizable in that era.

While traveling in England's dissident circles, Paine made the acquaintance of the American statesman Benjamin Franklin, who wrote him letters of introduction to take with him upon his eventual move to America, where he arrived on November 30, 1774—stricken with illness, perhaps typhus. After spending a month and a half recovering in a private home (rather than onboard, thanks to his letters), another month and a half later he was serving as the editor of the *Pennsylvania Magazine*, through which he became moderately known after penning a polemic against slavery. Franklin had previously urged Paine to write a current history of the period of grievances between the Americans and the British; then, however, Benjamin Rush, another antislavery advocate, suggested that Paine write something that could stir the colonists to consider separation from the mother country. *Common Sense* was first published on January 9, 1776. Six months later, American would declare its independence.

Paine, meanwhile, lived out his years to mixed reviews. Through the war he served in various political offices while keeping national morale up by producing some sixteen *American Crisis* papers and a number of other publications. (The first issue of *American Crisis*, published in December 1776, opens with the legendary words, "These are the times that try men's souls.") Afterward, he recrossed the Atlantic for France, where he published essays supporting the workers' movement in Britain, lambasting much of Christianity—which led to his being branded and despised as an atheist—and even criticizing the first president of the United States, George Washington, which led to the ruining of his reputation in the country he had helped usher into existence. He finally returned to America in 1802, moving to a farm awarded him by New York State for his wartime services. Lacking family and consoled largely by alcohol, he died with few remaining assets to his name on June 8, 1809.

Explanation and Analysis of the Document

◆ "Introduction"

In the "Introduction" to *Common Sense*, Paine effectively establishes the incendiary tone that he will employ throughout the pamphlet. Of note here is his opening admission to professing ideas that were not necessarily then popular; cleverly, he remarks that his ideas were "not yet sufficiently fashionable," implying that no others had considered the issue as fully as he did within that pamphlet. He labels the people of America "sufferers" and "grievously oppressed," immediately assuring all common citizens that he was sympathetic toward their collective plight; he expresses his intent to focus on ideas, not men,

establishing his relative objectivity; and in referring to the "cause of America" as "the cause of all mankind," he lends his work enormous gravity, which was perhaps of great value in justifying the vehemence of his arguments.

◆ "Of the Origin and Design of Government in General, with Concise Remarks on the English Constitution"

Paine opens the first main section by delineating the differences between the notions of "society" and "government," with the former termed a "blessing," the latter "a necessary evil." He details the manner in which a small society would develop into a larger one, eventually entailing the institution of a representative *government*. This government, Paine notes, is only virtuous in that it precisely serves the interests of *all* of the community's people. This opening strain of philosophical thought serves to prepare unschooled readers especially for the logical discrediting of British monarchical rule.

Many of Paine's notions are presented in scientific, particularly biological, terms. In paragraph 4 he makes one of his first references to Newtonian mechanics, which Sir Isaac Newton (1642–1727) had formulated less than a century earlier and which could thus still be invoked with fair impact on the popular consciousness. In paragraph 5 Paine uses a simple but effective analogy comparing the shelter of government to that of a tree, then refers to man's "natural right." Indeed, throughout the text, Paine draws on natural metaphors and uses the words "nature" and "natural" with the utmost positive connotations, reflecting the fact that in the colonial era the relationship between man and nature was still a very strong one.

In paragraphs 7–13 Paine sets about first denouncing governmental tyranny and then demonstrating that, though well disguised, the British government was a symbol of such tyranny. In paragraph 14 Paine notes that the monarchy and the House of Lords, "by being hereditary, are independent of the People." Thus, as he noted earlier and will expound upon later, only in being *selected* by the people can those who govern truly *represent* the people. His analysis of the purported "checking" of power in the monarchical system in paragraphs 15–21 was perhaps carefully read by those who drew up the U.S. Constitution, with its emphasis on adequate true checks and balances. Paine dismisses the monarchy as "a mere absurdity" in paragraph 18, and in fact his intent in *Common Sense* is largely destructive; he was well aware that he would not have to devise the new government to come in order to convince the people of the inaptness of the one they were then living under.

In paragraphs 21–25 Paine reiterates that no government that is directed by a ruler who inherited his position (such as a king) can offer the people true and just representation. In paragraph 23 a reference is made to "the fate of Charles I," who, after long conflict with Parliament, both in legal terms and through civil wars, was beheaded in 1649; Paine's point is that even this incident did not lead subsequent English monarchs to act with increased moral virtue.

◆ "Of Monarchy and Hereditary Succession"

In this section Paine focuses further on the illegitimacy of monarchical rule under any circumstances. In paragraphs 1–3 he laments the fact that kings ever came into existence at all, positing that they have been the ultimate cause of most wars. In paragraph 4 he introduces religion to the discussion, referring to "government by kings" as "the most prosperous invention the Devil ever set on foot for the promotion of idolatry."

Throughout the opening paragraphs of this section, Paine invokes the Bible, the lessons of which would have struck chords with common men of the time. For instance, in paragraphs 5–8 Paine introduces a general conception of the nature of kings, as drawn from biblical readings. In paragraph 9 he refers to the story of Gideon found in Judges 8:22–23. Here, Gideon pointedly refuses the kingship offered him by the people of Israel, noting that only God can rule over man. In paragraph 10 Paine invokes discussion from I Samuel 8:6–22 and I Samuel 12:13–19. He refers to "the idolatrous customs of Heathens," raising the question of the relevance of the difference between idolizing "gods" who are manifestations of nature and idolizing kings and priests, who are merely other men. At the end of paragraph 10 he states, "Monarchy in every instance is the popery of government," the word *popery* related to the Roman Catholic pope. The majority of Americans during Paine's era, being Protestants, would not have recognized the "authority" of the pope as legitimate. At the end of paragraph 11, when he asserts that nature makes a mockery of monarchy by often "giving mankind an *ass for a lion*," he is simply pointing out that many of the rulers of England had inherited their positions despite obvious imbecility.

In paragraph 12 Paine notes that even if people themselves choose a first king, they are unjustly constraining their descendants to the rule of that king's descendants. He then points out in paragraph 13 that even if a king long ago came to power by unjust means, the monarchy could later deceive the people regarding its origins. The reference to "Mahomet" in paragraph 13 is to Muhammad, the Prophet of Islam.

In paragraph 14–25, through the end of the section, Paine comments specifically on the questionable origins and deeds of the English monarchy, adding generalized asides throughout. As referred to in paragraph 14, William the Conqueror, the illegitimate son of the Duke of Normandy (thus, a Frenchman), established the long-running English monarchy in 1066 after invading England and killing King Harold in the Battle of Hastings. The conflicts referred to in paragraph 20–21, collectively known as the War of the Roses (1455–1485), illustrate the violence that could arise in a system where the hereditary passing of rule could be disrupted. Sir William Meredith, from paragraph 24, was a member of Parliament in England.

◆ "Thoughts on the Present State of American Affairs"

In paragraphs 1–5 of this section Paine introduces his extended polemic analyzing the American situation,

through which he repeatedly concludes that the wisest course of action would be for the colonies to declare and fight for independence. Indeed, in publishing *Common Sense*, Paine sought both to stir emotion and to ensure that every relevant nuance of the situation was understood by every potential citizen of the envisioned nation. The reference in paragraph 3 is to Henry Pelham, a British politician; Paine mentions him here simply to illustrate the vice of shortsightedness.

In paragraphs 5–8 Paine denounces the possibility of America’s maintaining any sort of union with Great Britain, first noting in paragraph 7 that the commercial ties between the two are meaningless. As mentioned in paragraph 9, Hanover, in modern Germany, as linked to



Thomas Paine

England, was taken by the French in the Seven Years’ War; Paine’s point is that maintaining exclusive association with a country at war with others would only unnecessarily broaden the extent of that war. In paragraphs 10–14 Paine seeks to discredit the familial ties that many colonists certainly felt with their “parent” country. A commonality between England and America to

which Paine makes no reference, perhaps strategically, is the English language; indeed, the working classes especially might have dwelled on the importance of shared mother tongues had Paine mentioned it at all.

In paragraphs 15–19 Paine argues that America’s security would not be enhanced through its ties with Great Britain; on the contrary, he believes America would only find itself dragged into the empire’s conflicts unnecessarily. In paragraph 19 Paine links the European discovery of America in 1492 to the Protestant Reformation, which essentially began in 1517 when Martin Luther nailed a set of theses regarding the role of the Roman Catholic Church to the door of a German church. Luther’s revolutionary stance predictably resulted in increased persecution by papal authorities. Paine posits that God himself perhaps meant for the North American continent to serve as a “sanctuary” from Europe.

In paragraphs 20–27 Paine emphasizes that the avoidance of a revolution at that time would simply be an irresponsibly shortsighted and cowardly delaying of the inevitable. Boston, Massachusetts, is described as a “seat of wretchedness” in paragraph 22. After the Boston Tea Party, when disguised Patriots destroyed imported tea, the British Parliament punished the entire state by closing the Boston port, decimating trade and rapidly impoverishing residents. Paine believed that all Americans were morally obligated to defend themselves, their families, and their countrymen against such tyranny. The 1765 Stamp Act, referred to in paragraph 27, imposed unpopular taxes on newspapers and

other documents. It was repealed in 1766, providing the revolutionary movement with some momentum, but in 1767 a number of alternate taxes were imposed. These, too, were later repealed, in 1770—except for the tax on tea, which brought about the Boston Tea Party.

In paragraphs 28–37 Paine asserts that the American colonies had grown to the point where dependence on Great Britain was a hindrance to smooth governmental functioning. Frederick North, well known as Lord North and mentioned in paragraph 32, was the British prime minister from 1770 to 1782. The “millions expended,” then, would refer to resources lost not only through the paying of taxes imposed by the Parliament headed by North but also through the organizational activity undertaken by Americans in efforts to gain the repeal of many of the laws he enacted. Later in that paragraph, Paine refers to the “folly” of paying “a Bunker-hill price” for anything, referring to the Battle of Bunker Hill, where on June 17, 1775, British troops sustained massive losses while subduing rebel troops during a battle of the Siege of Boston. The reference to the King’s “negative” in paragraph 34 is to his ability to veto any legislation proposed by the colonists. Above all, Paine notes in paragraph 36 that the British Parliament would only ever enact laws affecting America in its own nation’s interest, not in America’s interest.

In paragraphs 38–41 Paine again comments on military matters, noting that engaging in war then would be the only sure way to avoid the continual future loss of life. In hopes of quelling people’s fears regarding not just conflict but the nation’s unknown future beyond, in paragraphs 42–48 Paine discusses possibilities regarding the government to take shape after the overthrow of British rule. He pointedly declares that he does not mean for his word to be the last. Thus, in opening debate regarding the shape of the government to come, he subtly leaves as a foregone conclusion the notion that independence would soon be gained. The reference in paragraph 48 is to the Italian Giacinto Dragonetti, who wrote *On Virtues and Reward*, which first appeared in England in 1767; Dragonetti is invoked simply for being, as Paine notes, a “wise observer on governments.” Paine concludes this section in paragraph 49 by noting that only God and the law will be “King.”

“Massanello” (correctly, Masaniello), from paragraph 50, was an Italian fisherman who rose to become king of Naples through revolt in 1647 and who in the course of his reign executed some 1,500 people before his own assassination. Paine mentions him to stress that the rational formation of a republic would far better serve the people than a coup, which might only bring about more tyranny. In paragraphs 51–53 Paine concludes his analysis of the American situation with a fairly impassioned plea for the overthrow of oppression.

◆ **“Of the Present Ability of America: With Some Miscellaneous Reflections”**

In this section, Paine discusses the “ripeness or fitness of the continent for independence” in quantitative and quali-

tative terms, definitively stating in paragraph 2 that the time for action was the present. In paragraphs 4–15 Paine offers detailed discussion on the advantages the colonies would reap in amassing a naval force, citing financial figures and dismissing the negative aspects of incurring debt. The privateer *Terrible*, discussed in paragraph 11, is in fact a ship whose crew Paine would have joined as a young man had his father not dissuaded him; he might have perished, as did most of the crew in a battle with a French ship. In paragraphs 13–14 Paine dismisses the notion that the British would ever offer America sufficient military protection. Paine goes on to cite America’s abundance of military resources in paragraph 16 and its yet unoccupied land in paragraph 17 as additional national assets.

Paine proceeds to remark on various aspects of the possibility of independence. In paragraphs 18–20 he posits that America’s youth is a reason for, not against going to war, as the populace was then energetic and ambitious. In paragraph 21 he mentions the need to avoid being subdued by a conqueror, and in paragraph 22 he advocates freedom of religion. In paragraphs 23–26 he revisits notions regarding the government to come, mentioning a Continental Charter and equal representation through a congress. The episode discussed in paragraph 24 was one in which certain state assembly politicians concocted a resolution instructing their delegates to the Continental Congress to in no way support separation from Britain. Charles Wolfram Cornwall, in paragraph 26, was speaker of the House of Commons in the government headed by Lord North.

In this section’s conclusion, paragraphs 27–33, which constituted the original conclusion to the entire pamphlet, Paine simply summarizes certain points and reiterates his contention that the only rational option for the colonies was to declare independence.

◆ **“Appendix to the Third Edition”**

Paine attached the “Appendix” beginning with the second edition to address the fact that a speech by King George III, in which he condemned all acts of resistance carried out by the colonists, appeared in Pennsylvania on the day that *Common Sense* was first distributed. By and large, Paine uses this section to demonstrate that many of his contentions were proved accurate by the King’s words, which he characterizes as “wilful audacious libel against the truth, the common good, and the existence of mankind.” In fact, much of the text in paragraphs 1–5 is devoted to criticism of the person of the King. Sir John Dalrymple, mentioned in paragraph 4, wrote several political works similar to “The Address of the People of England to the Inhabitants of America”; the author of that work argues that the King should be thanked for the repeal of the Stamp Act since he did not prevent those proceedings. Paine dismisses this praise of the King as “idolatry.”

In paragraphs 6–19, Paine effectively reiterates points that he made throughout the original text in favor of independence over reconciliation. While somewhat repetitive, Paine was perhaps especially wise to condense his thoughts in closing, so as to solidify his notions in the

minds of readers. The “last war” referred to in paragraph 8 is the Seven Years’ War of the 1750s and 1760s, which pitted numerous European nations against one another and even expanded to the American colonies in the form of the French and Indian War. The letter lambasted in paragraph 12, written by William Smith and signed by the New York governor William Tryon, urged the New York assembly to fully consider reconciliation with Britain. Through paragraphs 15–19, Paine endeavors to convey to his readers the full gravity of the American situation; indeed, by the time the colonist reads, “The birthday of a new world is at hand,” he has in all likelihood been swayed by Paine’s monumental arguments.

Audience

Common Sense was written with an enormous audience in mind: the entire population of the North American continent. By virtue of his life experience, Paine was attuned to the inclinations and desires of both the upper and lower classes, and his pamphlet indeed proved successful largely thanks to his intent and ability to communicate with the masses. Bruce Kuklick notes, “He eschewed contemporary stylish discourse and learned jargon. His writing was clear and concrete, with pithy phrases designed to stick in the mind...His language, in one sense, was that of the common man; in another sense, he went far beyond what an ordinary person could say” (p. ix). While the tone may seem excessively academic to the modern reader, elongated grammatical constructions were standard in the eighteenth century; thus, in its time, *Common Sense* was considered exceptionally accessible.



John Adams

With regard to content, Paine catered to common men in part by focusing more on ideas and general concepts than on legislative or political specifics. When he offers formulations regarding the possible shape of the new American government, he does so vaguely and briefly so as not to alienate the less educated with technicalities. Many of his references were to the Bible, with which most any literate person would have been familiar in that era. Further, Wendell notes, “Paine’s genius lies in his earthy metaphors and in the rapier thrust of his epigrammatic style, a style that at times rises to apostrophic grandeur” (p. 20). Indeed, in *Common Sense*, Paine makes frequent reference to nature and the natural order, strengthening the connections that common men, many of whom were farmers, would have felt with his ideas. Overall, forgoing scholarly objectivity, he argues quite vehemently that America had no reasonable course to follow but that which would bring about immediate separation from Great Britain.

Essential Quotes

“The cause of America is in a great measure the cause of all mankind.”

(The Introduction.)

“Nature disapproves [hereditary monarchy], otherwise she would not so frequently turn it into ridicule by giving mankind an ass for a lion.”

(Of Monarchy and Hereditary Succession, paragraph 11.)

“I offer nothing more than simple facts, plain arguments, and common sense.”

(Thoughts on the Present State of American Affairs, paragraph 1.)

“There is something very absurd in supposing a continent to be perpetually governed by an island.”

(Thoughts on the Present State of American Affairs, paragraph 29.)

“We have it in our power to begin the world over again.”

(Appendix to the Third Edition, paragraph 15.)

Impact

Revealing why *Common Sense* would prove so important, Benjamin Rush noted before its publication, “When the subject of American independence began to be agitated in conversation, I observed the public mind to be loaded with an immense mass of prejudice and error relative to it” (Liell, p. 55). This was unsurprising, given that most of the dialogue regarding possible political action was produced by and directed only toward the elite. Circulation and readership of periodicals was low and, most relevantly, limited to the most learned classes. Thus, the common man may have had no more knowledge of the truth behind recent occurrences other than what could be propagated by word of mouth, which one would expect to be slow and fairly circumspect.

Common Sense was first published anonymously, as Paine believed that the pamphlet would bear more of an impact if readers understood that it was not being distributed for any one man’s personal gain; its author truly wished only that his ideas would become every colonist’s ideas. The city of Philadelphia proved an ideal launching pad, as it was then the most populous in the colonies as well as the one featuring the most politically active citizens,

and indeed, among the elite the tract was rapidly devoured and digested. Within days laypeople and congressional delegates alike were passing the text and their opinions of it to friends, and within a month the pamphlet’s third edition was being published.

The relevance of the emergence of *Common Sense* can perhaps be most readily understood in considering its publication statistics:

At a time when the most widely circulated colonial newspapers were fortunate if they averaged two thousand sales per week, when the average pamphlet was printed in one or two editions of perhaps a few thousand copies, *Common Sense* went through 25 editions and reached literally hundreds of thousands of readers in the single year of 1776. (Foner, ctd. in Liell, p. 95)

Indeed, estimates hold that some 500,000 copies were in circulation by year’s end, among a population of only 2.5 million, of which perhaps one-fourth were slaves and largely illiterate (Wendel). By contrast, in the twenty-first century, if 10 million copies of a given book are published, with America’s population near 300 million, the book is considered extraordinarily successful. (These figures perhaps also reflect the characters of the people occupying the region in

the respective eras; in the twenty-first century, of course, citizens are far more likely to receive political “wisdom” from television programs.)

Ultimately, with the general populace and the elite alike swayed by Paine’s arguments, a political tide in favor of revolution rapidly swept through the nation. Modern historians are virtually unanimous in saying that *Common Sense* played a major role in spurring the colonists to revolution. Harvey Kaye offers a succinct description of the pamphlet’s impact in *Thomas Paine and the Promise of America*:

“Whatever its originality in idea and language, *Common Sense* was radically original in appeal and consequence. Whether it changed people’s minds or freed them to speak their minds, it pushed them—not all of them, but vast numbers of them—to revolution.” Even contemporary observers, however, were well aware of the pamphlet’s importance. In *Thomas Paine: Apostle of Freedom*, Jack Fruchtman Jr. cites the words of John Adams: “Without the pen of the author of *Common Sense*, the sword of Washington would have been raised in vain.”

Questions for Further Study

1. The overall impact of *Common Sense* has been likened to that produced by the 1848 publication of *The Communist Manifesto*, in which Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels heralded the possibility of bringing about a classless society. Compare and contrast the two documents, focusing on any *one* of the aspects considered here (e.g., Context, Author, Audience, etc.).

2. Paine makes several statements regarding national debt, perhaps most notably, “A national debt is a national bond; and when it bears no interest, is in no case a grievance,” and “as we are running the next generation into debt, we ought to do the work of it, otherwise we use them meanly and pitifully.” Reflect on the American national debt in the modern era. How was the situation in the late eighteenth century different from that of the twenty-first century? Do Paine’s remarks bear relevance in the modern era? What would Paine say about the present situation?

3. Paine notes, “The present time, likewise, is that peculiar time which never happens to a nation but once, viz., the time of forming itself into a government.” Choose *one* of the following two questions to answer as comprehensibly as possible: (a) If the opportunity arose to alter whatever aspects of the American government seemed to need alteration, as slightly or drastically as necessary, what would you suggest be changed? (b) If you could oversee the inception of an entirely *new* country according to your own ideals, in the place of your choosing (be it real or imaginary), what form would your government take?

4. As previously discussed, in *Common Sense*, Paine makes frequent reference to “nature” and “natural law,” which was perhaps especially wise given the connections that existed between man and nature in the Revolutionary era. How has that relationship changed over the two and a quarter centuries since? Would references to “natural law” bear as much weight for modern Americans? What ideological concepts might instead touch modern Americans most deeply? That is, if one sought to persuade the vast majority of Americans with regard to some revolutionary concept, what notions might a polemicist most widely draw upon?

5. The means of communication have greatly evolved since the eighteenth century, most dramatically in the decades following the conception of the Internet. Discuss the effectiveness and social implications of all modern forms of mass communication, including newspapers, books, television, film, e-mail, and Web sites (as well as any alternate media of relevance). Conclude by discussing the implications of this vast array of communicative options regarding the propagation of ideas throughout the masses; that is, would a revolutionary such as Paine have found disseminating his ideas more or less difficult in the modern era?



Related Documents

Adams, John. *The Diary and Autobiography of John Adams*. 4 vols. Edited by L. H. Butterfield. Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1961.

Adams, while himself a fierce patriot, was firmly opposed to many of Paine's notions with regard to the shape the new nation ought to take. Most of his views, including those regarding Paine, can be found in this collection.

Franklin, Benjamin. *The Writings of Benjamin Franklin*. 10 vols. Edited by Albert Henry Smyth. New York: Macmillan, 1905–07.

Franklin essentially discovered Paine in dissident circles in England, as evinced by a number of letters in this weighty collection.

Paine, Thomas. *The Complete Writings of Thomas Paine*. Edited by Philip Foner. New York: Citadel Press, 1945.

Paine himself wrote a number of other pamphlets and essays aside from *Common Sense* and the aforementioned *American Crisis* papers, including *The Rights of Man* (2 parts, 1791 and 1792), in which he again deconstructed the English monarchy and offered a defense for the French Revolution, and *The Age of Reason* (2 parts, 1794 and 1795), in which he denounced religious institutions as a whole while yet endorsing belief in God. Foner's edition of Paine's writings has been widely used by historians.

Rush, Benjamin. *The Letters of Benjamin Rush*. 2 vols. Edited by L. H. Butterfield. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1951.

Rush played a major role in encouraging Paine to write the pamphlet that would spark the Revolution. Included here is correspondence with Paine himself as well as with Benjamin Franklin, who had served to introduce the two.

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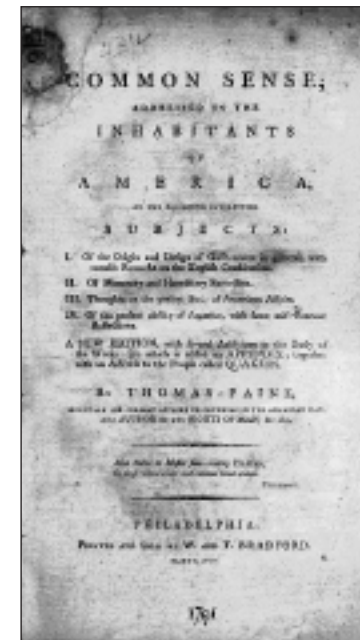
—By Michael Allen Holmes

Document Text

COMMON SENSE

Introduction to the Third Edition

Perhaps the sentiments contained in the following pages, are not YET sufficiently fashionable to procure them general favour; a long habit of not thinking a thing WRONG, gives it a superficial appearance of being RIGHT, and raises at first a formidable outcry in defense of custom. But the tumult soon subsides. Time makes more converts than reason. As a long and violent abuse of power, is generally the Means of calling the right of it in question (and in Matters too which might never have been thought of, had not the Sufferers been aggravated into the inquiry) and as the King of England hath undertaken in his OWN RIGHT, to support the Parliament in what he calls THEIRS, and as the good people of this country are grievously oppressed by the combination, they have an undoubted privilege to inquire into the pretensions of both, and equally to reject the usurpation of either. In the following sheets, the author hath studiously avoided every thing which is personal among ourselves. Compliments as well as censure to individuals make no part thereof. The wise, and the worthy, need not the triumph of a pamphlet; and those whose sentiments are injudicious, or unfriendly, will cease of themselves unless too much pains are bestowed upon their conversion. The cause of America is in a great measure the cause of all mankind. Many circumstances hath, and will arise, which are not local, but universal, and through which the principles of all Lovers of Mankind are affected, and in the Event of which, their Affections are interested. The laying a Country desolate with Fire and Sword, declaring War against the natural rights of all Mankind, and extirpating the Defenders thereof from the Face of



the Earth, is the Concern of every Man to whom Nature hath given the Power of feeling; of which Class, regardless of Party Censure, is the AUTHOR.

P. S. The Publication of this new Edition hath been delayed, with a View of taking notice (had it been necessary) of any Attempt to refute the Doctrine of Independance: As no Answer hath yet appeared, it is now presumed that none will, the Time needful for getting such a Performance ready for the Public being considerably past. Who the Author of this Production is, is wholly unnecessary to the Public, as the Object for Attention is the DOCTRINE ITSELF, not the MAN. Yet it may not be unnecessary to say, That he is unconnect-

ed with any Party, and under no sort of Influence public or private, but the influence of reason and principle.

Philadelphia, February 14, 1776

◆ Of the Origin and Design of Government in General, with Concise Remarks on the English Constitution

SOME writers have so confounded society with government, as to leave little or no distinction between them; whereas they are not only different, but have different origins. Society is produced by our wants, and government by our wickedness; the former promotes our happiness POSITIVELY by uniting our affections, the latter NEGATIVELY by restraining our vices. The one encourages intercourse, the other creates distinctions. The first is a patron, the last a punisher.

Society in every state is a blessing, but Government, even in its best state, is but a necessary evil; in its worst state an intolerable one: for when we suffer, or are exposed to the same miseries BY A



GOVERNMENT, which we might expect in a country WITHOUT GOVERNMENT, our calamity is heightened by reflecting that we furnish the means by which we suffer. Government, like dress, is the badge of lost innocence; the palaces of kings are built upon the ruins of the bowers of paradise. For were the impulses of conscience clear, uniform and irresistibly obeyed, man would need no other lawgiver; but that not being the case, he finds it necessary to surrender up a part of his property to furnish means for the protection of the rest; and this he is induced to do by the same prudence which in every other case advises him, out of two evils to choose the least. Wherefore, security being the true design and end of government, it unanswerably follows that whatever form thereof appears most likely to ensure it to us, with the least expense and greatest benefit, is preferable to all others...

FIRST. — The remains of Monarchical tyranny in the person of the King.

SECONDLY. — The remains of Aristocratical tyranny in the persons of the Peers.

THIRDLY. — The new Republican materials, in the persons of the Commons, on whose virtue depends the freedom of England.

The two first, by being hereditary, are independent of the People; wherefore in a CONSTITUTIONAL SENSE they contribute nothing towards the freedom of the State.

To say that the constitution of England is an UNION of three powers, reciprocally CHECKING each other, is farcical; either the words have no meaning, or they are flat contradictions.

FIRST. — That the King it not to be trusted without being looked after; or in other words, that a thirst for absolute power is the natural disease of monarchy.

SECONDLY. — That the Commons, by being appointed for that purpose, are either wiser or more worthy of confidence than the Crown.

But as the same constitution which gives the Commons a power to check the King by withholding the supplies, gives afterwards the King a power to check the Commons, by empowering him to reject their other bills; it again supposes that the King is wiser than those whom it has already supposed to be wiser than him. A mere absurdity!...

◆ Of Monarchy and Hereditary Succession

MANKIND being originally equals in the order of creation, the equality could only be destroyed by some subsequent circumstance: the distinctions of rich and poor may in a great measure be accounted

for, and that without having recourse to the harsh ill-sounding names of oppression and avarice. Oppression is often the CONSEQUENCE, but seldom or never the MEANS of riches; and tho' avarice will preserve a man from being necessitously poor, it generally makes him too timorous to be wealthy.

But there is another and great distinction for which no truly natural or religious reason can be assigned, and that is the distinction of men into **KINGS** and **SUBJECTS**. Male and female are the distinctions of nature, good and bad the distinctions of Heaven; but how a race of men came into the world so exalted above the rest, and distinguished like some new species, is worth inquiring into, and whether they are the means of happiness or of misery to mankind...

◆ Thoughts on the Present State of American Affairs

IN the following pages I offer nothing more than simple facts, plain arguments, and common sense: and have no other preliminaries to settle with the reader, than that he will divest himself of prejudice and prepossession, and suffer his reason and his feelings to determine for themselves that he will put on, or rather that he will not put off, the true character of a man, and generously enlarge his views beyond the present day.

Volumes have been written on the subject of the struggle between England and America. Men of all ranks have embarked in the controversy, from different motives, and with various designs; but all have been ineffectual, and the period of debate is closed. Arms as the last resource decide the contest; the appeal was the choice of the King, and the Continent has accepted the challenge...

◆ Of the Present Ability of America: With Some Miscellaneous Reflections

I HAVE never met with a man, either in England or America, who hath not confessed his opinion, that a separation between the countries would take place one time or other: And there is no instance in which we have shown less judgment, than in endeavoring to describe, what we call, the ripeness or fitness of the continent for independence.

As all men allow the measure, and vary only in their opinion of the time, let us, in order to remove mistakes, take a general survey of things, and endeavor if possible to find out the VERY time. But I need not go far, the inquiry ceases at once, for the TIME HATH FOUND US. The general concurrence, the glorious union of all things, proves the fact.

'Tis not in numbers but in unity that our great strength lies: yet our present numbers are sufficient to repel the force of all the world. The Continent hath at this time the largest body of armed and disciplined men of any power under Heaven: and is just arrived at that pitch of strength, in which no single colony is able to support itself, and the whole, when united, is able to do any thing. Our land force is more than sufficient, and as to Naval affairs, we cannot be insensible that Britain would never suffer an American man of war to be built, while the Continent remained in her hands. Wherefore, we should be no forwarder an hundred years hence in that branch than we are now; but the truth is, we should be less so, because the timber of the Country is every day diminishing, and that which will remain at last, will be far off or difficult to procure.

Were the Continent crowded with inhabitants, her sufferings under the present circumstances would be intolerable. The more seaport-towns we had, the more should we have both to defend and to lose. Our present numbers are so happily proportioned to our wants, that no man need be idle. The diminution of trade affords an army, and the necessities of an army create a new trade.

Debts we have none: and whatever we may contract on this account will serve as a glorious memento of our virtue. Can we but leave posterity with a settled form of government, an independent constitution of its own, the purchase at any price will be cheap. But to expend millions for the sake of getting a few vile acts repealed, and routing the present ministry only, is unworthy the charge, and is using posterity with the utmost cruelty; because it is leaving them the great work to do, and a debt upon their backs from which they derive no advantage. Such a thought's unworthy a man of honour, and is the true characteristic of a narrow heart and a piddling politician.

The debt we may contract doth not deserve our regard if the work be but accomplished. No nation ought to be without a debt. A national debt is a national bond; and when it bears no interest, is in no case a grievance. Britain is oppressed with a debt of upwards of one hundred and forty millions sterling, for which she pays upwards of four millions interest. And as a compensation for her debt, she has a large navy; America is without a debt, and without a navy; yet for the twentieth part of the English national debt, could have a navy as large again. The navy of England is not worth at this time more than three millions and a half sterling...

Appendix to the Third Edition

SINCE the publication of the first edition of this pamphlet, or rather, on the same day on which it came out, the king's speech made its appearance in this city. Had the spirit of prophecy directed the birth of this production, it could not have brought it forth at a more seasonable juncture, or at a more necessary time. The bloody-mindedness of the one, shows the necessity of pursuing the doctrine of the other. Men read by way of revenge. And the speech, instead of terrifying, prepared a way for the manly principles of independence.

Ceremony, and even silence, from whatever motives they may arise, have a hurtful tendency when they give the least degree of countenance to base and wicked performances, wherefore, if this maxim be admitted, it naturally follows, that the king's speech, IS being a piece of finished villany, deserved and still deserves, a general execration, both by the Congress and the people.

Yet, as the domestic tranquillity of a nation, depends greatly on the chastity of what might properly be called NATIONAL MANNERS, it is often better to pass some things over in silent disdain, than to make use of such new methods of dislike, as might introduce the least innovation on that guardian of our peace and safety. And, perhaps, it is chiefly owing to this prudent delicacy, that the king's speech hath not before now suffered a public execution. The speech, if it may be called one, is nothing better than a wilful audacious libel against the truth, the common good, and the existence of mankind; and is a formal and pompous method of offering up human sacrifices to the pride of tyrants.

But this general massacre of mankind, is one of the privileges and the certain consequences of kings, for as nature knows them not, they know not her, and although they are beings of our own creating, they know not us, and are become the gods of their creators. The speech hath one good quality, which is, that it is not calculated to deceive, neither can we, even if we would, be deceived by it. Brutality and tyranny appear on the face of it. It leaves us at no loss: And every line convinces, even in the moment of reading, that he who hunts the woods for prey, the naked and untutored Indian, is less savage than the king of Britain. Sir John Dalrymple, the putative father of a whining jesuitical piece, fallaciously called, "The address of the people of England to the inhabitants of America," hath perhaps from a vain supposition that the people here were to be fright-



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ened at the pomp and description of a king, given (though very unwisely on his part) the real character of the present one: "But," says this writer, "if you are inclined to pay compliments to an administration, which we do not complain of (meaning the Marquis of Rockingham's at the repeal of the Stamp Act) it is very unfair in you to withhold them from that prince, by whose NOD ALONE they were permitted to do any thing." This is toryism with a witness! Here is idolatry even without a mask: And he who can calmly hear and digest such doctrine, hath forfeited his claim to rationality an apostate from the order of manhood and ought to be considered as one who hath not only given up the proper dignity of man, but sunk himself beneath the rank of animals, and contemptibly crawls through the world like a worm.

I shall conclude these remarks, with the following timely and well-intended hints. We ought to reflect, that there are three different ways by which an independency may hereafter be effected, and that one of those three, will, one day or other, be the fate of America, viz. By the legal voice of the people in Congress; by a military power, or by a mob: It may not always happen that our soldiers are citizens, and the multitude a body of reasonable men; virtue, as I have already remarked, is not hereditary, neither is it perpetual. Should an independency be brought about by the first of those means, we have every opportunity and every encouragement before us, to form the noblest, purest constitution on the face of the earth. We have it in our power to begin the world over again. A situation, similar to the present, hath not happened since the days of Noah until now.

Should we neglect the present favorable and inviting period, and independence be hereafter effected by any other means, we must charge the consequence to ourselves, or to those rather whose narrow and prejudiced souls are habitually opposing the measure, without either inquiring or reflecting. There are reasons to be given in support of independence which men should rather privately think of, than be publicly told of. We ought not now to be debating whether we shall be independent or not, but anxious to accomplish it on a firm, secure, and honorable basis, and uneasy rather that it is not yet begun upon. Every day convinces us of its necessity. Even the Tories (if such beings yet remain among us) should, of all men, be the most solicitous to promote it; for as the appointment of committees at first protected them from popular rage, so, a wise and well established form of government will be the only cer-

tain means of continuing it securely to them. Wherefore, if they have not virtue enough to be WHIGS, they ought to have prudence enough to wish for independence.

In short, independence is the only bond that tie and keep us together. We shall then see our object, and our ears will be legally shut against the schemes of an intriguing, as well as cruel, enemy. We shall then, too, be on a proper footing to treat with Britain; for there is reason to conclude, that the pride of that court will be less hurt by treating with the American States for terms of peace, than with those, whom she denominates "rebellious subjects," for terms of accommodation. It is our delaying in that, encourages her to hope for conquest, and our backwardness tends only to prolong the war. As we have, without any good effect therefrom, withheld our trade to obtain a redress of our grievances, let us now try the alternative, by independently redressing them ourselves, and then offering to open the trade. The mercantile and reasonable part of England, will be still with us; because, peace, with trade, is preferable to war without it. And if this offer be not accepted, other courts may be applied to.

On these grounds I rest the matter. And as no offer hath yet been made to refute the doctrine contained in the former editions of this pamphlet, it is a negative proof, that either the doctrine cannot be refuted, or, that the party in favor of it are too numerous to be opposed. WHEREFORE, instead of gazing at each other with suspicious or doubtful curiosity, let each of us hold out to his neighbor the hearty hand of friendship, and unite in drawing a line, which, like an act of oblivion, shall bury in forgetfulness every former dissension. Let the names of Whig and Tory be extinct; and let none other be heard among us, than those of a good citizen, an open and resolute friend, and a virtuous supporter of the RIGHTS of MANKIND, and of the FREE AND INDEPENDENT STATES OF AMERICA.

Glossary

apostate (n):	one who abandons loyalty to
avarice (n):	greed
barrister (n):	type of lawyer
bower (n):	shelter, such as from the canopies of trees
capricious (adj):	impulsive
cavil (v):	raise trivial objections
convulsion (n):	violent disturbance
countenance (n):	moral support
credulous (adj):	inclined to believe
disaffection (n):	the loss of affection for
encomium (n):	enthusiastic praise
epistle (n):	letter
execrate (v):	denounce; declare as evil
extirpate (v):	exterminate
felicity (n):	happiness
felo de se (n):	literally, evildoer with respect to oneself; something that causes its own destruction
fidelity (n):	loyalty
gradation (n):	small change in amount
impregnable (adj):	secure from invasion
jesuitical (adj):	manipulating through language
junto (n):	assembly of people with a common purpose
papistical (adj):	Roman Catholic; that is, in reference to the role of the pope, authoritarian
pecuniary (adj):	fiscal
prepossession (n):	attitude previously formed
prudence (n):	essentially, common sense with respect to government/management
putative (adj):	commonly supposed
reciprocal (adj):	equally exchanged
remissness (n):	neglect; laxity
Rubicon (n):	a boundary that when crossed commits the person to a certain course
sanguine (adj):	optimistic
sophist (n):	one who uses reason falsely or deceptively
specious (adj):	having deceptive allure
sympochant (n):	one who flatters and serves those in power for his own gain
toryism (n):	loyalty to the Crown
variance (n):	discord; antagonism
viz. (adv):	namely
wherefore (adv):	thus, one can conclude that

