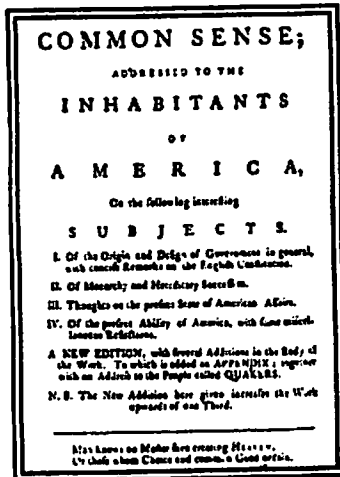


COMMON SENSE

(JANUARY 10, 1776)

THOMAS PAINE



The two-line poem on the bottom of the title page of Thomas Paine's *Common Sense* reads "Man knows no Master save creating Heaven, / Or those whom choice and common good ordain." The poem suggests that the American colonies should be ruled by only God or rulers they freely choose and who want what is best for most people. Here Paine is clearly saying that the colonists should not accept English rule because the common good of the colonies is of no interest to Great Britain.

When Thomas Paine's 50-page pamphlet *Common Sense* was published, he had only been in America for a little more than a year. Paine, who had emigrated from England, had quickly become sympathetic to the colonial cause. Many colonists wanted to revolt against being unfairly taxed. If Great Britain surrendered to their demands, they were willing to remain English colonists. But Paine took things one step further. He advocated total independence from Great Britain. He presented his arguments in *Common Sense*.

The pamphlet became one of the most influential pieces of revolutionary writing. It persuaded ordinary colonists to fight for their independence from England. During Paine's lifetime and afterward, the pamphlet's fame spread beyond the American colonies. It helped oppressed people everywhere understand they had the right to fight for their own freedom.

I have heard it asserted by some, that as America hath flourished under her former connection with Great Britain, the same connection is necessary towards her future happiness, and will always have the same effect. Nothing can be more fallacious than this kind of argument. We may as well assert that because a child has thriven upon milk, that it is never to have meat, or that the first twenty years of our lives is to become a precedent for the next twenty. But even this is admitting more than is true; for I answer roundly, that America would have flourished as much, and probably much more, had no European power taken any notice of her. The commerce by which she enriched herself are the necessities of life, and will always have a market while eating is the custom of Europe.

But she has protected us, say some. That she hath engrossed us is true, and defended the continent at our expense as well as her own is admitted. . . .

Alas! we have been long led away by ancient prejudices, and made large sacrifices to superstition. We have boasted the protection of Great Britain without considering that her motive was *interest*, not *attachment*; and that she did not protect us from *our enemies on our account*, but from her enemies on her own account, from those who had no quarrel with us on any *other account*, but who will always be our enemies on the *same account*. Let Britain waive her pretensions to the continent, or the continent throw off the dependence, and we should be at peace with France and Spain were they at war with Britain. . . .

But Britain is the parent country, say some. Then the more shame upon her conduct. Even brutes do not devour their young, nor savages make war upon their families; wherefore, the assertion, if true, turns to her reproach; but it happens not to be true, or only partly so, and the phrase *parent* or *mother country* hath been jesuitically adopted by the king and his parasites, with a low, papistical design of gaining an unfair bias on the credulous weakness of our minds. Europe, and not England, is the parent country of America. This new world hath been the asylum for the persecuted lovers of civil and religious liberty from every part of Europe. Hither have they fled, not from the tender embraces of a mother, but from the cruelty



In this engraving, the British troops arrive in Concord, Massachusetts, on April 19, 1775. Later, the troops met colonial Minutemen on the North Bridge. The battle that followed began the Revolutionary War.

Paine stopped going to school at the age of thirteen, when he became an apprentice in his father's corset shop in England. In 1757, after an unsuccessful attempt to run away to sea, he opened his own shop.



This is one of the few portraits of Paine still in existence.

In 1774 Paine met Benjamin Franklin in London. That year Franklin sent him to the American colonies with letters introducing Paine to Franklin's friends in Philadelphia.

of the monster; and it is so far true of England, that the same tyranny which drove the first emigrants from home, pursues their descendants still. . . .

I challenge the warmest advocate for reconciliation to show a single advantage that this continent can reap, by being connected with Great Britain. I repeat the challenge, not a single advantage is derived. Our corn will fetch its price in any market in Europe, and our imported goods must be paid for, buy them where we will. . . .

Every quiet method for peace hath been ineffectual. Our prayers have been rejected with disdain; and have tended to convince us that nothing flatters vanity or confirms obstinacy in kings more than repeated petitioning—and nothing hath contributed more than that very measure to make the kings of Europe absolute [have total power]. . . . Wherefore, since nothing but blows will do, for God's sake let us come to a final separation, and not leave the next generation to be cutting throats under the violated unmeaning names of parent and child.

To say they will never attempt it [English violations of the colonists' rights and property] again is idle and visionary: we thought so as the repeal of the stamp act, yet a year or two undeceived us; as well may we suppose that nations which have been once defeated will never renew the quarrel.

As to government matters, it is not in the power of Britain to do this continent justice: the business of it will soon be too weighty and intricate to be managed with any tolerable degree of convenience, by a power so distant from us, and so very ignorant of us; for if they cannot conquer us, they cannot govern us. . . .

Small islands not capable of protecting themselves are the proper objects for kingdoms to take under their care; but there is something very absurd in supposing a continent to be perpetually governed by an island. In no instance hath nature made the satellite larger than its primary planet; and as England and America, with respect to each other, reverse the common order of nature, it is evident that they belong to different systems. England to Europe: America to itself. . . .

But where, say some, is the king of America? I'll tell you, friend, he reigns above, and doth not make havoc of mankind

like the Royal Brute of Great Britain. Yet that we may not appear to be defective even in earthly honors, let a day be solemnly set apart for proclaiming the charter; let it be brought forth placed on the divine law, the Word of God; let a crown be placed thereon, by which the world may know, that so far as we approve of monarchy, that in America THE LAW IS KING. For as in absolute governments the king is law, so in free countries the law ought to be king, and there ought to be no other. But lest any ill use should afterwards arise, let the crown at the conclusion of the ceremony be demolished, and scattered among the people whose right it is.

A government of our own is our natural right; and when a man seriously reflects on the precariousness of human affairs, he will become convinced, that it is infinitely wiser and safer to form a constitution of our own in a cool deliberate manner, while we have it in our power, than to trust such an interesting event to time and chance. . . .

O ye that love mankind! Ye that dare oppose not only the tyranny but the tyrant, stand forth! Every spot of the old world is overrun with oppression. Freedom hath been hunted round the globe. Asia and Africa have long expelled her. Europe regards her like a stranger, and England hath given her warning to depart. O receive the fugitive, and prepare in time an asylum for mankind.

Although Paine was a recent immigrant, he felt at home in colonial America and even served in the revolutionary army. Said Paine, "Where liberty is, there is my country."

AUTHOR

Thomas Paine (1737–1809) worked as a corset maker and as a tax collector in England before immigrating to Philadelphia in 1774. There, he became a journalist. After *Common Sense*, he wrote a series of pamphlets defending the American Revolution (1775–1783). One of these pamphlets, *The Crisis*, began with the famous phrase. "These are the times that try men's souls."

RESPONSE

Only three months after its publication in January 1776, 120,000 copies of *Common Sense* had been sold. The American population then numbered 2.5 million. One of every 20 people had a copy. Almost every colonist read this best-seller or heard it discussed.