■ Common Sense

Date: January 9, 1776
Author: Paine, Thomas
Genre: political tract

"Society in every state is a blessing, but Government, even in its best state, is but a necessary evil . . .

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

Summary Overview

Radical and original in both message and writing style, the pamphlet *Common Sense* was a seminal document in the cause of American independence. Its author, Thomas Paine, was a newcomer to America who took full advantage of two opportunities: pursuing a career as a writer and joining in creating a new nation free of the imperfections that he felt he had left behind in England, including excessive taxation, rigid class distinctions, and, especially, a hereditary monarchy. *Common Sense* made its appearance at what was arguably the ideal moment for a call for American independence, when blood had already been spilled in battle and hopes for reconciliation between America and Britain were rapidly dimming; also, it made the case for independence with both reason and passion. The pamphlet attracted a huge audience and did much to set the stage for the congressional deliberations that led to the signing of the Declaration of Independence in July 1776.

Defining Moment

When the first edition of *Common Sense* was published, anonymously, in Philadelphia on January 9, 1776, the American Revolution was already in its ninth month. The battles at Lexington and Bunker Hill had taken their toll on both sides, the Continental Army had been formed under the command of George Washington, and the Second Continental Congress had convened in Philadelphia on July 8, 1775, signing the Olive Branch Petition affirming American loyalty to the British Crown and asking King George III to take steps toward effecting a reconciliation between the two warring sides. When envoys arrived in London with the petition, not only were they rebuffed, they also found that the king had just issued his Proclamation for Suppressing Rebellion and Sedition, which promised the harshest measures against the rebelling colonists.

News of the proclamation reached Philadelphia on November 9, 1775, and was a setback to the cause of those seeking reconciliation, as was the word that arrived from England, almost simultaneously with the publication of *Common Sense*, that King George had delivered a speech to Parliament in late October 1775 that denounced the American revolutionaries as a "desperate conspiracy" that he would suppress with armed force. At this critical moment, Paine's was not the only voice calling for independence, but his vigorous style and reasoning in *Common Sense* captivated the American people. At least 100,000 copies were sold in the colonies in three months, making it the most successful political tract in history to that time, and the pamphlet was printed in several other cities as well as in revised editions with added material. Once it gripped the minds of so many readers, it occupied a position

from which it could not be easily dislodged, and it put the opponents of independence on the defensive.

Following the publication of *Common Sense*, events proved sufficiently favorable to the revolutionary cause that nearly six months could comfortably elapse before Paine's recommendations became a reality. British forces were driven out of Boston and had yet to arrive in New York City as the Continental Congress deliberated behind closed doors in Philadelphia. In early June 1776 the Congress appointed a five-man committee to draft the Declaration of Independence. This declaration embodied Paine's idea that the tribulations that the colonies had suffered should be laid before the entire world, along with the record of futility they had experienced in soliciting justice from the king. Paine's ability to seize the moment and write a document that had so strong an impact on the course of events secured his place in American history.

Author Biography

Thomas Paine was born January 29, 1737, at Thetford, England. His father, Joseph Pain, was a Quaker and a maker of corset stays, and his mother, Frances, was the daughter of a local attorney. In keeping with his grandfather's status, Paine (who added the "e" to his surname when he migrated to America) attended the local grammar school but left at age twelve and pursued a living as a corset maker, schoolteacher, and excise officer (a kind of tax collector). He also served aboard a privateer during the Seven Years' War. From 1768 to 1774, he was an excise man at Lewes, England, where he joined the Headstrong Club, a forum for discussing politics. During this time, he wrote his first political tract, *The Case of the Officers of Excise* (1772).

While in London lobbying for higher pay, Paine was introduced by a member of the Excise Board to the representative of the American colonies, Benjamin Franklin, who in 1774 gave Paine a letter of introduction he could use in America. Fired from his government post, Paine legally separated from his second wife (the first had died in childbearing) and, with high hopes, set out for a fresh start in America.

Arriving in Philadelphia in late 1774, he was employed as editor of the *Pennsylvania Magazine*, and, showing himself to be of an independent mind, wrote articles in favor of women's rights and against slavery. His reputation as a revolutionary writer was secured when his pamphlet "Common Sense" was printed in Philadelphia in early January 1776. An avid supporter of General George Washington, he joined the army in the field, writing stories for Philadelphia newspapers. Between 1776 and 1783, he wrote thirteen political pamphlets in defense of the revolution, published as a series titled *The American Crisis*, and his wartime posts included secretary to the Continental Congress Committee of Foreign Affairs and clerk of the Pennsylvania Assembly.

In 1780, he traveled to Europe, receiving on his return to America a government position, awards of money and land, and election to the American Philosophical Society. Returning to Europe in 1790 to promote a bridge design, he was made an honorary citizen of France, which had begun its own revolution the year before. As he believed the principles he stood for in the American Revolution were the cause of people everywhere, in 1791 he produced a tract entitled *Rights of Man* that called on the British to rid themselves of the evils of monarchy and institute a government along the lines of that in the United States. Called to Paris in 1792 to help write a constitution for France, he was caught up in that country's revolutionary power struggle and spent almost a year in prison. Upon his release in 1794, he broke with Washington (by this time the first US president), accusing him of laxity in trying to secure Paine's release from prison, and saw to the publication of his antireligion tract, *The Age of Reason*. He settled again in the United States in 1802 and died in New York City on June 8, 1809.

HISTORICAL DOCUMENT

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 . . .

But admitting that matters were now made up, what would be the event? I answer, the ruin of the continent. And that for several reasons.

First. The powers of governing still remaining in the hands of the king, he will have a negative over the whole legislation of this continent. And as he hath shewn himself such an inveterate enemy to liberty, and discovered such a thirst for arbitrary power; is he, or is he not, a proper man to say to these colonies, *"You shall make no laws but what I please."* And is there any inhabitant in America so ignorant, as not to know, that according to what is called the *present constitution,* that this continent can make no laws but what the king gives it leave to; and is there any man so unwise, as not to see, that (considering what has happened) he will suffer no law to be made here, but such as suit *his* purpose. We may be as effectually enslaved by the want of laws in America, as by submitting to laws made for us in England. After matters are made up (as it is called) can there be any doubt, but the whole power of the crown will be exerted, to keep this continent as low and humble as possible? Instead of going forward we shall go backward, or be perpetually quarrelling or ridiculously petitioning. — We are already greater than the king wishes us to be, and will he not hereafter endeavour to make us less? To bring the matter to one point. Is the power who is jealous of our prosperity, a proper power to govern us? Whoever says *No* to this question is an *independent,* for independency means no more, than, whether we shall make our own laws, or, whether the king, the greatest enemy this continent hath, or can have, shall tell us, *"there shall be no laws but such as I like."*

But the king you will say has a negative in England; the people there can make no laws without his consent. In point of right and good order, there is something very ridiculous, that a youth of twenty-one (which hath often happened) shall say to several millions of people, older and wiser than himself, I forbid this or that act of yours to be law. But in this place I decline this sort of reply, though I will never cease to expose the absurdity of it, and only answer, that England being the King's residence, and America not so, make quite another case. The king's negative *here* is ten times more dangerous and fatal than it can be in England, for *there* he will scarcely refuse his consent to a bill for putting England into as strong a state of defence as possible, and in America he would never suffer such a bill to be passed.

America is only a secondary object in the system of British politics, England consults the good of *this* country, no farther than it answers her *own* purpose. Wherefore, her own interest leads her to suppress the growth of *ours* in every case which doth not promote her advantage, or in the least interferes with it. A pretty state we should soon be in under such a second-hand government, considering what has happened! Men do not change from enemies to friends by the alteration of a name: And in order to shew that reconciliation *now* is a dangerous doctrine, I affirm, *that it would be policy in the king at this time, to repeal the acts for the sake of reinstating himself in the government of the provinces;* in order that HE MAY ACCOMPLISH BY CRAFT AND SUBTILITY, IN THE LONG RUN, WHAT HE CANNOT DO BY FORCE AND VIOLENCE IN THE SHORT ONE. Reconciliation and ruin are nearly related.

Secondly. That as even the best terms, which we can expect to obtain, can amount to no more than a temporary expedient, or a kind of government by guardianship, which can last no longer than till the colonies come of age, so the general face and state of things, in the interim, will be unsettled and unpromising. Emi-

grants of property will not choose to come to a country whose form of government hangs but by a thread, and who is every day tottering on the brink of commotion and disturbance; and numbers of the present inhabitants would lay hold of the interval, to dispose of their effects, and quit the continent.

But the most powerful of all arguments, is, that nothing but independence, i.e. a continental form of government, can keep the peace of the continent and preserve it inviolate from civil wars. I dread the event of a reconciliation with Britain now, as it is more than probable, that it will be followed by a revolt somewhere or other, the consequences of which may be far more fatal than all the malice of Britain.

Thousands are already ruined by British barbarity; (thousands more will probably suffer the same fate.) Those men have other feelings than us who have nothing suffered. All they *now* possess is liberty, what they before enjoyed is sacrificed to its service, and having nothing more to lose, they disdain submission. Besides, the general temper of the colonies, towards a British government, will be like that of a youth, who is nearly out of his time; they will care very little about her. And a government which cannot preserve the peace, is no government at all, and in that case we pay our money for nothing; and pray what is it that Britain can do, whose power will be wholly on paper, should a civil tumult break out the very day after reconciliation? . . .

The colonies have manifested such a spirit of good order and obedience to continental government, as is sufficient to make every reasonable person easy and happy on that head. No man can assign the least pretence for his fears, on any other grounds, that such as are truly childish and ridiculous, viz. that one colony will be striving for superiority over another. . . .

If there is any true cause of fear respecting independence, it is because no plan is yet laid down. Men do not see their way out — Wherefore, as an opening into that business, I offer the following hints; at the same time modestly affirming, that I have no other opinion of them myself, than that they may be the means of giving rise to something better. Could the straggling thoughts of individuals be collected, they would frequently form materials for wise and able men to improve into useful matter.

Let the assemblies be annual, with a President only. The representation more equal. Their business wholly domestic, and subject to the authority of a Continental Congress.

Let each colony be divided into six, eight, or ten, convenient districts, each district to send a proper number of delegates to Congress, so that each colony send at least thirty. The whole number in Congress will be least 390. Each Congress to sit and to choose a president by the following method. When the delegates are met, let a colony be taken from the whole thirteen colonies by lot, after which, let the whole Congress choose (by ballot) a president from out of the delegates of *that* province . . .

But as there is a peculiar delicacy, from whom, or in what manner, this business must first arise, and as it seems most agreeable and consistent that it should come from some intermediate body between the governed and the governors, that is, between the Congress and the people, let a CONTINENTAL CONFERENCE be held, in the following manner, and for the following purpose.

A committee of twenty-six members of Congress, viz. two for each colony. Two members for each House of Assembly, or Provincial Convention; and five representatives of the people at large, to be chosen in the capital city or town of each province . . .

The conferring members being met, let their business be to frame a CONTINENTAL CHARTER, or Charter of the United Colonies; (answering to what is called the Magna Charta of England) fixing the number and manner of choosing members of Congress, members of Assembly, with their date of sitting, and drawing the line of business and jurisdiction between them: (Always remembering, that our strength is continental, not provincial:) Securing freedom and property to all men, and above all things, the free exercise of religion . . .

Should any body of men be hereafter delegated for this or some similar purpose, I offer them the following extracts from that wise observer on governments *Dragonetti*. "The science" says he "of the politician consists in fixing the true point of happiness and freedom. Those men would deserve the gratitude of ages, who should discover a mode of government that contained the greatest sum of individual happiness, with the least national expense." — *Dragonetti on virtue and rewards.*

But where says 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 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 as 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. If we omit it now, some, Massanello may hereafter arise, who laying hold of popular disquietudes, may collect together the desperate and discontented, and by assuming to themselves the powers of government, may sweep away the liberties of the continent like a deluge . . .

To talk of friendship with those in whom our reason forbids us to have faith, and our affections wounded through a thousand pores instruct us to detest, is madness and folly. Every day wears out the little remains of kindred between us and them, and can there be any reason to hope, that as the relationship expires, the affection will increase, or that we shall agree better, when we have ten times more and greater concerns to quarrel over than ever?

Ye that tell us of harmony and reconciliation, can ye restore to us the time that is past? Can ye give to prostitution its former innocence? Neither can ye reconcile Britain and America. The last cord now is broken, the people of England are presenting addresses against us. There are injuries which nature cannot forgive; she would cease to be nature if she did. As well can the lover forgive the ravisher of his mistress, as the continent forgive the murders of Britain. The Almighty hath implanted in us these unextinguishable feelings for good and wise purposes. They are the guardians of his image in our hearts. They distinguish us from the herd of common animals. The social compact would dissolve, and justice be extirpated from the earth, or have only a casual existence were we callous to the touches of affection. The robber, and the murderer, would often escape unpunished, did not the injuries which our tempers sustain, provoke us into justice.

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.

GLOSSARY

Dragonetti: Giacinto Dragonetti, an Italian reformer whose book *A Treatise on Rewards and Virtues* was published in England in 1769 Extirpated: eradicated

English constitution: not a single written document but a series of documents, laws, and accepted practices forming the basis of English government

Extirpated: eradicated

Magna Charta: (Magna Carta) document signed by King John of England in 1215 pledging himself to be bound by law

Massanello: (Masaniello) Tommaso Aniello, a fisherman of Naples, Italy, who led a revolt against Spanish rule in 1647

Document Analysis

Far from being chosen arbitrarily, the title of *Common Sense* has to be recognized as a useful rhetorical commonplace that sets the tone for the entire document. Recommended as a fitting title by Paine's fellow revolutionary Benjamin Rush of Philadelphia, the term "common sense" had already picked up in English political discourse a connotation of simple, practical reasoning, often by an anonymous writer, offered to make clear the wisest course of action in a given situation. Paine's readers can see the reasoning thread its way through the pamphlet as Paine speaks of his subject seemingly as a practical man who wants nothing more than to promote the best possible government for the American people. Appeal to authority, which might be thought of as an alternative to common sense as a way of establishing truth, is used sparingly, as only a handful of authors and one book (the Bible) are mentioned, and Paine offers neither his own name nor his credentials as a means of bolstering his arguments.

It is the historical anecdote, the factual observation (not always strictly accurate), and the apt metaphor (occasionally offering an insidious comparison) on which Paine chiefly relies to support his reasoning. Apparently he sees his target audience as those who are as yet undecided on independence, or even skeptical of it, as he does not make an explicit call for independence until the end, and he precedes that call with a set of arguments designed to bring the reader to embrace the thesis step-by-step once the inductive pattern is complete. However, Paine also signals that he has on his mind inhabitants of every land when he writes in the introduction, "The cause of America is in a great measure the cause of all mankind."

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

The body of the pamphlet is divided into four major sections, the first of which is "On the Origin and Design of Government in General, with Concise Remarks on the English Constitution." In this first section, Paine asserts that "society in every state is a blessing, but Government, even in its best state, is but a necessary evil." He elaborates on this by describing how people in some remote place presumably will unite in society to pool their labor, but when the worse side of human nature threatens to disrupt that society, government becomes necessary "to supply the defect of moral virtue." As a society advances, a parliament will form, consisting of every man with his own vote; later a representative assembly will assume this role but maintain the democratic nature of the earlier system. This picture of government emerging out of necessity is obviously one that Paine's readers can apply, if they wish, to the development of colonial America, and its natural simplicity lays the ground for Paine to attack the English constitution as bloated, overly complicated, and given to divided government, with a king checked not so much by the defective constitution as by the nature of the English people.

"On Heredity and Hereditary Succession"

The second major section of the pamphlet is entitled "On Heredity and Hereditary Succession," in which Paine attacks the very institution of monarchy. Asserting that monarchies originated among heathens, he draws on the Book of Judges and the Book of Samuel in the Old Testament to present his own version of "Hebraic Republicanism," a doctrine that had emerged in the seventeenth century in England as a means of discrediting the English monarchy and that was based on the belief that ancient Israel provided a model for a kingless nation-state. As Paine recounts the historical record set down in the Old Testament sources, the ancient Hebrews did without kings for thousands of years, ruled instead by judges and elders, and only out of delusion and sinfulness did they eventually ask God to give them a king. In developing this argument, Paine quotes at length from scripture, constituting the most extensive use of quotation from authority in any part of *Common Sense*. As Paine still adhered to Quakerism at this point in his life (he later became a deist), he presumably accepted the authority of the Bible and assumed here that his largely Protestant audience would do so as well (the fact that he aims his message at a Protestant audience and spurns Catholic readers is shown at another point by his equating the monarchy to "Popery," an example of his use of insidious comparison).

Switching his attention to the future, Paine goes on to attack hereditary monarchy as posterity threat to the future health of the nation. He points out the folly of giving any king the right to impose the rule of his heirs upon the governed, as such a practice could easily lead to rule by an incompetent successor. Further, Paine argues that any hereditary line of kingly succession likely began with a usurper who took power by force. Usurpation, Paine says, is but one way of gaining a throne, the other two being by election or by lot; he asserts that if

by lot or election, it should have continued so, but if by usurpation, as he believes is the case in England, then no one can reasonably defend the monarchy.

Paine continues to attack hereditary monarchy by further examining the history of the English Crown. Rule by kings, he argues, is no method of avoiding civil strife, as thirty English kings and two minors had ruled since the Norman Conquest, with a consequent eight civil wars and nineteen rebellions. Paine can find no useful purpose in having a king, especially in England. In sum, Paine finds nothing good and much bad about monarchy as a form of government (in later years, Paine claimed to have been influenced in these opinions by two tracts written by the seventeenth-century writer John Milton. However, Milton's grievance was chiefly against King Charles I, and he wrote in justification of the king's execution, whereas Paine's grievance is clearly against the hereditary monarchy as an institution).

"Thoughts on the Present State of American Affairs"

The third major section of *Common Sense*—from which the above excerpt is taken—is devoted to "Thoughts on the Present State of American Affairs." Paine first dismisses all plans and proposals regarding the colonies and England before the Battle of Lexington in April 1775 as "superseded and useless now." With this statement, his need for narrative is greatly lessened, and, indeed, he is freed from expounding on much that, as a recent immigrant to America, he would know of only secondhand. Being well aware that many colonists still hold hopes of reconciliation, however, he sets out to refute the arguments for that option, which he enumerates as follows: America has thrived under British rule; British military might has protected America; Britain is the parent country and the colonies her children; Americans are of English descent and should therefore maintain allegiance to Britain; and united, the colonies and Britain can defy the world. To the first argument, Paine replies that America would have thrived as much under no European power. To the argument about military protection, he replies that Britain's protection was always pursued in the self-interest of Britain and not of America. Regarding the next point, he replies that if Britain is the parent country, so greater is its shame for the way it has treated the colonies. To the argument about family connections, he asserts that such bonds are too tenuous to apply to occupants of another continent, and, even if all Americans were of English descent, which they are not, it would signify little, as Britain has become America's enemy. To the final argument, that Britain and the colonies are stronger together, he argues that the supposed advantage is mere presumption, and that, furthermore, America's future is not one of defiance but of "peace and friendship with all Europe." In sum, Paine writes, "I challenge the warmest advocate for reconciliation to show a single advantage that this continent can reap by being connected with Great Britain."

After his rebuttals to the arguments in favor of reconciliation, Paine offers additional arguments for separation from England. The first argument is that beyond the bloodshed already inflicted, in the future, America will be dragged by England into European wars: "The blood of the slain, the weeping voice of nature cries, 'TIS TIME TO PART." A second argument is geographical, but (again with an eye to his readers' religiosity) imbued with divine meaning, as Paine argues that the sheer distance between England and America shows that the former's authority over the latter was "never the design of heaven." A third argument is that a split between America and England is inevitable, that it would be best accomplished immediately, and that among Americans it is only from the self-interested, the weak, the prejudiced, and the delusional that opposition is made to independence, thus stigmatizing those who will not yield to his arguments.

Paine argues that even if the pre-Revolution relations were somehow restored between America and Britain, they would eventually relapse with even worse results. Indeed, he writes, some men take too lightly the injuries already inflicted on America, and these men only deceive themselves and invite ruin on their posterity. Noting the death and destitution that had been visited on many, he asks his readers if they have so suffered, and brands those who answer yes but who are still for reconciliation as having "the heart of a coward, and the spirit of a sycophant." Paine knows that here he is evoking emotions of shame and horror, but he excuses himself on the grounds that he only wants to awaken his audience and make it understand that America, not Britain, is the stumbling block to freedom: "'Tis not in the power of Britain or of Europe to conquer America, if she do not conquer herself by *delay* and *timidity*."

After arguing that things cannot be left to the next generation to settle, and that anything short of independence would be an insufficient solution to the colonists' predicament, and by asserting that it is the king, and not merely his ministries, that must be defeated, Paine

tackles the question of what will transpire if the king is left with power over America. First, Paine writes, there will be no laws over America except what the king allows, and, thus, the welfare of England will always be given top priority. Second, things will be in an unsettled state that over time will dissuade immigration to and encourage emigration from America.

On the other hand, to allay fears over the unknown consequences independence might bring, Paine paints an agreeable picture of America's ability for self-governance, the colonies having so far handled their affairs in an orderly fashion. He proposes that the new government might be best organized along the lines of a president and an assembly of at least 390 men representing districts in their respective colonies; that a continental conference be convened for the purpose of establishing a continental charter; and that in the absence of a human king, it will be that "in America the LAW IS KING." Paine closes this third section of *Common Sense* with a recapitulation that the time to act is now, that no good will come of delay, and that true reconciliation is impossible, invoking an insidious comparison by asking, "Can ye give to prostitution its former innocence? Neither can you reconcile England and America."

"Of the Present Ability of America with Some Miscellaneous Reflections"

The fourth and last major section of *Common Sense* is entitled "Of the Present Ability of America with Some Miscellaneous Reflections." Here, Paine addresses the practical questions that arise from a consideration of independence. He cites the lack of American debt as a good sign that an adequate army and navy can be established; in a later edition of the pamphlet, he appears to fall back on his knowledge of naval affairs from his voyage on a privateer by adding an explanation of how practical and affordable an American navy would be, while at the same time denigrating the British Navy as being much more formidable on paper than in reality. To play up America's ability to field an army, he asserts that a small population and modest trade is more conducive to raising a large army than a large population consumed by matters of trade, and that it is typically the new nation that displays the greatest achievements. Paine also speaks in favor of religious freedom, which he says independence would protect (he does not claim that it is in danger, but again it may sit well with the religious in his audience to be assured that whatever sect they may embrace, it will be more secure in a country without an official church). Finally, after repeating his earlier arguments in favor of a large and equal representation, he comes to his conclusion by spelling out the need for a "declaration of independence" and its advantages; specifically, he says that without such a declaration, no foreign power will mediate the American quarrel with Britain (although nowhere earlier does he claim any need for mediation), that neither France nor Spain will assist the American cause (this despite his earlier argument that America can raise a sufficient army and navy by itself), and that Americans will appear as rebels in the eyes of foreign nations (and that it would be injurious to their own peace if they were to support America). On the other hand, Paine asserts, by declaring to foreign powers all the injustices heaped on America by Britain and the unsuccessful steps taken to gain redress for these injustices, the result will be far better than that gained by further petitions to Britain. The steps to be taken, Paine promises, will soon seem agreeable, and Americans will no longer be like a man who keeps putting off unpleasant business.

The fact that *Common Sense* was a political tract has a great deal to do with the uses Paine made of it. He wished to present his arguments anonymously, for they are bold. Being likely to excite public sentiment, he wanted to avoid making himself the focus of controversy or seeming to seek personal glory through his discourse. This anonymity would not be possible through a sermon or other form of public speaking. Furthermore, from a strictly practical standpoint, Paine was a writer and not an orator. Paine undoubtedly recognized the value of communicating in enough detail to adequately explain and support his claims, which would argue against not only a brief article or letter but also an overly lengthy format that would tire the reader's attention or create too high a purchase price for the average person; in these respects a pamphlet was clearly superior to a book. Many of the figures of speech that might be useful in a spoken message could be dispensed with, and Paine was free to write in an accessible style that still had force and occasionally gave rise to truly memorable and artful phrases that have stood the test of time and mark Paine as a great political writer.

Essential Themes

The idea of American independence was not Paine's alone, but of the many writers that appeared in print following the outbreak of the American Revolution,

none expressed his arguments with such vigor and clarity. Not only did Paine espouse the ideas in *Common Sense* itself, but also he was eager to defend them against the attacks that inevitably came from the opposing side. The Reverend William Smith, provost of what became the University of Philadelphia and a leading Loyalist, wrote a series of articles under the pen name of "Cato" that called for continued efforts to reach reconciliation with England, stressed the advantages that the connection with England afforded the colonies, and warned of the unforeseeable risks of independence. Writing under the pseudonym of "Forester," Paine shot back with a series of letters published in April and May 1776 that not only offered a detailed rebuttal to Smith's arguments but also served to keep the public's attention fixed on the subject of independence. While the Declaration of Independence that emerged in July 1776 was the work of other men, notably Thomas Jefferson, it was a document that clearly took inspiration from, among other sources, Paine and *Common Sense*.

If independence was a theme that was of particular concern to Americans, the cause of freedom and democratic rule was one with wider appeal that could find adherents among those in other countries who took their inspiration from Enlightenment thinkers such as John Locke. Paine claimed late in life that he had never read Locke, but he was sufficiently immersed in the world of ideas of his day to develop a practical philosophy adequate to his task. Coming on the heels of success in America, his efforts to stimulate democracy in Britain and France and to oppose the monarchies of both were natural extensions of his belief that the cause of freedom knew no national boundaries. In America, his vision of a national government was in its basic design not unlike the framework adopted by the Constitutional Convention in 1787, but there were those (including John Adams, who later dubbed the period of the Revolutionary War the "Age of Paine," in a derisive rather than complimentary sense) who tended to equate democracy with mob rule and thus felt no admiration for Paine's democratic tendencies. In England, any thought of abandoning the hereditary monarchy was doomed by tradition, and thus the arguments against it in Paine's *Rights of Man* were offered in vain. In France, mob rule did indeed seem to take hold after the overthrow of Louis XVI led to the Reign of Terror; Paine's efforts to point revolutionary France in a positive direction almost cost him his life and did nothing to impede the eventual rise of dictatorship.

Lawrence W. Haapanen, PhD

Bibliography

Larkin, Edward. *Thomas Paine and the Literature of Revolution*. New York: Cambridge UP, 2005. Print.

Nelson, Craig. *Thomas Paine: Enlightenment, Revolution, and the Birth of Modern Nations*. New York: Viking, 2006. Print.

Paine, Thomas. *Common Sense and Other Writings*. Ed. J. M. Opal. New York: Norton, 2012. Print.

Rosenfeld, Sophia. *Common Sense: A Political History*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2011. Print.

Wilson, David A. *Paine and Cobbett: The Transatlantic Connection*. Kingston, ON: McGill-Queen's UP 1988. Print.

Additional Reading

Ellis, Joseph J. *American Creation: Triumphs and Tragedies of the Founders of the Republic*. New York: Knopf, 2007. Print.

Ferling, John. *Setting the World Ablaze: Washington, Adams, Jefferson, and the American Revolution*. New York: Oxford UP, 2000. Print.

Smith, Barbara Clark. *The Freedoms We Lost: Consent and Resistance in Revolutionary America*. New York: New, 2010. Print.

Wood, Gordon S. *The Radicalism of the American Revolution*. New York: Knopf, 1992. Print.

---. *Revolutionary Characters: What Made the Founders Different*. New York: Penguin, 2006. Print.

LESSON PLAN: **A Powerful Cry for American Independence**

Students analyze *Common Sense*, examine its impact on popular support for American independence in 1776, and evaluate its place among political documents in American history.

Learning Objectives

Analyze multiple causation of the American Revolution, including its political, ideological, religious, and economic origins; consider multiple perspectives about how the decision to declare independence was reached; interrogate historical data to uncover the context for the popularity of *Common Sense*; evaluate debates about the influence of *Common Sense* in American history.

Materials: Thomas Paine, *Common Sense* (1776); "The Declaration and Resolves of the First Continental Congress" (1774); the Declaration of Independence (1776).

Overview Questions

What reasons does Paine present in his pamphlet to support American independence? What form of government does Paine recommend the colonies form, and why? What are the similarities and differences between the First Continental Congress's "Declaration and Resolves" and *Common Sense*? What factors account for the differences? How influential a document was *Common Sense* in American history, and why?

Step 1: Comprehension Questions

Why does Paine claim that the king is "an inveterate enemy to liberty"? Why does Paine state "America is only a secondary object in . . . British politics"?

- **Activity:** Have students discuss passages related to Paine's arguments against remaining loyal to England. Have student pairs list reasons from *Common Sense* that justify American independence.

Step 2: Comprehension Questions

What reasons does Paine give in calling for "a continental form of government"? Do you think Paine's audience agreed with him that "in America THE LAW IS KING"? Why or why not? What is Paine's purpose in declaring, "[a] government of our own is our natural right"?

- **Activity:** Have students summarize Paine's views on government; ask volunteers to read aloud their summaries. Have students discuss whether Paine's arguments justify American independence.

Step 3: Context Questions

Both "Declaration and Resolves" and *Common Sense* present similar arguments for the rights of Americans. Why did Paine call for independence, while the First Continental Congress did not? What principles do these two documents share with the Declaration of Independence, and why?

- **Activity:** Have students create a Venn diagram to compare and contrast these documents; have students present and discuss their diagrams.

Step 4: Exploration Questions

Many historians consider *Common Sense* one of America's most important political documents. Do you agree? Why or why not?

- **Activity:** Have students list five documents they consider the most influential in American history and their reasons why; have students present and evaluate their lists in small groups.

Step 5: Response Paper

Word length and additional requirements set by Instructor. Students answer the research question in the Overview Questions. Students state a thesis and use as evidence passages from the primary source document as well as support from supplemental materials assigned in the lesson.