

Common Sense

After fighting had broken out at Lexington and Concord, England's King George III expressed his view of the British-colonial relationship in a speech to Parliament On October 27, 1775. Both the king and the majority party in Parliament viewed any compromise with the colonies as a threat to the continued existence of the British Empire.

King George declared that the American colonies were in rebellion against the crown and therefore subject to military intervention.

In part, King George III said to Parliament,

The authors and promoters of this desperate conspiracy have, in the conduct of it, derived great advantage from the difference of our intentions and theirs.

They meant only to amuse by vague expressions of attachment to the Parent State, and the strongest protestations of loyalty to me, whilst they were preparing for a general revolt.

On our part, though it was declared in your last session that a rebellion existed within the province of the Massachusetts Bay; yet even that province we wished rather to reclaim than to subdue.

The resolutions of Parliament breathed a spirit of moderation and forbearance; conciliatory propositions accompanied the measures taken to enforce authority; and the coercive acts were adapted to cases of criminal combinations amongst subjects not then in arms.

I have acted with the same temper; anxious to prevent, if it had been possible, the effusion of the blood of my subjects; and the calamities which are inseparable from a state of war ...

... still hoping that my people in America would have discerned the traitorous views of their leaders, and have been convinced, that to be a subject of Great Britain, with all its consequences, is to be the freest member of any civil society in the known world.

The rebellious war now levied is become more general, and is manifestly carried on for the purpose of establishing an independent empire. I need not dwell upon the fatal effects of the success of such a plan.

The object is too important, the spirit of the British nation too high, the resources with which God hath blessed her too numerous, to give up so many Colonies which she has planted with great industry, nursed with great tenderness, encouraged with many commercial advantages, and protected and defended at much expence of blood and treasure.

It is now become the part of wisdom, and (in its effects) of clemency, to put a speedy end to these disorders by the most decisive exertions, For this purpose, I have increased my naval establishment, and greatly augmented my land forces; but in such a manner as may be the least burthensome to my kingdoms. ...

When the unhappy and deluded multitude, against whom this force will be directed, shall become sensible of their error, I shall be ready to receive the misled with tenderness and mercy!

W. H.

COMMON SENSE;

ADDRESSED TO THE

W. Hamilton

INHABITANTS

O F

A M E R I C A,

On the following interesting

S U B J E C T S.

- I. Of the Origin and Design of Government in general, with concise Remarks on the English Constitution.
- II. Of Monarchy and Hereditary Succession.
- III. Thoughts on the present State of American Affairs.
- IV. Of the present Ability of America, with some miscellaneous Reflections.

By Thomas Paine

Man knows no Master save creating HEAVEN,
Or those whom choice and common good ordain.

THOMSON.

PHILADELPHIA;

Printed, and Sold, by R. BELL, in Third-Street.

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Common Sense - Thomas Paine's Response to the King's Speech

Thomas Paine wrote a response to the king's pronouncement, for which his friend Dr. Benjamin Rush suggested the title *Common Sense* (the full title is *Common Sense; Addressed to the Inhabitants of America*). Paine argued that the cause of America should not be just a revolt against taxation but a demand for independence.

Paine was born and raised in England to a Quaker family of modest means in Norfolk, England in 1737. His formal education ended when he was 12 years old, after which he pursued various occupations without great success.

In 1774 he emigrated to Philadelphia, where he soon took on the job of editing Robert Aitken's radical new monthly newspaper, the *Pennsylvania Magazine*. Paine loved controversy, hated the British aristocracy, and was devoted to the Enlightenment ideal of individual liberty. So it comes as no surprise that he was an immediate and vocal supporter of American independence. (Magen Mulderon)

Paine had originally intended *Common Sense* to appear in newspapers in several installments, but he realized that his argument was more convincing when taken as a whole. So he contracted with Philadelphia printer Robert Bell to publish the work.

When it was first published in 1776, *Common Sense* did not credit its author. Its publisher, the wealthy Benjamin Rush, was also anonymous. For many months, while the pamphlet was the talk of the colonies, the public didn't know who wrote or published it.

Paine wanted it that way, both because his arguments against British rule would bring government retaliation, and because he shared the Enlightenment belief that ideas were more important than the identity of the speaker expressing them. (Institute for Free Speech)

In part, Paine writes in *Common Sense*,

Absolute governments (tho' the disgrace of human nature) have this advantage with them, that they are simple; if the people suffer, they know the head from which their suffering springs, know likewise the remedy, and are not bewildered by a variety of causes and cures.

But the constitution of England is so exceedingly complex, that the nation may suffer for years together without being able to discover in which part the fault lies, some will say in one and some in another, and every political physician will advise a different medicine.

I know it is difficult to get over local or long standing prejudices, yet if we will suffer ourselves to examine the component parts of the English constitution, we shall find them to be the base remains of two ancient tyrannies, compounded with some new republican materials.

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.

COMMON SENSE.

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 on 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 chuse the least. *Wherefore* security being the true design and end of government, it unanswerably follows, that whatever *form* thereof appears most likely to insure it to us, with the least expence and greatest benefit, is preferable to all others.

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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 a union of three powers reciprocally checking each other, is farcical, either the words have no meaning, or they are flat contradictions.

To say that the commons is a check upon the king, presupposes two things:

First.—That the king is 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!

There is something exceedingly ridiculous in the composition of monarchy; it first excludes a man from the means of information, yet empowers him to act in cases where the highest judgment is required. The state of a king shuts him from the world, yet the business of a king requires him to know it thoroughly; wherefore the different parts, by unnaturally opposing and destroying each other, prove the whole character to be absurd and useless. ...

That the crown is this overbearing part in the English constitution needs not be mentioned, and that it derives its whole consequence merely from being the giver of places and pensions is self-evident, wherefore, though we have been wise enough to shut and lock a door against absolute monarchy, we at the same time have been foolish enough to put the crown in possession of the key.

The prejudice of Englishmen, in favour of their own government by king, lords and commons, arises as much or more from national pride than reason. Individuals are undoubtedly safer in England than in some other countries, but the will of the king is as much the law of the land in Britain as in France, with this difference, that instead of proceeding directly from his mouth, it is handed to the people under the more formidable shape of an act of parliament. For the fate of Charles the first, hath only made kings more subtle—not more just.

Wherefore, laying aside all national pride and prejudice in favour of modes and forms, the plain truth is, that it is wholly owing to the constitution of the people, and not to the constitution of the government that the crown is not as oppressive in England as in Turkey.

An inquiry into the constitutional errors in the English form of government is at this time highly necessary, for as we are never in a proper condition of doing justice to others, while we continue under the influence of some leading partiality, so neither are we capable of doing it to ourselves while we remain fettered by any obstinate prejudice. And as a man, who is attached to a prostitute, is unfitted to choose or judge of a wife, so any prepossession in favour of a rotten constitution of government will disable us from discerning a good one.

Paine concludes Commons Sense saying,

Immediate necessity makes many things convenient, which if continued would grow into oppressions. Expedience and right are different things. When the calamities of America required a consultation, there was no method so ready, or at that time so proper, as to appoint persons from the several Houses of Assembly for that purpose;

and the wisdom with which they have proceeded hath preserved this continent from ruin. But as it is more than probable that we shall never be without a Congress, every well wisher to good order, must own, that the mode for choosing members of that body, deserves consideration.

And I put it as a question to those, who make a study of mankind, whether representation and election is not too great a power for one and the same body of men to possess? When we are planning for posterity, we ought to remember, that virtue is not hereditary.

It is from our enemies that we often gain excellent maxims, and are frequently surprised into reason by their mistakes ...

To Conclude, however strange it may appear to some, or however unwilling they may be to think so, matters not, but many strong and striking reasons may be given, to shew, that nothing can settle our affairs so expeditiously as an open and determined declaration for independance. Some of which are,

First.—It is the custom of nations, when any two are at war, for some other powers, not engaged in the quarrel, to step in as mediators, and bring about the preliminaries of a peace: but while America calls herself the Subject of Great-Britain, no power, however well disposed she may be, can offer her mediation. Wherefore, in our present state we may quarrel on for ever.

Secondly.—It is unreasonable to suppose, that France or Spain will give us any kind of assistance, if we mean only, to make use of that assistance for the purpose of repairing the breach, and strengthening the connection between Britain and America; because, those powers would be sufferers by the consequences.

Thirdly.—While we profess ourselves the subjects of Britain, we must, in the eye of foreign nations, be considered as rebels. The precedent is somewhat dangerous to their peace, for men to be in arms under the name of subjects; we, on the spot, can solve the paradox: but to unite resistance and subjection, requires an idea much too refined for common understanding.

Fourthly.—Were a manifesto to be published, and despatched to foreign courts, setting forth the miseries we have endured, and the peaceable methods we have ineffectually used for redress; declaring, at the same time, that not being able, any longer, to live happily or safely under the cruel disposition of the British court, we had been driven to the necessity of breaking off all connections with her; at the same time, assuring all such courts of our peaceable disposition towards them, and of our desire of entering into trade with them: Such a memorial would produce more good effects to this Continent, than if a ship were freighted with petitions to Britain.

Under our present denomination of British subjects, we can neither be received nor heard abroad: The custom of all courts is against us, and will be so, until, by an independance, we take rank with other nations.

Common Sense Printing and Distribution

Thomas Paine's *Common Sense* was originally published on January 10, 1776; the pamphlet is famous as one of the most influential essays in history, credited with convincing large portions of the American colonies that independence from Great Britain was necessary. Without Paine's work, the American Revolution as we know it may not have happened.

Common Sense's first printing consisted of 1000 copies, with profits to be split evenly between the author and publisher. By January 20 Bell was advertising a "new edition" in press, which likely means that the first printing had already sold out.

Paine had already publicly announced a plan to use his share of the profits from *Common Sense* to buy mittens for the Continental Army in Quebec. However, Robert Bell insisted that printing costs had eaten up all the profits from the first edition and that he owed Paine nothing. A very public feud commenced between Paine and his publisher, with accusations and counter-accusations printed in the *Pennsylvania Evening Post*.



Bell published his unauthorized "second edition" (really just a reprint of the first edition) on January 27. Paine meanwhile contracted with printers Thomas and William Bradford to publish, at the author's expense, a "new edition" with "large and interesting additions by the author" and a response to Quaker objections to a military rebellion. The Bradford edition was published in February and sold for half the price (one shilling) of Bell's.

Undeterred, Bell produced a third edition that not only pirated the additional materials from the Bradford edition, but also included a section called "Large Additions to *Common Sense*," which reprinted several pieces by other authors. Paine was predictably incensed by this and published another denunciation in the *Post*, to which Bell then responded in kind.

Despite - or more likely, because of - this feud, copies of *Common Sense* continued to sell briskly in Philadelphia.

Paine often gets credit for more or less single-handedly galvanizing the reluctant colonists to commit to the war of independence. As one historian puts it "*Common Sense* swept the country [sic] like a prairie fire," and "as a direct result of this overwhelming distribution, the Declaration of Independence was unanimously ratified on July 4, 1776.

This may be overstating the case a bit. Paine's pamphlet was certainly popular and influential in revolutionary America, but the real story of *Common Sense*'s creation, dissemination, and reception is less straightforward - and perhaps more interesting - than the myth. (Mulderon)

There were many loyalist rebuttals of Common Sense. One of the earliest and best known is Plain Truth: Addressed to the Inhabitants of North America, written by Maryland planter James Chalmers under the generic pseudonym Candidus.

Paine's follow-up to Common Sense was a series of pamphlets called The American Crisis. General George Washington had the first pamphlet read to his troops at Washington's Crossing in late 1776 to convince them to extend their enlistments so he could attack Trenton.

"These are the times that try men's souls: The summer soldier and the sunshine patriot will, in this crisis, shrink from the service of their country; but he that stands it now, deserves the love and thanks of man and woman. Tyranny, like Hell, is not easily conquered; yet we have this consolation with us, that the harder the conflict, the more glorious the triumph," said Paine.

In his later years, Paine would become a controversial figure because of his writings on religion and his role in the French revolution.

President Thomas Jefferson had permitted Paine to return from France in his final years and wrote about the author in 1821.

Paine wrote for a country which permitted him to push his reasoning to whatever length it would go ... no writer has exceeded Paine in ease and familiarity of style; in perspicuity of expression, happiness of elucidation, and in simple and unassuming language.

[I]n this he may be compared with Dr Franklin: and indeed his Common sense was, for a while, believed to have been written by Dr Franklin, and published under the borrowed name of Paine, who had come over with him from England. (National Archives)

Only a handful of people attended his funeral in 1809.

Information here is primarily from Free Speech Institute; Library of Congress; National Archives; Magen Mulderon; Dennis Byrne; David Clark; Warren County Schools; Washington Post; BBC; UKTV; Britannica

In an effort to provide a brief, informal background summary of various people, places and events related to the American Revolution, I made this informal compilation from a variety of sources. This is not intended to be a technical reference document, nor an exhaustive review of the subject. Rather, it is an assemblage of information and images from various sources on basic background information. For ease in informal reading, in many cases, specific quotations and citations and attributions are often not included – however, sources are noted in the summary. The images and text are from various sources and are presented for personal, noncommercial and/or educational purposes. Thanks, Peter T. Young