

Common Sense

by

Thomas Paine

Summarized by Rosie the Riveter

Historical and Biographical Note:

The pamphlet *Common Sense* was written by Thomas Paine in 1775 and first published in Philadelphia on January 9, 1776. Many consider it the most successful piece of propaganda ever written in the United States. Many consider that it reflected the opinions of many colonists at that time and also served to galvanize the opinions of many, and make real the idea that the colonies should indeed be separate from England and should indeed be an independent nation.

He points out why a monarchy should not be followed, and advocates the necessary separation from Britain. It recommends a Declaration of Independence, which followed on July 4, 1776, six months after the appearance of *Common Sense*. There are those who feel that without Paine and this small pamphlet there would not have been created in so many colonists such a burning desire to separate from England, and a willingness to risk their "lives, their fortune, and their sacred honor" to achieve independence.

Thomas Paine was born in Thetford, England January 29, 1737. His father, Joseph Paine, was a Quaker. Thomas was given a good, basic education. As a boy, he learned of the horrors of capital punishment, and passed by on his way to school the stocks and pillory, hearing the shrieks of pain administered to people. Paine protested this, and later in his writings became very much an advocate for human rights. (Note: Thomas Paine wrote many essays, including one outrightly condemning slavery. He called on those involved in the business of slavery to note that they are accountable to God. Paine also wrote an essay on the plight of women, saying that in many parts of the world they were chattel property of men. These are just two of many powerful essays that he wrote.)

His father was a staymaker (maker of corsets) and Thomas worked at that for four years. In 1756 when war was declared against France, Paine went to sea on "The King of Prussia, Captain Mendez" After that, he did not return to Thetford, but became a staymaker in London, then Dover, then Sandwich, Kent, where he met and married Mary Lambert. Not much data is given on this, but the following year, his wife died.

Paine returned to London, and became friends with Benjamin Franklin, and other men of note. Franklin urged Paine to seek his fortune in America, and gave him formal letters of endorsement and recognition of Thomas Paine's genius and worth. These letters were introductory letters to people in Philadelphia, and especially to Franklin's son-in-law, asking to make Paine welcome and help him find work. Paine arrived there November 30, 1774.

So Paine worked, instructing some gentlemen's sons, and he became the editor of the *Pennsylvania Magazine*, where he penned articles that interested people, and the circulation of the magazine increased.

At this time in America the colonies for several years had been victims of British government taxes, and levies. The colonists had petitioned the King, to no effect. King George III ruled as a tyrant, with an iron hand. In 1771 two hundred lives had been lost in a rebellion in North Carolina. There were frequent skirmishes between colonists and British soldiers who had been stationed there. On April 19, 1775, British troops attacked and killed seven "minute men" (which you'll recall were the security alerts posted by the colonists) in Lexington, Massachusetts, and wounded many.

It was into this climate that "Common Sense" was written. It was very popular. In Philadelphia, it sold as fast as it came off the presses. It was read aloud in taverns. It influenced George Washington and many of those that later met to create the Declaration of Independence.

At the time there were 2.5 million colonists. There are varying estimates of the number of copies sold, from a low of 75,000 copies sold in the colonies to 500,000 total copies sold in the colonies and England and especially France. It went through about 25 reported printings that are "official." As Paine gave permission to just about anyone who wanted to print it and gave up any claim to royalties from its sale, and as it was copied by hand and partial copies were printed in newspapers, and as copies were read aloud in taverns to those who could not read, or understand easily some of its arguments, the total number of people who were familiar with the ideas presented in the book was undoubtedly much greater than the number of people who actually bought a copy. It has been argued that its effect was as if 20% of the population had bought a copy. That would be the equivalent of a book that sold 60 million or more copies today.

The book is about IDEAS, and the power of ideas to induce people to ACTION for a common cause. We here at FastBookx consider it one of the most important works written at a very important time of our history, fully comparable in worth to the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution. We realize that is an extreme statement. We feel every young person (and adult) in America should read it as part of their basic education on America and its history. We feel that young people and adults in other countries may find much of value in it as well.

Enjoy.

Summary of "Common Sense:"

From the Introduction: "Perhaps sentiments contained in the following pages, are not yet sufficiently fashionable to procure them general favor; 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.....As a long and violent abuse of power is generally the means of calling the right of it in question,.....In the following sheets, the author has studiously avoided every thing which is personal among ourselves. Compliments as well as censure to individuals make no part thereof"....

The cause of America is in a great measure the cause of all mankind. Many circumstances have arisen, 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.

*definition of *extirpate*: "root out, destroy completely"

Postscript to Introduction in the Third Edition: 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 Independence. As no answer hath yet appeared, it is now assumed 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 unconnected 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.

"Society in every state is a blessing, but government, even in its best state, is a necessary evil; in its worse state an intolerable one..... 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."

He wrote that as the colonies increase that it's found to be best to divide into electorates and have representatives in government, and that the elected might return and mix again with the general body of electors in a few months. "And as this frequent interchange will establish a common interest with every part of the community, they will mutually and naturally support each other, and on this,(not on the unmeaning name of a king) depends the strength of government, and the happiness of the governed."

"Absolute governments (though the disgrace of human nature) have this advantage with them, 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.

The English Constitution has 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 person of the peers. Thirdly, the new Republican materials, in the persons of the Commons, on whose virtue depends the freedom of England. The first two, being hereditary are independent of the people.

To say that the Constitution of England is a union of three powers, reciprocally checking each other is a farce, and states that one or the other cannot be trusted , or one is wiser than the other.

"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 judgement 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.

"...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."

"OF MONARCHY AND HEREDITARY SUCCESSION"

"Mankind being originally equals in the order of creation... In the early ages of the world, according to the scripture chronology, there were no kings; the consequence of which was, there were no wars; it is the pride of kings which throws mankind into confusion... Antiquity favors the same remark; for the quiet and rural lives of the first Patriarchs have a happy something in them, which vanishes away when we come to the history of Jewish royalty. Government by kings was first introduced by the heathens, from whom the children of Israel copied the custom.....As the exalting one man so greatly above the rest cannot be justified on the equal rights of nature, so neither can it be defended on the authority of scripture; for the will of the Almighty, as declared by Gideon, and the prophet Samuel, expressly disapproves of government by kings.

Near three thousand years passed away, from the Mosaic account of the creation, till the Jews under a national delusion requested a king....The children of Israel proposed making Gideon a king. And Gideon replied, "I will not rule over you, neither shall my son rule over you. The Lord shall rule over you." And Paine pointed out parts of the scripture where the Jews again wanted a king and Samuel cried out, "I will call unto the Lord, and He shall send thunder and rain that ye may perceive and see that your wickedness is great which ye have done in the sight of the Lord, in asking you a king. "....And the Lord sent thunder and rain that day....These portions of the scripture are direct and positive.....That the Almighty hath here entered his protest against monarchical government is true, or the scripture is false."

"To the evil of monarchy we have added that of hereditary succession.....For all men being originally equals, no one by birth could have a right by birth to set up his own family in perpetual preference to all others forever, and though himself might deserve some decent degree of honors of his contemporaries, yet his descendants might be far too unworthy to inherit them.

"Most wise men, in their private sentiments, have ever treated hereditary right with contempt; yet it is one of those evils, which when once established is not easily removed; many submit from fear, others from superstition, and the more powerful part shares with the king the plunder of the rest.

"This is supposing the present race of kingsto have an honorable origin, whereas it is more probable that....we should find the first of them nothing better than the principal ruffian of some restless gang, chief among plunderers...

England since the conquest hath known some few good monarchs, but groaned beneath a much larger number of bad ones...Men who look upon themselves born to reign, and others to obey, soon grow insolent.*

*Definition: insolent -- showing a rude and arrogant lack of respect.

Their minds are early poisoned by importance, and the world they act in differs so materially from the world at large... they are frequently the most ignorant and unfit of any throughout the dominion. Also, what about a minor on the throne, or a king worn out with age? ... Thirty kings and two minors have ruled in England since the conquest and in that time there have been eight civil wars and nineteen rebellions....The contest for monarchy and succession, between the houses of York and Lancaster, laid England in a scene of blood for many years. In England a king hath little more to do than to make war and give away places [which will] impoverish a nation.

THOUGHTS ON THE PRESENT STATE OF AMERICAN AFFAIRS

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

“The sun never shined on a cause of greater worth. ‘Tis not the affair of a city, a country, a province, or a kingdom, but of a continent—of at least one eighth part of the habitable globe. ‘Tis not the concern of a day, a year, or an age; posterity are virtually involved in the contest, and will be more or less affected, even to the end of time, by the proceedings now. Now is the seed time of continental union, faith and honor.

Some say America has flourished under Great Britain. She would have flourished more on her own.

America is enriched with the necessaries of life, and will always have a market while eating is the custom in Europe. Some say Britain protected us-no, Britain has her own enemies. France and Spain never were our enemies as Americans, but as our being the subjects of Great Britain. But Britain is the parent country, say some. Then the more shame upon her conduct. Even brutes do not devour their young, nor do savages make war upon their families. We claim brotherhood with every European Christian.

Much hath been said of the united strength of Britain and the colonies.....what have we to do with setting the world at defiance? Our plan is commerce and that will secure us peace and friendship of all Europe. It is in the interest of all Europe to have America a *free port*.

Not a single advantage is derived from reconciliation with Britain. Any dependence on Great Britain tends directly to involve this continent in European wars and quarrels. As Europe is our market for trade, we ought to form no partial connection with any part of it.

Men of passive tempers look somewhat lightly on the offences of Great Britain, and want to be friends. Your future connection with Britain, whom you can neither love nor honor, will be forced and unnatural, and in a little time will fall into a relapse more wretched than the first.

Have you lost a parent or a child by their hands, and yourself the ruined and wretched survivor? I mean not to exhibit horror for the purpose of provoking revenge, but to awaken us from the fatal and unmanly slumbers, that we may pursue determinately some fixed object.

Britain has not manifested the least inclination towards a compromise. No man was a warmer wisher for a reconciliation than myself, before the fatal 19th of April, 1775. (British troops marched against the Patriot arsenal at Concord and Lexington. Eight Americans died and ten others were wounded.) "The moment the event of that day was made known, I rejected the hardened, sullen-tempered Pharaoh of England forever; and disdain the wretch, that the pretended title of FATHER OF THE PEOPLE can unfeelingly hear of their slaughter, and composedly sleep with their blood upon his soul... Can there be any doubt, but the whole power of the crown will be executed to keep this continent as low and as humble as possible? Instead of going forward, we shall be going backward, or perpetually quarreling, or ridiculously petitioning.

The people in England can make no laws without his (the king's) consent,....It 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."....

"England consults the good of this country no further than it answers her own purpose....The king may accomplish by craft and subtlety, in the long run, what he cannot do by force and violence in the short one... Emigrants of property will not chose to come to a country whose form of government hangs but by a thread.

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.

"The Republics of Europe are all (and we may say always) in peace. Holland and Switzerland are without wars, foreign or domestic. Monarchical governments are never long at rest; the crown itself is a temptation to enterprising ruffians at home.

I offer the following hints.....they may be the means of giving rise to something better. 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 and each district send a proper number of delegates to Congress. Let the colonies choose a president by lots. In turn, each colony, in proper rotation, picks a president.

Thomas Paine laid out how a Congress could be formed, how a Continental Charter could be formed. "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.

"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....."

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." He went on to say that someone might collect together the discontented and assume themselves the powers of government, finally sweep away the liberties of the continent like a deluge.

"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."

ON THE PRESENT ABILITY OF AMERICA, WITH SOME MISCELLANEOUS REFLEXIONS (sic)

Thomas Paine talked of how now is the time to act. We have no debt. If we don't act now we leave our future children a great deal of work to do. "No country on the globe is so happily situated, or so internally capable of raising a fleet as America. Tar, timber, iron, and cordage are her natural produce . We need go abroad for nothing. In point of safety, ought we be without a fleet? We are not the little people now....our methods of defense ought to improve with our increase in property.....Any daring fellow, in a brig of fourteen or sixteen guns, might have robbed the whole continent, carried off half a million of money.

"We should not judge it necessary to support a constant navy. If premiums were to be given to merchants to build and employ in their service, ships mounted with 20, 30, 40, or 50 guns, 50 or 60 of those ships, with a few guard ships on constant duty, would keep up a sufficient navy, and that without burdening ourselves with the evil so loudly complained of in England, of suffering their fleet in time of peace to be rotting in the docks."

"In almost every article of defense we abound."

"Another reason why the present time is preferable to all others, is that the fewer our numbers are, the more land there is unoccupied, which, instead of being lavished by the king on his worthless dependents, may be hereafter applied, not only to the discharge of present debt, but to the constant support of government.

The infant state of the colonies, as it is called, so far from being against, is an argument in favor of independence. We are sufficiently numerous, and were we more so we might be less united....Commerce diminishes the spirit both of patriotism and military defense. And history sufficiently informs us, that the bravest achievements were always accomplished in the non-age (youth) of a nation... The more men have to lose, the less willing are they to venture. The rich are in general slaves to fear, and submit to courtly power with the trembling duplicity (deceptiveness) of a spaniel.

The intimacy which is contracted in infancy, and the friendship which is formed in misfortune, are of all others the most lasting and unalterable. Our present union is marked with both these characters: we are young, and we have been distressed; but our concord hath withstood our troubles, and fixes a memorable era for posterity* to glory in.

* Definition -- all future generations of people.

"The present time is that peculiar time which never happens to a nation but once, that is, the time of forming itself into a government. Most nations have let slip the opportunity, and by that means have been compelled to receive laws from their conquerors, instead of making laws for themselves. First, they had a king, and then a form of government; whereas the articles or character of government should be formed first, and men delegated to execute them afterwards: but from the errors of other nations let us learn wisdom, and lay hold of the present opportunity-*to begin government at the right end.*

"As to religion, I hold it to be the indispensable duty of government to protect all conscientious professors thereof, and I know of no other business which government has to do therewith.....I fully and conscientiously believe that it is the will of the Almighty that there should be a diversity of religious opinions among us. It affords a larger field for our Christian kindness: were we all of one way of thinking, our religious dispositions would want matter for probation; and on this liberal principle I look on the various denominations among us, to be like children of the same family, differing only in what is called their Christian names.

"The present state of America is truly alarming to every man who is capable of reflection. Without law, without government, without any other mode of power than what is founded on, and granted by, courtesy. Held together by an unexampled occurrence of sentiment, which is nevertheless subject to change, and which every secret enemy is endeavoring to dissolve. Our present condition is, Legislation without law; wisdom without a plan; a constitution without a name; and what is strangely astonishing, perfect independence contending for dependence. The instance is without a precedent, the case never existed before, and who can tell what may be the event? ...

"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.*"

End of Book

Rosie the Riveter's Comments:

The first publication of Common Sense made an appearance in Philadelphia the same day that the king's speech did. So you can imagine how that went over.

At that time, a large number of the colonists read "Common Sense," or had it read to them, often in a tavern. When I took to summarizing this important work, I used a lot of Thomas Paine's original wording. There is no way I could have phrased it in any kind of fashion compared to how he wrote.

You really ought to do yourself a favor and read the whole thing. You may need a dictionary a few times, but overall it is written in a prose that flows evenly. It's a pleasure to read, and it does beg to be read.

It certainly gave me some whole new concepts, and especially on monarchy. It broadens one's understanding of the history of America, and in such a positive way. Yet this brilliant piece of work is not much promoted in our schools. Every student should read and understand this pamphlet.

(The editor asked six adults at random if they knew who Thomas Paine was, or what "*Common Sense*" was, and none of them had ever heard of either one.)

In reading the history of Thomas Paine, I learned that he was inclined to poetry, but in the 1700's that was not encouraged, at least to him in his circle of education, as it used too much imagination. Yet, Thomas Paine used all kinds of imagination in this article and many others that he wrote. He helped create a future, and that is what imagination does. He helped postulate into existence the Declaration of Independence. Because of that, we now have the freedoms that we have in America, which are only dreamed of in many parts of our world. Thank you, Thomas Paine, for having the vision. And to all those other brave and learned men who helped out, who risked their lives, reputation, and property. They risked it all to create the country we now have. I should mention that Thomas Paine himself went to war and fought for our independence, and that years later, because of his outspoken views of government (and because he got on the wrong side of a French official,) Paine spent eleven months in a French jail, every day with the possibility of being beheaded.

Thomas Paine didn't write only *Common Sense*. He wrote many essays on topics that were controversial, and in a very outspoken way. He wrote on the rights of women and how women in most parts of the world were chattel property, and under the thumb of men. And he wrote "*African Slavery in America*." He was the first to say slavery should be abolished. It was, eighty-eight years later. He wrote, "By such wicked and inhuman ways the English are said to enslave towards one hundred thousand yearly, of which thirty thousand are supposed to die of barbarous treatment the first year." He pointed out to all involved in the slave trade that they would be accountable to their Creator. "How can they be called Christians?" he asked.

Thomas Paine wrote anonymously and under several different pen names, for the "Philadelphia Magazine", postulating futures for many of us to view.

I loved his view of a government that is simple, that protects religious freedom, one where you have an efficient government that plans ahead and doesn't waste all kinds of taxpayers' money. The government needs to be held accountable. Honestly, if each of us ran our personal business or home in the manner that our current government is running things, we could not

survive that way. Spend all kinds of money that we don't have to pay for a multitude of questionable ends.

I am sure you can think of instances of this.

So, Thomas Paine instilled in us the vision of a government by the people, for the people, one where the government was actually pleased to serve the people, not where the common person has to practically apologize for asking for service. Or be handled in such an inefficient way by a bureaucracy that adds all kinds of time into any action it does, because no one there has the authority to think for themselves.

Thank you, Thomas Paine. Let's get back to simplicity of government. Let's show some courage to put things to rights.

Summary done by Rosie the Riveter

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