

## **Thomas Paine, "Common Sense" (January 10, 1776)**

*Thomas Paine (1737-1809) was born in England to a poor Quaker father and Anglican mother. After meeting Benjamin Franklin in London, he emigrated to the colonies late in 1774 and got a job editing the Pennsylvania Magazine. Tensions between England and the colonies were high, and Paine soon leapt into the fray. After the Battle of Lexington and Concord on April 19, 1775, Paine concluded that the American colonial revolt should be aimed not against unjust taxation but towards full independence from Great Britain. Paine's arguments were spelled out in Common Sense, a fifty-page pamphlet that was published in January, 1776. It was an immediate sensation. Close to 150,000 copies were sold within three months, and possibly as many as 500,000 copies all together, to a colonial population of but two and half million people. More than any other single publication, Paine's Common Sense persuaded public opinion of the case for independence from Great Britain.*

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...

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 hath enriched herself are the necessaries 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; and she would have defended Turkey from the same motive... for the sake of trade and dominion.

Alas! we have 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 her 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, 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 of a 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 to Great Britain... Our corn will fetch its price in any market in Europe, and our imported goods must be paid for, buy them where we will.

But the injuries and disadvantages we sustain by that connection are without number; and our duty to mankind at large, as well as to ourselves, instructs us to renounce the alliance: because any submission to, or dependence on, Great Britain tends directly to involve this continent in European wars and quarrels, and sets us at variance with nations who would otherwise seek our friendship, and against whom we have neither anger nor complaint. As Europe is our market for trade, we ought to form no partial connection with any part of it. It is the true interest of America to steer clear of European contentions, which she never can do while by her dependence on Britain she is made the makeweight in the scale of British politics.

Europe is too thickly planted with kingdoms to be long at peace, and whenever a war breaks out between England and a foreign power, the trade of America goes to ruin, because of her connection with Britain. The next war may not turn out like the last, and should it not, the advocates for reconciliation now will be wishing for separation then, because neutrality in that case would be a safer convoy than a man of war. Everything that is right or natural pleads for separation. The blood of the slain, the weeping voice of nature cries, 'TIS TIME TO PART. Even the distance at which the Almighty hath placed England and America is a strong and natural proof that the authority of one over the other was never the design of heaven...

It is the good fortune of many to live distant from the scene of present sorrows the evil is not sufficiently brought to their doors to make them feel the precariousness with which all American property is possessed. But let our imaginations transport us for a few moments to Boston; that seat of wretchedness will teach us wisdom, and instruct us to forever renounce a power in whom we can have no trust. The inhabitants of that unfortunate city, who but a few months ago were in ease and affluence, have now no other alternative than to stay and starve, or turn out to beg. Endangered by the fire of their friends if they continue within the city, and plundered by the soldiery if they leave it, in their present situation they are prisoners without the hope of redemption...

But if you say, you can still pass the violations over, then I ask, Hath your house been burnt? Hath your property been destroyed before your face? Are your wife and children destitute of a bed to lie on, or bread to live on? Hath you lost a parent or child by their hands, and yourself the ruined and wretched survivor? If you have not, then you are not a judge of those who have. But if you have, and can still shake hands with the murderers, then you are unworthy of then name of husband, father, friend, or lover; and whatever might be your rank or title in life, you have the heart of a coward, and the spirit of a sycophant...

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... Wherefore, since nothing but blows will do, for God's sake let us come to a final separation, and to leave the next generation to be cutting throats under the violated unmeaning names of parent and child...

As to government matters, it is not in the power of Britain to do this continent justice... for if they cannot conquer us, they cannot govern us. To be always running three or four thousand miles with a tale or petition, waiting four or five months for an answer, which, when obtained, requires five or six more to explain it in, will in a few years be looked upon as folly and childishness. There was a time when it was proper, and there is a proper time for it to cease.

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...

[The king] hath shown himself to be an inveterate enemy to liberty, and discovered such a thirst for arbitrary power, is he, or is he not, a proper person 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, this continent can make no laws but what the King gives leave to; and there is any man so unwise as not to see, that (considering what has happened) he will suffer no law to be made but such as suits his purpose?... [C]an there be any doubt but the whole power of the Crown will be exerted to keep this continent as low and as humble as possible? Instead of going forward we will go backward... We are already greater than the King wishes us to be, and will he not hereafter endeavor to make us less? To bring the matter to one point, is the power jealous of our prosperity, a proper power to govern us? Whosoever says No to this question is an independent, for independency means no more than this, whether we shall make our own laws, or whether the king, the greatest enemy which this continent hath, or can have, shall tell us, There shall be no laws but such as I like.

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... [L]et 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 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...

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 even to time and chance...

Ye that tell us of harmony and reconciliation, can ye restore to us the time that is passed? Can ye give to prostitution its former innocence? Neither can ye reconcile Britain and America. The last

cord is now broken... 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 wide 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 all mankind.

## Questions

1. What are Paine's main arguments for colonial independence?
2. What kinds of language and imagery does he use to express these arguments?
3. How do Paine's ideas and tone differ from those expressed in the Continental Congresses?
4. Why might his pamphlet held such wide appeal?