

Common Sense by Thomas Paine

1. Brief Biography of Thomas Paine

Thomas Paine was born in England to Joseph (a farmer and corset-maker) and Frances Paine. In his youth, he was apprenticed to his father and then established himself in his father's trade of corset-making in Sandwich, Kent. By the late 1760s, when Paine was in his thirties, he began taking a deeper interest in civic matters, and his pro-republican, anti-monarchical commitments began to take shape. During a down-and-out period of his life—his business had failed, he had to sell his household in order to avoid debtors' prison, and he was separated from his wife—he moved to London and met Benjamin Franklin. Soon after, Franklin gave Paine a letter of recommendation, allowing Paine to move and settle in Britain's American colonies in 1774. Paine began working as a writer and editor, finding success in pitching his essays to a common audience. In 1776, he anonymously published *Common Sense* and soon followed it up with *The American Crisis*. After the American Revolution, he served on the Congressional Committee of Foreign Affairs and later moved to France, becoming heavily involved in the French Revolution during the 1790s. For his radical views, he was jailed for a year in Paris, subsequently returning to the United States, where he died in obscurity.

2. Historical Context of *Common Sense*

Common Sense was written at the beginning of the American Revolution (1775-1783) which secured the American colonies' independence from Great Britain. In particular, Paine references Britain's taxation of the American colonies without adequate representation, dating back to the Stamp Act Congress of 1765 and building to such protests as the Boston Massacre in 1770 and the Boston Tea Party in 1773. Following a 1774 Continental Congress, tensions continued to mount as British soldiers occupied Boston and later tried to destroy colonial military supplies, with battle breaking out at Lexington and Concord in 1775 and Britain finally being expelled from Boston by the Continental Army in March 1776, not long after *Common Sense* was published. Though the Declaration of Independence (citing the Enlightenment-inspired natural rights that Paine champions in his pamphlet) was signed that summer, the war continued. American independence wasn't officially recognized until the Treaty of Paris was signed in 1783.

3. Summary of *Common Sense*

In *Common Sense*, Thomas Paine argues for American independence. His argument begins with more general, theoretical reflections about government and religion, then progresses onto the specifics of the colonial situation.

Paine begins by distinguishing between government and society. Society, according to Paine, is everything constructive and good that people join together to accomplish. Government, on the other hand, is an institution whose sole purpose is to protect us from our own vices. Government has its origins in the evil of man and is therefore a necessary evil at best. Paine says that government's sole purpose is to protect life, liberty and property, and that a government should be judged solely on the basis of the extent to which it accomplishes this goal.

Paine then considers an imagined scenario in which a small group of people has been placed on an island, and cut off from the rest of society. In time, these people develop ties with one another, and lawmaking becomes inevitable. Paine says the people will be much happier if they are responsible for the creation of the laws that rule them. Paine is also implicitly arguing that such a system of representation is also better for the American colonists. Having expressed his disagreement with British reign in America, Paine proceeds to launch a general attack on the British system of government. Paine says the British system is too complex and rife with contradictions, and that the

monarchy is granted far too much power. The British system pretends to offer a reasonable system of checks and balances, but in fact, it does not.

From here Paine moves on to discuss, in general, the notions of monarchy and hereditary succession. Man, Paine argues, was born into a state of equality, and the distinction that has arisen between king and subject is an unnatural one. At first, Paine says, the world was without kings, but the ancient Jews decided they wanted a king. This angered God, but he allowed them to have one. Paine presents pages of biblical evidence detailing God's wrath at the idea of the Jews having a king. The conclusion Paine reaches is that the practice of monarchy originates from sin, and is an institution that the Bible and God condemn. Paine calls hereditary succession an abominable practice. He says that even if people were to choose to have a king, that does not legitimize that King's child acting as a future ruler. Furthermore, hereditary succession has brought with it innumerable evils, such as incompetent kings, corruption, and civil war.

Having dispensed with the preliminary theoretical issues, Paine sets in to discuss the details of the American situation. In response to the argument that America has flourished under British rule, and therefore ought to stay under the king, Paine says that such an argument fails to realize that America has evolved and no longer needs Britain's help. Some say that Britain has protected America, and therefore deserves allegiance, but Paine responds that Britain has only watched over America in order to secure its own economic well-being. Paine adds that most recently, instead of watching over the colonies, the British have been attacking them, and are therefore undeserving of American loyalty.

Paine says that the colonies have little to gain from remaining attached to Britain. Commerce can be better conducted with the rest of Europe, but only after America becomes independent. Paine also asserts that if the colonies remain attached to Britain, the same problems that have arisen in the past will arise in the future. Paine argues that it is necessary to seek independence now, as to do otherwise would only briefly cover up problems that will surely reemerge.

Paine even proposes the form of government that the independent colonies should adopt. His recommendation is for a representative democracy that gives roughly equal weight to each of the colonies.

Paine explains why the current time is a good time to break free of Britain. Primarily, Paine focuses on the present size of the colonies, and on their current capabilities. He presents an inventory of the British Navy and gives calculations revealing how America could build a navy of comparable size. Paine recommends this as a way of ensuring America's security and prosperity in trade. Paine also argues that America is sufficiently small as to be united now. If time were to elapse, and the population of the colonies to grow, the same feeling of unity would not be present. Paine adds that if the Americans revolt now, they can use the vast expanses of uncharted land to the West in order to pay down some of the debt they will incur.

Paine says that as a colony of Britain, America lacks respectability on the international scene. They are seen simply as rebels, and cannot form substantial alliances with other nations. In order to prosper in the long term, the colonies need to be independent. Paine says that, by declaring independence, America will be able to ask for the help of other countries in its struggle for freedom. For all of these reasons, Paine says it is imperative and urgent that the colonies declare independence.

4. Themes

4.1 Government

Read this:

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.

Paine argues that government is actually, at best, a “necessary evil” for restraining human vice, and therefore that the simplest, least intrusive form of government should be sought. Paine’s argument rests on the fundamental assertion that society and government are altogether different things. 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 first is a patron, the last a punisher.” Essentially, society consists of those things that citizens enjoy pursuing in common, while government is there to protect such pursuits by punishing vice. Government only exists to ensure that society remains sustainable. Embedded within this argument is Paine’s belief that human beings are naturally inclined to vice. Unsurprisingly, given Paine’s belief in human vice, he argues that government is inherently limited in how much good it can achieve, and that, in fact, it can often do harm. In Paine’s view, government, by its nature, can never be as good as society.

4.2 The Case Against Monarchy

Read this:

In short, monarchy and succession have laid (not this or that kingdom only) but the world in blood and ashes. ‘Tis a form of government which the word of God bears testimony against, and blood will attend it.

After establishing his views on government in general, **Paine** takes the more radical step of arguing that monarchy is a bankrupt institution and must be abandoned. In his view, there are many absurdities of monarchy to choose from, such as the isolation and ignorance of rulers from those they govern. Historically, Paine claims, it’s been proven that monarchy is corrupt and corrupting. Paine builds an anti-monarchical case on the basis of the Bible. In the early ages of humanity, “there were no kings; the consequence of which was there were no wars.

4.3 Dependence vs Independence

Paine implies that America’s subservience to Britain is inherently unhealthy and limiting. Thus, he argues that it’s unnatural and counterproductive for the young American colonies to remain perpetually linked to Great Britain. Continued dependence would actually hamper America’s long-term prospects, too: “any submission to, or dependance 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.”

4.4 Reason, Morality and Rehtoric

Paine is actually saying a lot with this statement. He asserts that he’s only offering common-sense facts—that he’s simply appealing to the reader’s reasoning abilities and readiness to set aside preconceived ideas. He essentially asks the reader to aspire to a generous character. In sum, Paine is inviting the reader to engage in an active process of evaluation that draws upon one’s own intellect and character and (at least ostensibly) doesn’t just take Paine’s ideas at face value.

Paine even argues that the impulse to rebellion and independence is actually a good and salutary one, because it's rooted in God-given moral feelings. "The Almighty hath implanted in us these unextinguishable feelings for good and wise purposes. [...] They distinguish us from the herd of common animals. The social compact would dissolve, and justice be extirpated from the earth, [...] 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."

Not only does Paine encourage his audience to employ their reasoning skills, he doesn't hesitate to impugn those who fail to do so—or those whose faculties are, in his view, insufficiently developed. Paine argues that those who continue to push for America's reconciliation with Britain have suspect motives.

5. Characters

5.1 Thomas Paine

Thomas Paine (1737–1809) is the author of *Common Sense*. Born in England and inspired by Enlightenment political philosophy, he became an activist for American independence after moving to the colonies in 1774. Drawing inspiration from Enlightenment thinker John Locke, Paine believed in the inherent equality and inalienable rights of man that would go on to form the basis of the US Declaration of Independence. In *Common Sense*, Paine portrays himself as an ordinary citizen motivated by concern for justice, not by political partisanship.

5.2 George III

George III (1738–1820) reigned as King of Great Britain from 1760–1820. He was king at the time that hostilities broke out between British troops and the American colonial militia in the 1770s, and was the king against whom the US Declaration of Independence listed its grievances. **Thomas Paine**'s *Common Sense* was the first prominent work to not only advocate for American independence, but to directly take George III to task for his oppressive rule over the colonies, calling him, among other things, a "Royal Brute" and a tyrant.