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The Forgotten Founding Father: The Impact of Thomas Paine

Thomas Paine must be considered to be one of the world's most unique personalities. From humble beginnings he rose to occupy center stage in the greatest events of his time. Slandered, libeled, and vilified by the most powerful individuals and institutions of his day, he nevertheless succeeded in placing before the world his agenda for freedom, for justice, and for the institution of governments whose purpose is to *serve the governed*.

Impact on the American Revolution

If the America of 1776 and the France of 1789 were tinderboxes, then Thomas Paine was their spark. As a genius communicator to the common man of both countries, he was 'A swayer of public opinion who used his pen with consummate skill to incite decisive action.'²⁹ Paine possessed that rarest of gifts – an original mind. There is a curious remark in an early pamphlet which admirably expresses his method: 'When precedents fail to assist us, we must return to the first principles of things for information and THINK, as if we were the FIRST MEN that thought.'³⁰

When Paine wrote his famous *Common Sense*, the prevailing attitude in the colonies was that 'independence' was a word not to be spoken. Even John Adams called independence 'A hobgoblin of so frightful mien that it would throw a delicate person into fits to look it in the face.'³¹ Dr. Benjamin Rush, a major figure of the times, told Paine that 'there were two words which he should avoid by every means necessary for his own safety and that of the public – INDEPENDENCE and REPUBLICANISM.'³² Yet Paine, consistently willing to endanger himself for the causes in which he believed, published *Common Sense* at his own expense. 'Common Sense came off the press on January 10, 1776. The fifty-page pamphlet sold more than five hundred thousand copies within a few months (to a population of three million). More than any other single publication, *Common Sense* paved the way for the Declaration of Independence.'³³

Within six months of its publication, the call for independence, which previously had only been whispered in private, was unanimously ratified by the colonials (July 4, 1776). Not only was Paine the first to publicly call for independence and republican government in the United States, he did the same in France. And the result was no less far reaching.

Impact on the French Revolution

In 1791, the National Assembly controlled France. However, it was as yet unclear as to how the revolution was to proceed, and what form of government should be created. On June 20 of that year, King Louis XVI and his family secretly abandoned Paris and attempted to flee the country. The King's attempted abdication threw France into even greater turmoil.

Once again, Paine led the vanguard. He composed a manifesto calling for the formation of a republic in France before anyone else had even hinted at the idea. On July 1, he raced through the streets of Paris plastering the proclamation wherever people would gather. Again, an idea which had barely been whispered was now cleared for open discussion. The establishment of the French Republic, based upon the *Declaration of the Rights of Man and of Citizens* (which Paine co-authored), was soon to follow. Such was the power of Thomas Paine's pen.

The Right of the Individual

Paine was ever ready to lend his talents to the cause of individuals as well as the mass of humanity. In one of the most moving episodes of the revolution, Paine worked to save the life of a British officer, Captain Asgill. Asgill was to be executed by the Americans in reprisal for the hanging of an American, Captain Huddy of the Jersey Militia, who had been executed without warrant or justification. Paine, in his *A Supernumerary Crisis* (May 31, 1782), placed the responsibility for Huddy and Asgill squarely on the shoulders of the British, and privately wrote to Washington urging that he spare Asgill's life. When Marie Antoinette wrote to the same purpose, Asgill was released. Thus, to Paine, even the lives of enemies were worth saving when principles of justice were involved.

It was in his defense of the life of King Louis that we see the clearest possible example of Paine's courage and dedication to the rights of the

individual. 'There is little doubt that Paine worked harder than any other member of the Convention to save the life of Louis XVI.'³⁴ 'Bertrand De Moleville, an ardent royalist and implacable enemy of republicanism who took refuge in England during the trial, gave Paine the highest tribute for his speech in the monarch's favor. He considered it "to the eternal shame of the Assembly that Thomas Paine, misguided by the fanaticism of the most ardent demagogery, was the most wise, the most humane, the most courageous, in a word, the least culpable of all his colleagues."' ... 'This [the defense of Louis XVI] was in a sense the most dramatic crisis in Paine's life.'³⁵

Despite the furious outbursts of Marat and Thuriot, and risking the ire of Robespierre, despite the ominous sounds of the guillotine doing its grisly work, Paine spoke out. 'With his dogged sincere purpose and faith in human benevolence, he was attempting to withstand the forces of dissent and protest which had been building up for generations. As usual, Paine pleased nobody. The Girondins ignored his appeal for mercy. The Jacobins condemned him as a sentimental tool of the Girondins, and the English reviled him as a regicide enemy merely because of his presence in the Convention.'³⁶ Paine's defense of the king led to his own imprisonment. His rationality, his reason, and his commitment to rights and justice had no place in a revolution which had begun to devour its own. Paine spent nearly a year in the Luxembourg prison while hundreds, then thousands were killed. It was only through a twist of fate that Paine, whose death warrant had been signed by Robespierre, was not executed.

Paine on Religion: *The Age of Reason*

The irony of Paine being reviled for his well-meant words and actions was not limited to his defense of the king. *The Age of Reason*, Paine's most controversial work, was undertaken in part as a response to the atheism of the French Revolutionists. That Paine should have ultimately been accused of and reviled for being an atheist himself is the height of injustice. Paine himself was an ardent deist; he believed strongly in a Creator, an afterlife, the need to do good and to repent sin.³⁷ However, being raised as a Quaker, he had a strong aversion to orthodox Christianity and the actions of the established churches. *The Age of Reason* stated these thoughts in a way that proved to be quite unpopular. 'The key to Heaven is not in the keeping of any sect, nor ought the road

to it be obstructed by any. Our relation to each other in the *world* is as *men*, and the man who is a friend to *man*, and to his rights, let his religious opinions be what they may, is a good citizen.”³⁸ As [Vernon] Parrington states in his Pulitzer Prize-winning *Main Currents in American Thought*, ‘To the animosity which his political principles excited among the Federalists, was added the detestation of the orthodox for the deism of *The Age of Reason*. The ministers outdid the politicians in virulent attacks upon his reputation, until the generous Quaker, the friend of humanity, and citizen of the world, was shrunk and distorted, into ‘The Infidel Tom Paine.’ It was a strange reward for a life spent in service to mankind. Like all idealists, he made the mistake of underestimating the defensive strength of vested interests and their skill in arousing mob prejudice.”³⁹

That Paine should have suffered for his views is understandable. *The Age of Reason* attacked the authority of the establishment. But it is those slanderous comments based on ignorance, like those of Teddy Roosevelt, who called Paine a ‘filthy little atheist,’ having never read his works, which soil and cling to Paine’s reputation, even to today.

The Legacy of Reason

Thomas Paine wrote that reason, like time, makes its own way.⁴⁰ In this, he has been proven wrong. Paine has been largely forgotten by the two governments in whose formation he played such an important part. There are no Thomas Paine high schools, libraries, scholarships, and so forth, and this is a great injustice. But Paine also said that ‘time makes more converts than reason,’⁴¹ and, fortunately, this has proven to be true. Paine’s ideas on individual rights and the role of government in society, which so shocked the ruling order in his day, seem today to be both obvious and correct.

‘In the political realm, his principles are now considered axiomatic – and for that reason, no longer associated with him. The universal acceptance of his principles has paradoxically meant the decline of his popularity, for the degree to which they have been accepted and applied in society, they have lost the aura of novelty and individuality.’⁴²

Paine is important today, not only for his defiance of existing institutions but because of the modern cast of his mind. Paine gave us a belief in the possibility of changing the shape of existing governments and the course of entire nations to accommodate the needs of the living.

Paine has left us a very considerable legacy. More than any other individual, he provides us with the vocabulary and frame of reference of modern political thought. Upon his death, most newspapers of the day reprinted the obituary notice from the *New York Citizen*, which read in part, 'He lived long, did some good and much harm.' How poorly understood were his ideas and their impact on the world both then and now. 'His views have been claimed by people anywhere who desire to form for themselves a government which gives to every individual a just measure of liberty.'⁴³

And so the spirit of Thomas Paine, his headstone shattered, his grave robbed, lives on in declarations of independence and constitutions creating representative governments by and for the people, worldwide. Thomas Paine, who, until the age of 37, was a complete failure, demonstrates what a single individual can accomplish. Once he found his true calling, he proved that neither kings nor armies nor governments can withstand the 'power of an idea whose time has come.'