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Thomas Paine: A Most Un-Common Man

I have never yet made it the least point of consideration whether a thing is popular or unpopular, but whether it is right or wrong.
A Friend to Rhode-Island and the Union, 1783

Thomas Paine wrote those words in 1783, at the height of his personal popularity, and he meant exactly what he said. He lived by them through war, political persecution, and imprisonment, and he refused to turn away from them in the face of approaching death. Paine, as we have learned, had risen from humble beginnings to become the most influential writer of his time, and the clarity and strength of his words rallied an era to the cause of freedom. But his uncompromising quest to enlighten the world through reason and common sense would, perhaps inevitably, place his own reputation in jeopardy. He would fall from hero to outcast. And as we have learned, at his death, a New York obituary remarked that he had 'done some good, and much harm,' and an American president would later dismiss him as 'a filthy little atheist.'

It has always been my belief that Tom Paine's own words afford the strongest defense against his harshest critics, past and present. With that in mind, it is appropriate that we spend a few short minutes *hearing* the actual words of this brilliant man of the eighteenth century. Time restrictions have prompted my presumptuous editing to extract only a few key passages from his work.

Thomas Paine arrived in the New World in 1774, and he was soon hired as editor of *Pennsylvania Magazine*. Even then he was determined to 'do some good for mankind.' Some of his earliest articles dared to criticize a variety of then-accepted oppressions:

ON SLAVERY. 'Ever since the discovery of America, Britain hath employed herself in the most horrid of all traffics, that of the human flesh ... hath yearly ravaged the hapless shores of Africa, robbing it of its unoffending inhabitants to cultivate her stolen Dominions to the West ... When the Almighty shall have blest us and made us a people dependent only upon Him, then may our first gratitude be shown by an act of legislation which shall put a stop to the importance of negroes for sale, soften the hard fate of

those already there, and in time procure their freedom.'

'African Slavery in America,' *Pennsylvania Journal*, March 1775

ON WOMEN. 'Surrounded on all sides by judges who are at once their tyrants and seducers, who does not feel for the tender sex? If a woman were to defend the cause of her sex, she might address him in the following manner: "How great is your injustice. If we have an equal right with you to virtue, why should we not have a right to praise? The public esteem ought to wait upon merit ... Why must we be condemned to die unknown? Deny us not the public esteem which, after the esteem of one's self, is the sweetest reward of well doing."'

Pennsylvania Magazine, edited by Paine, 1775-1776

ON PACIFISM. 'I am thus far a Quaker that I would gladly agree with all the world to lay aside the use of arms, and settle matters by negotiations; but, unless the whole [world] will, the matter ends, and I take up my musket and thank heaven He has put it in my power. We live not in a world of angels.'

Pennsylvania Magazine, edited by Paine 1775-1776

Paine had been in America only six months when a series of bloody skirmishes broke out between British soldiers and American colonists. A few had talked of American independence but none dared go on record as supporting it in the public print, except for Tom Paine. In January of 1776, at his own expense, he published his remarkable *Common Sense*:

Some writers have so confounded society with government as to leave little or no distinction between them ... 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. Society in every state is a blessing, but government, even in its best state, is but a necessary evil ... Government, like dress, is the badge of lost innocence ... Mankind being originally equal in the order of creation, the equality could only be destroyed by some subsequent circumstance ... Nothing in nature or religion could allow for the distinction of men into kings and subjects ... so far as we approve of monarchy ... in America *the law is king* ... Everything that is right or natural pleads for separation. The blood of the slain, the

weeping voice of nature cries, 'Tis time to part ... Every quiet method for peace has been ineffectual ... A Government of our own is our natural right ... 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 around 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. The cause of America is in great measure the cause of all mankind. '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.

Common Sense, January 10, 1776

The success of *Common Sense* could have made Paine a wealthy man, but he turned over his lucrative royalties to the Continental Congress, resigned from his job, and enlisted as a private in the Continental Army. The bright July dreams of independence turned to despair during the cruel winter of 1776, and Paine picked up his stronger weapon, the pen, to fan the flame of hope anew in *The American Crisis*:

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. What we obtain too cheap we esteem too lightly ... Heaven knows how to put a proper price on its goods; and it would be strange indeed if so celestial an article as FREEDOM should not be highly rated ... 'Tis the business of little minds to shrink; but he whose heart is firm, and whose conscience approves his conduct, will pursue his principles unto death ... By perseverance and fortitude we have the prospect of a glorious issue; by cowardice and submission, the sad choice of a variety of evils – a ravaged country – a depopulated city – habitations without safety, and slavery without hope ... Look on this picture and weep over it! ... I call not upon a few, but upon all: not on *this* state or *that* state, but on *every* state: up and help us; lay your shoulders to the wheel ... Let it be

told to the future world, that in the depth of winter, when nothing but hope and virtue could survive, that the city and the country, alarmed at one common danger, came forth to meet and repulse it.

The American Crisis I, December 19, 1776

And he continued to address vital issues in his *Crisis Papers* throughout the long struggle for American independence:

If we attend the nature of freedom, we shall see the proper way of treating her ... The ancients lost her because they tried so hard to bolt and cage her. An injudicious security becomes her prison and, disgusted with captivity, she becomes an exile. Freedom is the associate of innocence, not the companion of suspicion. She only requires to be *cherished*, not to be caged. And to be loved is, to her, to be protected. She connects herself with man as God made him, not as fortune altered him, and continues with him to be just and civil ...

'The times that tried men's soul' are over ... To see it in our power to make a world happy, to teach mankind the art of being so, to exhibit on the theatre of the universe a character hitherto unknown, and to have, as it were, a new creation entrusted in our hands are honors that command reflection and can neither be too highly estimated nor too gratefully received. It would be a circumstance ever to be lamented and never to be forgotten were a single blot ... suffered to fall on a revolution which to the end of time must be an honor to the age that accomplished it, and which has contributed more to enlighten the world and diffuse a spirit of freedom and liberality among mankind than any human event ... that ever preceded it.

The American Crisis XIII, April 19, 1783

With independence won, Paine's need to earn a living took him to Europe, and his arrival coincided with the eruption of the French Revolution. Edmund Burke's attack on that revolution, coupled with his defense of the British monarchy, prompted Paine to write his next great work, *Rights of Man*.

The end of all political associations is the preservation of the natural and imprescriptible rights of man; and these rights are liberty, property, security, and resistance of oppression ... The Nation is essentially the source of all sovereignty; nor can any

individual or any body of men be entitled to any authority which is not expressly derived from it.

There never did, nor can exist a parliament, or any description of man, or any generation of men in any country, possessed of the right or the power of binding or controlling posterity to 'the end of time.' ... Every age and generation must be free to act for itself ... as the ages and generations which preceded it. The vanity and presumption of governing beyond the grave, is the most ridiculous and insolent of all tyrannies ... I am not contending for, nor against, any form of government, nor for nor against any party, here or elsewhere ... I am contending for, the right of the *living*, and against their being willed away, and controlled and contracted for, by the manuscript-assumed authority of the dead ...

A constitution is not a thing in name only, but in fact. It has not an ideal, but a real existence; and wherever it cannot be produced in a visible form, there is none. A constitution is a thing antecedent to a government, and the government is only the creature of a constitution ... It is the body of elements, to which you can refer, and quote article by article ... A constitution, therefore, is to a government, what the laws ... are to a court ... The court ... does not make the laws, neither can it alter them; it only acts in conformity to the laws made; and the government is in like manner governed by the constitution.

Rights of Man Part I, 1791

Paine's new book was enthusiastically received by a majority of the British people, but the government quickly moved to suppress it and eventually tried to arrest the author for sedition. Paine fled to France where he was greeted as a hero, made an honorary citizen, and elected to the National Convention. In that position, he was faced again with a choice of 'right or wrong.' As he saw it, despite his long abhorrence of the monarchy, he made a futile plea that the life of the deposed king be spared.

I am inclined to believe that if Louis Capet had been born in obscure condition, had he lived within the circle of an amiable and respectable neighborhood, at liberty to practice the duties of domestic life, had he been thus situated, I cannot believe that he would have shown himself destitute of social virtues ... It is to

France alone, I know, that the United States of America owe that support which enabled them to shake off the unjust and tyrannical yoke of Britain ... Let then those United States be the safeguard and asylum of Louis Capet. There, hereafter, far removed from the miseries and crimes of royalty, he may learn, from the constant aspect of public prosperity, that the true system of government consists not in kings, but in fair, equal and honorable representation ...

Reasons for Preserving the Life of Louis Capet,
Address to French National Convention, January 15, 1793

Thomas Paine's reasoned defense of the king turned those who led the French reign of terror against him. He was not surprised, as he revealed in a letter to Samuel Adams in America:

It has been my intention, for several years past, to publish my thoughts upon religion ... my friends were falling as fast as the guillotine could cut their heads off, and as I expected every day the same fate, I resolved to begin my work ... The people of France were running headlong into atheism, and I had the work translated in their own language, to stop them in that career, and fix them to the first article of every man's creed who has any creed at all and that first article should be – *I believe in God.*

Letter to Samuel Adams, January 1, 1803

And, on his way to a French prison, he turned over the first pages of a manuscript that he would complete during his incarceration. He dedicated *The Age of Reason* to the American people.

TO MY FELLOW CITIZENS OF THE
UNITED STATES OF AMERICA.

I put the following work under your protection. It contains my opinions on religion. You will do me justice to remember that I have always strenuously supported the right of every man to his own opinion, however different that opinion might be from mine. He who denies to another this right, makes a slave of himself to his present opinion, because he precludes himself the right of changing it. The most formidable weapon against errors of every kind is reason. I have never used any other, and I trust I never shall.

I believe in one God, and no more; and I hope for happiness beyond this life. I believe in the equality of man; and I believe that religious duties consist in doing justice, loving mercy, and endeavoring to make our fellow-creatures happy ... My own *mind* is my church ... All national ... churches, whether Jewish, Christian or Turkish, appear to me to be no other than human inventions, set up to terrify and enslave mankind, and monopolize power and profit ... The creation we behold is the real and ever existing Word of God, in which we cannot be deceived. It proclaims His power, it demonstrates His wisdom, it manifests His goodness and beneficence ... seeing, as we do daily, the goodness of God (to all His Creatures) is an example calling upon all men to practice the same towards each other ...

The Age of Reason, Part 1, 1794

My country is the world ... my religion is to do good.

Rights of Man, Part 2, 1792

Paine's writings had always been controversial, but none provoked the venom that followed the publication of *The Age of Reason*. He answered one attack in a pamphlet called *Agrarian Justice*.

What has determined me to publish it now is a sermon preached by Watson, Bishop of Llandaff (who) ... wrote a book entitled *An Apology for the Bible*, in answer to my second part of *The Age of Reason* ... It is wrong to say God made *rich and poor*; He made only *male and female*; and He gave them the earth for their inheritance ... Instead of preaching to encourage one part of mankind in insolence ... it would be better that priests employed their time to render the general condition of man less miserable than it is.

Agrarian Justice, 1797

Prowling British warships made it impossible for Tom Paine to return to his adopted country for fifteen long years. The patriot-philosopher, who had first suggested that the foundling republic he named the United States of America and had first called for a formal Declaration of Independence and a written Constitution, was now shunned by most who had once felt honored to call him friend. But the aging prophet without honor found the strength to continue his fight for a more peaceful world.

In 1803, President Thomas Jefferson received the original draft, in Paine's handwriting, of a visionary proposal he called: *An Association of Nations*.

It shall be an unarmed Association for the protection of the rights and commerce of nations that shall be neutral in time of war ... The Association shall establish a flag for itself to be carried by every ship and vessel of every nation ... This flag to be a pennant at the head of the mainmast, and it is to be composed of the same colors as compose the rainbow, and arranged in the same order as they appear in that phenomenon ... We, therefore, the powers composing this Association, declare that we will, each one for itself, prohibit in our dominions the exportation or transportation of military stores ... and all kinds of iron and steel weapons used in war.

Maritime Compact: An Association of Nations,
In *To the Citizens of the United States*, Letter 7, published in
The National Intelligencer, April 21, 1803

Unfortunately, nothing came of his plan for an Association of Nations. Thomas Paine died in New York City in 1809 and was buried on his farm in New Rochelle, because the Quaker cemetery would not have him. His grave was robbed some years later and his bones were placed in a fine wooden chest and transported to England. That chest, with his remains inside, was later sold as a piece of furniture and lost forever. Tom Paine left the world as inconspicuously as he had entered it. Of the countless words Thomas Paine wrote extolling the virtues of liberty during a time when that commodity was in very short supply, my personal favorites are these contained in a letter to a New Jersey friend during his long sojourn in Europe. His friend wondered if Paine, so long away, had *forgotten* America.

A thousand years hence, perhaps in less, America may be what England now is: the innocence of her character that won the hearts of all nations in her favor may sound like a romance, and her inimitable virtue as if it never had been. The ruins of that liberty which thousands bled for or suffered to obtain may just furnish materials for a village tale or extort a sigh from rustic sensibility while the fashionable of that day, enveloped in dissipation, shall deride the principle and deny the fact.

When we contemplate the fall of empires and the extinctions of nations of the Ancient world, we see but little to excite our regret than the mouldering ruins of pompous palaces, magnificent monuments, lofty pyramids, and walls and towers of the most costly workmanship. But when the empire of America shall fall, the subject for contemplative sorrow will be infinitely greater than the crumbling brass or marble can inspire. It will not then be said, here stood a temple of vast antiquity; here rose a Babel of invisible height, or there a palace of sumptuous extravagance. But *here* – ah painful thought, the noblest work of human wisdom, the grandest scene of human glory, the fair cause of freedom rose and fell! Read this and ask if I forget America.

Letter to Mrs. Few of Bordentown, NJ, January 6, 1789

Thomas Paine dedicated his life to enlightening the ranks of those his high-born peers called the ‘common men.’ In decades of fearless work, he never forgot his roots while proving that he was, himself, a most uncommon man. It is singularly appropriate that we remember, in this place, other words his quill scratched out almost 200 years ago:

An army of principles will penetrate where an army of soldiers cannot; it will succeed where diplomatic management would fail: it is neither the Rhine, the Channel, nor the Ocean that can arrest its progress: it will march on the horizon of the world, and it will conquer.

Agrarian Justice, 1797