

Thomas Paine and the Making of "Common Sense"

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EDITOR'S NOTE: Thomas Paine (1737–1809) was born Thomas Pain in Thetford, England. He worked variously as a corset-maker, a privateer, and a revenue officer in the excise service, but in 1774 he was dismissed from his job, his household goods were sold at auction, and he was separated from his wife. At this time, he decided to immigrate to America. Paine had been active in political debate in England, and through his friend George Lewis Scott was acquainted with Benjamin Franklin, whose letter of introduction Paine carried with him to the colonies. He soon found his life's vocation as a political pamphleteer, advocating for American independence and eventually world revolution. Among his best-known works are *Common Sense* (1776); *The American Crisis* (1776–83); *Public Good* (1780); *The Rights of Man* (1791–2); and *The Age of Reason* (1794–5), which he wrote in prison, attacking organized Christianity and alienating many of his former allies.

Paine had a tumultuous life and career. After the Silas Deane Affair (1778), in which he exposed secret diplomatic correspondence between the U.S. and France while writing a series of articles accusing Deane of financial improprieties, he was forced to resign from his post on the Committee for Foreign Affairs. In 1792 he was made an honorary citizen and member of the National Convention in France, but soon after was imprisoned as an enemy during the Reign of Terror. That same year he was tried for treason *in absentia* in England on the basis of passages judged to be seditious in *The Rights of Man*. Despite his fame as a writer and patriot, he died in poverty. Paine has generally been omitted from the list of American revolutionary founders, despite his enormous influence on events, but his works have remained in continuous circulation for the past two hundred and fifty years. The pages that follow, taken from a new biography, trace the process by which Paine became a best-selling author.

*Craig Nelson*

## Thomas Paine and the Making of *Common Sense*

Sometime between December 7 and 12, 1774, unable to walk because of the ravaging fever of typhus, Thomas Pain would be carried in a blanket onto the docks of Philadelphia, where his real life story would begin, the story of a life that he would start with but two assets. One would be his history with the London Newtonians; half of the population of Philadelphia, with thirty to forty percent of its wealth, would turn out to be fellow mechanics, pursuing enlightened ideas. The other asset would be a cache of letters written by Benjamin Franklin to the most important men in Philadelphia, including his son-in-law, Richard Bache (pronounced “Beech”):

From *Thomas Paine: Enlightenment, Revolution, and the Birth of Modern Nations*, published by arrangement with Viking, a member of Penguin Group (USA) Inc. Copyright © 2006 by Craig Nelson.

The bearer Mr Thomas Pain is very well recommended to me as an ingenious worthy young man. He goes to Pennsylvania with a view of settling there. If you can put him in a way of obtaining employment as a clerk, or assistant tutor in a school, or assistant surveyor, of all of which I think him very capable, so that he may procure a subsistence at least, till he can make acquaintance and obtain a knowledge of the country, you will do well, and much oblige your affectionate father.

This simple letter marks the beginning of a remarkably close friendship that would last for the rest of Benjamin Franklin's life. After the great American hero lost both of his own sons—Francis, who died of smallpox as a child, and William, who abandoned his father to join the British during the Revolution—the bereaved father will turn again and again to Paine, calling him “adopted political son.” In turn, Paine would discuss with Franklin all that he wrote and all that he invented. Over the years, they would grow more and more alike, coming to agree on nearly all matters large and small—becoming so close, in fact, that many believed that Paine's first great work, *Common Sense*, was wholly Franklin's notion.

Franklin and Paine were both born near the bottom rungs of Anglo-American society. Both had acquired an advanced education by their own efforts, and both believed in cultivating an elegant and stylish simplicity as an outward manifestation of republican ideals, traits they would share with another great American autodidact, George Washington, to whom Franklin at his death would bequeath a humble crab-tree walking stick. Franklin was remembered as being notoriously argumentative as a young man; Paine would be accused of having a similar temper, and especially (and fatally for his political career in America) a marked inability to compromise.

Franklin and Paine fell in sync politically on almost every issue, from considering the best form of government to be comprised of one legislature as democratically elected as feasible (though Paine would eventually come to see the benefits of bicameral systems), to launching public attacks on the institution of slavery. They were of exactly the same mind when it came to religion, though Franklin did not fully share Paine's almost spiritual devotion to human reason, dryly commenting that, “so convenient a thing it is to be a reasonable creature, since it enables one to find or make a reason for everything one has a mind to do.” Paine would regularly forgo royalties to more widely distribute his writings, just as Franklin would never patent his lightning rod or stove (and would never make a penny from either), so that their designs could be shared beneficially by all. The family member Franklin loved most, his grandson Benjamin Franklin Bache (known as Benny), would eventually become Paine's American publisher.

Paine lacked the experience of his benefactor's decades of training in commerce, civil service, and international diplomacy, which all contributed to form Franklin's notorious persona: reserved, impassive, and unforthcoming; he was a businessman, politician, and deal-maker above all else. Both Franklin and Washington vigorously created and brandished their public images and a granite restraint, which were essential keys to their success as politicians, and even though both would become two of his closest American friends, Paine never achieved this level of self-control. Spurred on

by his massive nerve, Paine loved to provoke. Believing in the Enlightenment as an absolute truth, he would become as much an Apostle of the Light as any Saint Paul could ever be, and just as unyielding in his beliefs and as sanctimonious with those of less pristine dedication. Paine would in time make of himself the Enlightenment's greatest missionary, carrying the thoughts of the patrician avant-garde to the great mass of merchants and artisans. At the same time, he would be a living embodiment of Poor Richard, the secret personality that Franklin had hidden away for the sake of his business and his country, an outrageously controversial and very public savant who shocked the lesser-educated into imagining a new world in which they had a serious role in the affairs of state, and assaulted the corruption of power in the ancien régime across two continents.

In America, Thomas Pain will reinvent himself as Thomas Paine, and Thomas Paine will become Benjamin Franklin unleashed.

[ . . . ]

When Pain arrived, the richest tenth of Philadelphia's citizens owned more than fifty percent of its wealth, and followed the English tradition of spending winters in urban town homes and the rest of the year in country estates. Half of the city, however, was mechanics, who followed the news of changes in British mercantile law as closely as anyone in the shopkeeping or import trades. Three years before Pain's arrival, master craftsmen had deserted the Franklin-directed Quaker Society political organization over disagreements with city merchants on British import law, in order to form their own mechanics-only group, the Patriotic Society. Pain would join his fellow workingmen there, as well as eating, drinking, and debating at the Indian Queen, an American version of Lewes's Headstrong Club or London's Honest Whigs.

But Pain met more than mechanics as he browsed the titles of the Philadelphia Library Company and attended lectures hosted by the American Philosophical Society, where he would eventually be accepted as a member. Founded in 1743 for "the promoting of useful knowledge, especially as it respects the agriculture, manufactories, and natural history of North America," this United Colonies' rendition of the Royal Society was the headquarters for the greatest of American intellectuals, including such future Pain friends as clockmaker, surveyor, state treasurer, astronomer, and first director of the U.S. Mint David Rittenhouse. As his study of Newton and his personal charisma had brought Pain such friendships as [George Lewis] Scott and Franklin in London, so now, alongside the introductions of Richard Bache, it would bring him to the heart of Philadelphia's burgeoning enlightened society.

The most important Philadelphian in Pain's life after Ben Franklin, however, would turn out to be a man he met while visiting the printshop and bookstore next to his riverside rooming house on the corner of Front and Market streets. Robert Aitken was its owner, and Pain spent so much time there that on January 10, 1775, the two fell into conversation. Pain greatly impressed Aitken (who had himself arrived in the New World from Scotland just a few years before), to the point where the printer decided to offer him a job as executive editor of his brand-new magazine.

Clad in a blue paper cover under the motto *Fuval in sylvis habitare* ("Happy it is to live in the woods"), *Pennsylvania Magazine; or, American Monthly Museum* would at first follow the strict formula of almost every other eighteenth-century publication, with their overriding tone of smothering pleasantness. Maidens, flowers, glades, and scampering forest creatures made regular appearances, while disputatious essays on religion or politics were strictly forbidden. A typical issue would include such up-to-the-minute concerns as an explication of the constitution of beavers, a biography of Voltaire, a land-surveying mathematical puzzle, an essay on suicide, the announcement of a new machine for generating electricity, treatises on self-improvement and the inexorable law of progress, current Philadelphia commodity prices, the text of the Continental Congress's writ to George III, and extensive descriptions and illustrations of the latest and most exciting European inventions, the latter being must-reads for Philadelphia moderns, those American Philosophical Society members who would become Paine's personal friends and political allies in the decade to come.

The first issue, fifty-two pages long, appeared on January 24, 1775, and sold six hundred copies. Within a few months of Paine's stewardship, however, *Pennsylvania Magazine* would attract more than fifteen hundred paid subscribers, making it the most widely read magazine published in the New World. The new editor's first article, "The Magazine in America," outlined his aspirations: "The two capital supports of a magazine are utility and entertainment. The first is a boundless path, the other an endless spring . . . I have no doubt of seeing, in a little time, an American magazine full of more useful matter than I ever saw in an English one: Because we are not exceeded in abilities, have a more extensive field for enquiry, and, whatever may be our political state, *Our happiness will always depend upon ourselves*. . . . I consider a magazine as a kind of bee-hive, which both allures the swarm, and provides room to store their sweets. Its division into cells, gives every bee a province of its own; and though they all produce honey, yet perhaps they differ in their taste for flowers."

About half of each issue would be written by three men: lawyer Francis Hopkinson, College of New Jersey (today Princeton) President John Witherspoon, and Paine, who used such pseudonyms as Justice and Humanity, Humanus, Atlanticus, Vox Populi, and Esop, at first to make the magazine seem to have more contributors than it actually did (common practice for every European and American publication), but eventually as a cover for his more treasonous and incendiary material (not so common). Besides "The Magazine in America," he would contribute "Description of a New Electrical Machine" and "A Mathematical Question Proposed" for the January issue; "Useful and Entertaining Hints on the Internal Riches of the Colonies," "The Critic and The Snowdrop," and "New Anecdotes of Alexander the Great" for February; "Reflections on the Life and Death of Lord Clive," "The Monk and the Jew," and "The Death of General Wolfe" for March; and "A New Method of Building Frame Houses," "Cupid and Hymen," and "An Account of the Burning of Bachelor's Hall" for April. Some later Paine critics would find in the brevity of his three famous works evidence of laziness; considering the volume of essays he produced in the first months

of *Pennsylvania Magazine*, however, it is hard to imagine a more industrious editor and contributor.

Years later Isaiah Thomas interviewed publisher Aitken for his *History of Printing in America*. By then Aitken and Paine were no longer speaking, having waged a very bitter and very public battle over salary and title, and this may have colored Aitken's reminiscence:

On one of the occasions, when Paine had neglected to supply the material for the magazine, with a short time of the day of publication, Aitken went to his lodgings, and complained of his neglecting to fulfill his contract. Paine heard him patiently, and coolly answered, "You shall have them in time." Aitken expressed some doubts on the subject, and insisted on Paine's accompanying him and proceeding immediately to business, as the workmen were waiting for copy. He accordingly went home with Aitken, and was soon seated at the table with the necessary apparatus, which always included a glass, and a decanter of brandy. Aitken observed, "he would never write without that." The first glass put him in a train of thinking; Aitken feared the second would disqualify him, or render him intractable; but it only illuminated his intellectual system; and when he had swallowed the third glass, he wrote with great rapidity, intelligence, and precision; and his ideas appeared to flow faster than he could commit them to paper. What he penned from the inspiration of the brandy, was perfectly fit for the press without alteration, or correction.

For the first time in his life, Thomas Paine had found an occupation that fully matched his talents and his aspirations. He was almost immediately a tremendous success, both with the magazine's readership and with his own ever-expanding social sphere. He admitted that he had found the "one kind of life I am fit for, and that is a thinking one, and, of course, a writing one." The consequences of this second round of apprenticeship reversed thirty-seven years of failure and psychologically transformed him. Paine would no longer be that callow boy who couldn't bring himself to learn his Latin, or that selfish excise officer who let his family business collapse as he sought glory in the big city. He was now a man thoughtful in his private life, and sedulous in his profession, while pursuing the holy grail of eighteenth-century moderns: *virtue*.

What heaven is for Christians, virtue was for those educated in the values of the Enlightenment. Tracing its origins to *vir*, the Latin for "man," and considered the ultimate goal of every meritocrat, *virtù* was originally translated as "public spirit," for, as described by a line of philosophers from Aristotle to Montesquieu, it referred to someone so devoted to civic service that he became famous in his lifetime, and after death was remembered by history for his great and generous work. Machiavelli had warned that democratic states depended on the virtue of their citizens, for if a love of power inspired "factions" to pursue private interests in lieu of the greater good, or *fortuna* (an epicene lust for riches and luxury) defeated *virtù*, corruption and tyranny would be the inevitable result. Time and again across the years of revolution and republic, the American founding fathers would worry that their reputations were being sullied, despite their assiduous efforts at leading lives of sterling virtue.

A key point of this ethic was to first become so successful in business as to satisfy the financial needs of one's family, so that one could then turn to the charity of public

service, but Pain, like Samuel Adams (who lived in such poverty that he needed the donations of friends to be dressed properly as a delegate to the 1774 Continental Congress), would forgo that step. Instead, he would leap directly to relinquishing a great fortune in order to more widely spread the teachings of the Enlightenment to improve the lives of future generations. When, at the start of his writing career, he was not fairly reimbursed as the world's best-selling author due to living in the copyright-free American frontier, Pain would entirely forgo all royalties, which made it possible to reduce the cover price so that almost anyone could afford his pamphlets. He described his new character to one of his closest friends: "You will say that in this classification of citizens I have marked no place for myself, that I am neither farmer, mechanic, merchant, nor shopkeeper. I believe, however, I am of the first class. I am a *farmer of thoughts*, and all the crops I raise I give away."

Just as he had so ardently converted to the causes of Newton and the Enlightenment in London, Pain now became more of an American than any native son. As an editor, he regularly sought to publish articles on more substantive issues, including attacks on cruelty to animals and the barbaric tradition of dueling. It was long believed that Pain also authored one of the most famous articles ever published in *Pennsylvania Magazine*, "An Occasional Letter on the Female Sex," one of the first arguments in favor of women's rights in America. It has since been shown that he did not write the piece, but that it appeared under his editorship shows the type of progressive modern work he and Aitken were championing.

In his role as printer and businessman, Aitken at times, however, refused to go forward with some of the more avant-garde material, and Pain would have to turn to the *Pennsylvania Journal and the Weekly Advertiser* or the *Pennsylvania Ledger* to publish them. One of these pieces was coauthored with Thomas Pryor in November 1775, "Experiments for Making Saltpeter in Private Families," saltpeter being a crucial component of gunpowder. Another was one of the first public attacks on slavery. Philadelphia's slave auctions were held in an outdoor shed across the street from Pain's own room, and would-be bidders could inspect the merchandise at the London Coffee House next door. Seeing this inspired Pain to publish a shocking essay, years ahead of its time, that assaulted every excuse for the trade, and demanded immediate emancipation for all Africans in every colony:

Our traders in men (*an unnatural commodity!*) must know the wickedness of that slave-trade, if they attend to reasoning, or the dictates of their own hearts . . . They show as little reason as conscience who put the matter by with saying—"Men, in some cases, are lawfully made slaves, and why may not these?" So men, in some cases, are lawfully put to death, deprived of their goods, without their consent; may any man, therefore, be treated so . . . ? Nor is this plea mended by adding—"They are set forth to us as slaves, and we buy them without farther inquiry, let the sellers see to it." Such man may as well join with a known band of robbers, buy their ill-got goods, and help on the trade; ignorance is no more pleadable in one case than the other; the sellers plainly own how they obtain them. But none can lawfully buy without evidence that they are not concurring with men-stealers; and as the true owner has a right to reclaim his goods that were stolen, and sold; so the slave, who is proper owner of his freedom, has a right to reclaim it, however often sold. . . . Is the barbarous enslaving

of our inoffensive neighbours, and treating them like wild beasts subdued by force, reconcilable with the divine precepts? Is this doing to them as we would desire they should do to us? If they could carry off and enslave some thousands of us, would we think it just?—One would almost wish they could for once; it might convince more than reason, or the Bible.

“African Slavery in America” was so vigorous, intemperate, and influential that five weeks after its publication, on April 14, 1775, Philadelphians formed the Pennsylvania Society for the Relief of Negroes Unlawfully Held in Bondage, the first abolitionist organization in the Western Hemisphere. The nerve of this essay, the same kind of nerve that had inspired the younger Pain to present himself to Oliver Goldsmith, in time triggered a chain reaction, one eventually leading to Pain becoming Paine, as Dr. Benjamin Rush remembered: “I met him accidentally in Mr. Aitkin’s bookstore, and was introduced to him by Mr. Aitkin. We conversed a few minutes, and I left him. Soon afterwards I read a short essay with which I was much pleased, in one of Bradford’s papers, against the slavery of the Africans in our country, and which I was informed was written by Mr. Paine. This excited my desire to be better acquainted with him.”

One of the first to champion inoculations for children and humane treatment for the mentally ill (instead of condemning them for being possessed by devils), the hawk-eyed and hawk-nosed Benjamin Rush believed that all disease had one source—overactive blood—making him one of medical history’s most enthusiastic leechers and purgers. A scion of Philadelphia who attended medical school at the famed University of Edinburgh, Rush would become a signer of the Declaration of Independence, a surgeon for the Continental Army, treasurer of the U.S. Mint under his dear friend President John Adams, and one of the cofounders of the Pennsylvania Society for Promoting the Abolition of Slavery, the successor to the organization formed in the wake of Pain’s essay. Rush would be a principal of both organizations, and publish essays as an ardent abolitionist while continuing to own slaves himself.

Dr. Rush was, like Pain, immersed in Enlightenment thinking, strong-willed, and always ready to say exactly what was on his mind. They differed, however, in that the physician was one of America’s founding-father workaholics, keeping to an early-to-bed, early-to-rise clock of Presbyterian discipline and disdaining (as much as possible in that era) liquor. Pain, on the other hand, loved meeting with friends for talking, debating, and drinking at all hours of the night; he slept away the mornings, and thoroughly enjoyed a good afternoon nap. Rush and Pain’s friendship became very close very quickly, however, through their shared feelings and beliefs on science, abolition, the education of women, and on the most pressing issue of the day: the recent dawn, in blood, of the colonial civil war.

[ . . . ]

On October 18, 1775, Pain reappeared as “Humanus” in the *Pennsylvania Journal* with his most provocative article to date, “A Serious Thought.” Responding to those



like Johnson who ridiculed Virginian slave-owners now demanding liberty, it offered a preview of what was to come:

When I reflect on the horrid cruelties exercised by Britain . . . that ever since the discovery of America she hath employed herself in the most horrid of all traffics, that of human flesh, unknown to the most savage nations, hath yearly (without provocation and in cold blood) ravaged the hapless shores of Africa, robbing it of its unoffending inhabitants to cultivate her stolen dominions in the West—when I reflect on these, I hesitate not for a moment to believe that the Almighty will finally separate America from Britain. Call it independency or what you will, if it is the cause of God and humanity it will go on.

Throughout the summer and fall of 1775, Pain spent less and less time editing and contributing to *Pennsylvania Magazine* as his relationship with Aitken collapsed. The quarrel grew so bitter that at one point the two men agreed to have their differences arbitrated by third parties, but Aitken at the last minute refused even this gesture. A group of allies offered to financially back Pain with his own magazine, but he, for reasons unknown, declined, perhaps because he was already consumed with drafting a major essay on the history of the American colonies and their position within the British Empire.

According to his very-late-in-life and not entirely accurate memoirs, Benjamin Rush was greatly involved with the crafting of this article, providing the idea for the title, finding the printer, and even originally planning to write it all himself. After he published a piece attacking slavery, however, Rush's medical practice had been so damaged that he felt he could not be publicly identified with another incendiary stance. Pain easily could, for after all, Rush thought, what did *he* have to lose (besides being hanged for sedition)?:

I suggested to him that he had nothing to fear from the popular odium to which such a publication might expose him, for he could live anywhere, but that my profession and connections which tied me to Philadelphia . . . He readily assented to the proposal, and from time to time he called at my house, and read to me every chapter of the proposed pamphlet as he composed it. I recollect being charmed with a sentence in it, which by accident, or perhaps by design, was not published. It was as follows, "Nothing can be conceived of more absurd than three millions of people flocking to the American shore, every time a vessel arrives from England, to know what portion of liberty they shall enjoy." When Mr. Paine had finished his pamphlet, I advised him to show it to Dr. Franklin, Mr. Rittenhouse, and Mr. Samuel Adams, all of whom I knew were decided friends to American independence. I mention these facts to refute a report that Mr. Paine was assisted in composing his pamphlet by one or more of the above gentlemen. They never saw it until it was written and then only by my advice.

Though it is true that Pain originally wanted the title "Plain Truth" and Rush instead suggested "Common Sense," the doctor's account is not wholly plausible. Pain, after all, needed no intermediary to discuss his work with Benjamin Franklin, and Rush had absurdly commented on the writing of this essay on independence and

republicanism that “there were two words which [I had warned him] to avoid by every means as necessary to his own safety and that of the public—independence and republicanism.” Additionally, if Rush did not understand the danger in publishing such seditious and treasonous material, Paine certainly did:

It cannot at this time a day be forgotten that the politics, the opinions and the prejudices of the country were in direct opposition to the principles contained in that work. And I well know that in Pennsylvania, and I suppose the same in other of the then provinces, it would have been unsafe for a man to have espoused independence in any public company and after the appearance of that pamphlet it was as dangerous to speak against it. It was a point of time full of critical danger to America, and if her future well-being depended on any one political circumstance more than another it was in changing the sentiments of the people from dependence to independence and from the monarchical to the republican form of government; for had she unhappily split on the question, or entered coldly or hesitatingly into it, she most probably had been ruined.

Rush’s memoir offers only a half-glimpsed picture of the process that Paine followed in developing *Common Sense* and all his major work. Missing to us today from the documentary record is one very significant part of Paine’s life—the hours spent daily (or nightly) in conversation with his fellow moderns. These talks would include international news, local gossip, and debates on the issues of the day, the news and gossip ending up in his letters and the debates in his essays. This is not to say that his pamphlets were produced by committee, or that every one of his contemporaries agreed with everything in them, but it is patent that Paine assimilated the conversations and correspondence with his many friends and allies into his work. He would remember discussing *Common Sense* with Ben Franklin as, “In October, 1775, Dr. Franklin proposed giving me such materials as were in his hands towards completing a history of the present transactions [the Anglo-American conflict], and seemed desirous of having the first volume out the next spring. I had then formed the outlines of *Common Sense*, and finished nearly the first part; and as I supposed the doctor’s design in getting out a history was to open the new year with a new system, I expected to surprise him with a production on that subject much earlier than he thought of.”

The paucity of documents revealing the evolution of Paine’s ideas has led to a profound misconception of him. Instead of assessing them as radical manifestoes, as they generally are today, it would be more accurate to view the great majority of Paine’s lasting works as core treatises of the Enlightenment. *Common Sense*, *Rights of Man*, and *The Age of Reason*, after all, do not stray far outside the beliefs of Franklin, Washington, Jefferson, Rousseau, Condorcet, Smith, Price, Priestley, Godwin, and Wollstonecraft. This is not to say that Paine was unoriginal or less radical than he is now judged; it is to say that everyone else in his global modern circle had sensibilities as progressive as his own. The American founding fathers, especially, are now remembered as less extreme than they actually were; nostalgia and patriotism have rendered them safe and domesticated. Ben Franklin is now a wizened polymath who flew kites; Thomas Jefferson a quirky inventor who perhaps loved too much; John Adams a churchgoing,

salt-of-the-earth Yankee. Paine's subject matter may have been scandalous, his writing style spicy and pugnacious, and his utopian vision an inspiration to progressives across history, but the biggest best-selling author of the eighteenth century was not generally considered a wild, black-sheep extremist in his own time—otherwise, he would never have been so popular with such a broad readership, or been the friend or ally of every significant figure in the eighteenth-century fight against tyranny and for the greater good. What was truly radical about him, in fact, was wholly a matter of class; he explained modern, patrician ideas in essays that any plebeian could read and understand. He was the Enlightenment's great Mercury, and in time, exactly for this immense popularity, he would be convicted of treason.

*Common Sense* appeared in the form of a pamphlet, the most popular style of eighteenth-century publishing, as it offered a medium for anyone who could afford the cost of paper and a printshop's fees. With no binding or cover, consisting of between twenty and eighty loosely sewn pages, with costs affordable for almost any would-be author, the longest pamphlets were about the length of today's romance novels or classic mysteries. Costing about a shilling and therefore far less expensive than books, pamphlets were just the right length for explaining a position in detail, as well as for being read aloud to the illiterate, an important consideration for those wanting to reach the widest of audiences. (There is new evidence, in fact, that Jefferson inscribed pause marks in copies of the Declaration of Independence to aid in public performances.)

One later pamphleteer, George Orwell, would call these booklets "a one-man show. One has complete freedom of expression, including, if one chooses, the freedom to be scurrilous, abusive, and seditious; or, on the other hand, to be more detailed, serious and 'high-brow' than is ever possible in a newspaper or in most kinds of periodicals . . . it can be produced much more quickly than a book, and . . . can reach a bigger public."

The writing in *Common Sense* was part Enlightenment inspirational—proclaiming the present as the precipitous moment for America to become a New World model of government and society, as well as a beacon of freedom and human progress—and part bilious attack. Though Paine never seemed to regard himself as an apostle or prophet or missionary of Enlightenment principles (such terms being fundamentally contrary to rationalist, natural philosophy), *Common Sense* would, like all of his major work, be structured very much like a traditional pulpit sermon. There is the oral quality of the prose, which seems styled as to be read aloud; the dramatic portrayal of imminent dangers facing the audience; and the answer, an exhortation to action (which, in the case of *Common Sense*, meant war, not prayer). The Enlightenment urged human beings to search for ways to improve the lot of all people, everywhere; Paine's consistent metaphor would elevate the American citizen as someone equipped to wield such global power, now.

As plutocrats, the great majority of the American founding fathers were understandably concerned with mercantilism, customs, navigation law, tariff charts, and land charters. *Common Sense*, instead, attacked all that was feudal in the Europe of the eighteenth century, notably its hereditary thrones and privileges of class. Paine

took an idea that Englishmen on both sides of the Atlantic cherished—that theirs was the best government in the world, as it balanced the competing powers of monarch, gentry, and commoner against one another, pitting the throne against the House of Lords against the House of Commons—and detonated it. For those fervently believing that kings offer stability through their absolute rule, Paine deftly parried that “the whole history of England disowns the fact. Thirty kings and two minors have reigned in that distracted kingdom since the conquest, in which time have been (including the Revolution) no less than eight civil wars and nineteen rebellions.” He so cleverly and so logically strung together his causes and effects of society and government, employing such Real Whig concepts as the inherent equality of human beings and the inanity of inherited power, that North American readers could find no fault with his argument, one that would dissolve colonial fealty to King George III and his Parliament.

Another key to the great popularity and influence of *Common Sense* was Paine’s ability to address the colonists’ greatest fears by appealing to their noblest aspirations, especially with his insistence that tyrants, monarchs, and legislators have no power unless the citizens of a state grant it to them—that the world’s greatest power lay within the united action of ordinary people. According to *Common Sense*, there is no question that, in a war against the greatest military power of its time, the free citizens of America would triumph. Historian Bernard Bailyn explained the force of *Common Sense* by calling it “a work of genius—slapdash as it is, rambling as it is, crude as it is. . . . One had to be a fool or a fanatic in early January 1776 to advocate American independence. Everyone knew England was the most powerful nation on earth . . . and that a string of prosperous but weak communities along the Atlantic coast left uncontrolled and unprotected would quickly be pounced on by rival European powers. . . . Why should one want to destroy the most successful political system in the world, which guaranteed both liberty and order, under which America had flourished? . . . There is something extraordinary in this pamphlet and in the mind and imagination of the man who wrote it, something bizarre, outsized, unique.”

Real Whig James Harrington’s “The Grounds and Reasons of Monarchy Considered” (with its attacks on hereditary succession) and scientist-philosopher-clergyman Joseph Priestley’s “An Essay on the First Principles of Government” (with its ideas on the evolution of representational democracies) were clear forebears to *Common Sense*, and Paine told John Adams that his history of kings and the Bible was inspired by John Milton’s *Pro Populo Anglicano Defensio* and *Defence of the People of England and Tenure of Kings and Magistrates*; he credited his arguments in favor of independence to James Burgh’s “Political Disquisitions” of 1775. The author likely was familiar with both the Royal Society’s dicta on prose and William Duncan’s *Elements of Logick*, which convinced a number of Anglo-American writers and speakers to forgo the classical rhetoric of Cicero in favor of one based on Newton, nature, and mathematics, in the laying out of one’s argument from only “self-evident” propositions.

Regardless of his many sources, Paine’s ability to seize readers’ attention and the confrontational style of his prose were uniquely his own. For those accustomed to the era’s standard baroque emollients of endless allusion and the subjunctive case, Paine’s

decidedly plainsong argot must have appeared harsh, stark, raw, and unsettling. For contrast, consider a fair representation of mainstream eighteenth-century prose in this single sentence of Priestley's "First Principles of Government":

In the largest states, if the abuses of government should, at any time be great and manifest; if the servants of the people, forgetting their masters, and their masters' interest, should pursue a separate one of their own; if, instead of considering that they are made for the people, they should consider the people as made for them; if the oppressions and violations of right should be great, flagrant, and universally resented; if the tyrannical governors should have no friends but a few sycophants, who had long preyed upon the vitals of their fellow citizens, and who might be expected to desert a government, whenever their interests should be detached from it: if, in consequence of these circumstances, it should become manifest, that the risk, which would be run in attempting a revolution would be trifling, and the evils which might be apprehended from it, were far less than these which were actually suffered, and which were daily increasing; in the name of God, I ask, what principles are those, which ought to restrain an injured and insulted people from asserting their natural rights, and from changing, or even punishing their governors that is their servants, who had abused their trust; or from altering the whole form of their government, if it appeared to be of a structure so liable to abuse?

*Common Sense* could be considered the first American self-help book, the help being for those who could never imagine life without a monarch. The king was then viewed as not just an executive of the state but as the very reflection of the nation, the God-given *pater* to whom even the lowliest of subjects could appeal in time of need. Cromwell's republic was not remembered fondly in Paine's time; many believed that a throneless nation was like a body without a head, that in such systems total anarchy and chaos would necessarily result.

Paine announced that not only did there not exist a divine right of kings, but that the proof lay within the pages of the Bible itself, and that the King/Lords/Commons balance of powers was nothing but a theatrical performance, helping subjects believe the myth of their system's fairness and equity, when in fact it was corrupt and oligarchic. He explained that adults do not require any fatherly king (or mother country) to oversee them; they only need the rule of law. He attacked the very limited suffrage offered to British citizens through absurdly high property requirements (to date, Paine had yet to own fifty pounds' worth of property and could not vote) and the allocation of districts that kept English suffrage firmly in the hands of the elite. He proclaimed the benefits of American independence before anyone else was brave enough to speak of such matters in public. He directly focused the inchoate rage of the British-American middle class against crown bureaucrats and aristocratic disdain. He sparked the Declaration of Independence, and inspired colonials to see themselves not as traitors or as mere defenders of English constitutional history but as pioneers and forefathers struggling to create a better world for future generations. Most important, Thomas Paine spiritually transformed an unfocused and confusing civil war into an ennobling crusade of good confronting evil, following a course both difficult and frightening, but ending with a triumph that was inevitable.

The cause of America is, in a great measure, the cause of all mankind . . .

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. . . .

Society in every state is a blessing, but government even in its best state is but a necessary evil; in its worst state an intolerable one; for when we suffer, or are exposed to the same miseries by a government, which we might expect in a country without government, our calamity is heightened by reflecting that we furnish the means by which we suffer! Government, like dress, is the badge of lost innocence; the palaces of kings are built on the ruins of the bowers of paradise. . . .

I know it is difficult to get over local or long standing prejudices, yet if we will suffer ourselves to examine the component parts of the English constitution, we shall find them to be 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 persons of the peers.

Thirdly.—The new republican materials, in the persons of the commons, on whose virtue depends the freedom of England.

The two first, by being hereditary, are independent of the people; wherefore in a constitutional sense they contribute nothing towards the freedom of the state.

To say that the constitution of England is a union of three powers reciprocally checking each other, is farcical, either the words have no meaning, or they are flat contradictions.

To say that the commons is a check upon the king, presupposes two things.

First.—That the king is not to be trusted without being looked after, or in other words, that a thirst for absolute power is the natural disease of monarchy.

Secondly.—That the commons, by being appointed for that purpose, are either wiser or more worthy of confidence than the crown. . . .

But there is another and greater distinction for which no truly natural or religious reason can be assigned, and that is, the distinction of men into kings and subjects. Male and female are the distinctions of nature, good and bad the distinctions of heaven; but how a race of men came into the world so exalted above the rest, and distinguished like some new species, is worth enquiring into, and whether they are the means of happiness or of misery to mankind. . . . One of the strongest natural proofs of the folly of hereditary right in kings, is, that nature disapproves it, otherwise she would not so frequently turn it into ridicule by giving mankind an ass for a lion. . . .

This is supposing the present race of kings in the world to have had an honorable origin; whereas it is more than probable, that could we take off the dark covering of antiquity, and trace them to their first rise, that we should find the first of them

nothing better than the principal ruffian of some restless gang, whose savage manners of preeminence in subtlety obtained him the title of chief among plunderers; and who by increasing in power, and extending his depredations, overawed the quiet and defenseless to purchase their safety by frequent contributions. . . .

England, since the conquest, hath known some few good monarchs, but groaned beneath a much larger number of bad ones, yet no man in his senses can say that their claim under William the Conqueror is a very honorable one. A French bastard landing with an armed banditti, and establishing himself king of England against the consent of the natives, is in plain terms a very paltry rascally original. It certainly hath no divinity in it. . . .

The most plausible plea, which hath ever been offered in favor of hereditary succession, is, that it preserves a nation from civil wars; and were this true, it would be weighty; whereas, it is the most barefaced falsity ever imposed upon mankind. The whole history of England disowns the fact. Thirty kings and two minors have reigned in that distracted kingdom since the conquest, in which time there have been (including the Revolution) no less than eight civil wars and nineteen rebellions. . . .

In England a king hath little more to do than to make war and give away places; which in plain terms, is to impoverish the nation and set it together by the ears. A pretty business indeed for a man to be allowed eight hundred thousand sterling a year for, and worshipped into the bargain! Of more worth is one honest man to society, and in the sight of God, than all the crowned ruffians that ever lived.

*Thoughts of the present state of American Affairs*

. . . I have heard it asserted by some, that as America hath flourished under her future connection with Great Britain, that 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 thrived 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 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; . . . to say that reconciliation is our duty, is truly farcical. The first king of England, of the present line (William the Conqueror) was a Frenchman, and half the peers of England are descendants from the same country; wherefore by the same method of reasoning, England ought to be governed by France . . .

Let a Continental Conference be held, in the following manner, and for the following purpose . . . to frame a Continental Charter, or Charter of the United Colonies; (answering to what is called the Magna Charta of England) fixing the number and manner of choosing members of Congress, members of Assembly, with their date of sitting, and drawing the line of business and jurisdiction between them: 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, according to the dictates of conscience; with such other matter as is necessary for a charter to contain. Immediately after which, the said conference to dissolve, and the bodies which

shall be chosen conformable to the said charter, to be the legislators and governors of this continent for the time being: Whose peace and happiness, may God preserve, Amen. . . .

But where says 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 Britain. Yet that we may not appear to be defective even in earthly honors, 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. For as in absolute governments the king is law, so in free countries the law ought to be king; and there ought to be no other. . . .

It is the custom of nations, when any two are at war, for some other powers, not engaged in the quarrel, to step in as mediators, and bring about the preliminaries of a peace: but while America calls herself the subject of Great Britain, no power, however well disposed she may be, can offer her mediation. Wherefore, in our present state we may quarrel on for ever. . . . Were a manifesto to be published, and dispatched to foreign courts, setting forth the miseries we have endured, and the peaceable methods we have ineffectually used for redress; declaring, at the same time, that not being able, any longer to live happily or safely under the cruel disposition of the British court, we had been driven to the necessity of breaking off all connection with her; at the same time assuring all such courts of our peaceable disposition towards them, and of our desire of entering into trade with them. Such a memorial would produce more good effects to this Continent, than if a ship were freighted with petitions to Britain. . . .

Should an independency be brought about . . . we have every opportunity and every encouragement before us, to form the noblest, purest constitution on the face of the earth. We have it in our power to begin the world over again.

\* \* \*

Rush acted as Paine's agent, approaching one Philadelphia printer after the next with the manuscript, but no one dared publish it. Paine at the time remembered that the Americans' "attachment to Britain was obstinate, and it was at that time a kind of treason to speak against it. They disliked the ministry, but they esteemed the nation. Their idea of grievance operated without resentment, and their single object was reconciliation." Even after King George had declared the colonies to be in a state of rebellion, the Pennsylvania and New Jersey assemblies instructed their congressional delegates to do nothing that might further distance America from England. In London Ben Franklin assured William Pitt that he had heard nothing in favor of breaking away to form a new nation "from any person drunk or sober."

Rush finally settled with a Scots printer on Third Street, Robert Bell, who remembered that "when the work was at a stand for want of a courageous typographer, I was then recommended by a gentleman nearly in the following words: 'There is Bell, he is a Republican printer, give it to him, and I will answer for his courage to print it.'" For being so courageous, Bell demanded that if there were a financial loss,



Pain would be liable; that if there were profits, he would take half, and that he would charge an outrageous two shillings cover price (about fifteen dollars today). With no other stationers willing to go forward, Pain agreed to Bell's terms, but was slightly less courageous than the publisher. The first printing of *Common Sense* had Bell's name on it, but not Pain's (or Paine's); instead, the title page announced only that it was "written by an Englishman."

Bell printed one thousand copies on January 10, 1776—the same day that King George denounced the colonies to Parliament—and sold them all within days. Pain calculated that he was owed thirty pounds for his half-share, but Bell claimed instead that there were no profits whatsoever, and that in fact, Pain owed him £29 12s 1d. The publisher also refused to include in the second printing revisions the author made in reply to the loyalist criticisms of Pennsylvania's many Quakers (pamphleteering gave rise to an industry of its own, where a publication was answered by its political opponents in the press or in their own pamphlets, and the original author would then answer back in revised editions or sequels). Pain was enraged. He paid Bell's demanded sum, and then approached another printer, paid for a run of six thousand, and arranged for brothers William and Thomas Bradford to sell them at a price of one shilling, undercutting Bell (whose success with the first edition was so remarkable that it emboldened his fellow stationers). Pain then forswore all royalties, and donated all his profits to George Washington's Continental Army, to be used for mittens: "As my wish was to serve an oppressed people, and assist in a just and good cause, I conceived that the honor of it would be promoted by my declining to make even the usual profits of an author." The Bradford edition's cover clearly stated, "by Thomas Paine."

The combination of an author charitably renouncing what would become a significant fortune to keep the cover price ridiculously low and the public street brawlings of printers Bell and the Bradfords resulted in a marketing strategy of genius. Bell launched an advertising campaign in the *Pennsylvania Evening Post*, dismissing the Bradford edition as similar to his "in figure and utility as much as a British shilling in size and value resembleth a British half crown." The Bradfords in turn explained that Bell's machinations were depriving American troops of their mittens. The controversy only spurred sales of both editions. When Bell then replied with ads attacking the author, Pain responded by publicly repudiating his own copyright, thereby giving *any* colonial printer the right to issue his own edition. The various ad campaigns, charges, and countercharges set off a response that would enflame the whole of the United Colonies. Across the seaboard, colonial printshops printed and distributed knock-offs in New York, Salem, Hartford, Lancaster, Albany, Providence, and Norwich; by the end of the month, a German translation had appeared, and by the end of April, French editions were available in Quebec. John Adams noted that *Common Sense* was "received in France and in all of Europe with rapture," eventually appearing in Warsaw, London, Edinburgh, Newcastle, Rotterdam, Copenhagen, Berlin, Dubrovnik, and Moscow.

Many of these European editions deleted Pain's comments on the foolishness of hereditary rule, and none remitted to the author any royalties. It was, in fact, impossible for a successful author to make any money in America, since there was no

true copyright in force, and the minute a piece of writing was seen to have favor with the public, it was pirated and sold throughout the colonies with all revenues kept by the stationers. In this lawless atmosphere, what Paine (or any other author) needed for financing was a patron. As the apostle of the Enlightenment, however, one of Paine's great targets of attack was the absurdity of inherited wealth and title, with the side effect of closing that potential avenue of income. In time, he would address the perils of his copyright-free nation in a letter that may have had some bearing on the American Constitution's inclusion of "Congress shall have the power to promote the Progress of Science and useful Arts, by securing for limited Times to Authors and Inventors the exclusive Right to their respective Writings and Discoveries":

George Washington  
Philadelphia  
2 April 1783

Sir

Understanding that Congress has it in contemplation to recommend to the States the passing of a law for the security of literary property, I take the liberty of troubling Congress, with an anecdote which will serve to shew the necessity of such a measure.

On the recommendation of Doctor Rush, I gave the manuscript copy of the pamphlet *Common Sense* to a certain printer of this city and as I did not intend to have any trouble with the work after it was printed, and had conceived it proper toward supporting the reputation of the principles of the pamphlet contained, that no parts of the profits arising from the sale should come into my hands, I, therefore gave one half of the clear profits to the printer over and above his charge of printing—and the other half, I gave by my own hand to Mr. Thomas Pryor and Mr. Joseph Dean both of this city, to be received by them and disposed of to any public purpose they might choose, the particular thing mentioned was to purchase woolen mittens for the soldiers then going to the Quebec Expedition—The printer not only kept the whole profits of the first edition, which he still retains [illegible] but in the course of two or three days printed [a] second edition, and on my expressing some surprise at his doing it without my knowledge, as I intended making additions to it, he very bluntly told me—I had no business with it.

I am  
Your Excellency's  
Most Obt and very hble Sevt  
Thomas Paine

America would not have a copyright law until 1790—a statute that owed its existence primarily to the strenuous efforts of Paine's great friend Joel Barlow—and it would solely concern charts, maps, and books. Previously, the nation had followed English common law in considering literary output a form of property, but, as in England, the actual law benefited the owner of the printing press—the stationer—more than it did the author. The attitude of early American colonials toward their authors was perhaps summed up by Virginia's royal governor Sir William Berkeley, who commented in 1671: "I thank God there are no free schools nor printing, and I hope we shall not have

these hundred years; for learning has brought disobedience, and heresy, and sects into the world, and printing has divulged them, and libels against the best government. God keep us from both.”

*Common Sense* made Thomas Paine America’s first best-selling author. By the end of that year of 1776, between 150,000 and 250,000 copies had been sold, at a time when the American population stood at three million—the equivalent in per capita of selling thirty-five million copies of a single title today. Aitken’s store by itself sold seven dozen in its first two weeks, and a mere ten days after Bell’s first printing, copies were on sale in Virginia and Massachusetts. It would have the greatest public impact on American history of any piece of writing, with *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* following a close second. In time, half the nation either read it or had it read to them. A Connecticut reader marveled that “you have declared the sentiments of millions. Your production may justly be compared to a land-flood that sweeps all before it. We were blind, but on reading these enlightening words the scales have fallen from our eyes; even deep-rooted prejudices take to themselves wings and flee away. . . . The doctrine of independence hath been in times past, greatly disgusting; we abhorred the principle—it is now become our delightful theme, and commands our purest affections.” A citizen of Massachusetts remembered the public frenzy: “I believe no pages was ever more eagerly read, nor more generally approved. People speak of it in rapturous praise.” A Bostonian commented that “independence a year ago could not have been publicly mentioned with impunity. . . . Nothing else is now talked of, and I know not what can be done by Great Britain to prevent it.”

Paine found himself carried forward by the immense wave of his book’s popularity into the heart of New World society. If *Common Sense* isolated the fears and the angers of the average colonist and focused them into a strategy for the future, its impact was tenfold for the men who would face charges of treason as the American founding fathers. *Common Sense* would lead directly to the Declaration of Independence and the Articles of Confederation, and among the United Colonies’ elite now in favor of separation from Britain Paine was both a celebrity and a sage.

General Charles Lee wrote George Washington to ask, “Have you seen the pamphlet *Common Sense*? I never saw such a masterly irresistible performance. It will, if I mistake not, in concurrence with the transcendent folly and wickedness of the Ministry, give the *coup-de-grace* to Great Britain. In short, I own myself convinced, by the arguments, of the necessity of separation.” Washington in turn reported that, “the sound doctrine and unanswerable reasoning contained in the pamphlet *Common Sense* will not leave members [of Congress] at a loss to decide upon the propriety of separation . . . [it is] working a wonderful change in the minds of many men,” while John Adams called the pamphlet “a tolerable summary of the arguments which I had been repeating again and again in Congress for nine months,” and will pass on the rumor that the author’s “name is Paine, a gentleman about two years from England—a man who, General [Charles] Lee says, has genius in his eyes.” Adams would later write Thomas Jefferson that “every post and every day rolls upon us independence like a torrent. . . . History is to ascribe the American Revolution to Thomas Paine,” while Jefferson commented that “no writer has exceeded Paine in ease and familiarity of style, in perspicuity of

expression, happiness of elucidation, and in simple and unassuming language.”

Paine would explain his pamphlet’s muscular appeal in a January 14, 1779, letter to Henry Laurens, president of Congress: “I saw the people of this country were all wrong, by an ill-placed confidence. After the breaking out of hostilities I was confident [that British] design was a total conquest. . . . I think the importance of [*Common Sense*] was such that if it had not appeared, and that at the exact time it did, the Congress would not now have been sitting where they are. The light which that performance threw upon the subject gave a turn to the politics of America which enabled her to stand her ground. Independence followed in six months after it, although before it was published it was a dangerous doctrine to speak of, and that because it was not understood.”

The book aroused such depths of passion that when New Yorkers learned that printer Samuel Loudon was going to issue a critical rejoinder, concluding that Paine “unites the violence and rage of a republican with all the enthusiasm and folly of the fanatic,” forty *Common Sense* advocates forced their way into Loudon’s printshop, demanding to know who wrote the attack. The printer claimed to not know the author’s name, and the mob responded by pushing their way into his office, seizing the fifteen hundred copies already manufactured, assembling at the common, and burning them.

One of the most serious challenges to *Common Sense* came as a series of eight letters published in various Pennsylvania newspapers by “Cato,” assumed to be the College of Philadelphia provost, the Reverend Dr. William Smith. Arguing that Paine and his fellow rebels were wildly overreacting to what was in fact a minor quarrel between Britain and America, Smith accused those proposing independence of being secretly allied with France or Spain, and predicted that a democratic republic would bring with it a cataclysm of unforeseen perils. His arguments were so influential that a group of Philadelphians, including Rittenhouse, Mifflin, and Franklin (who had arrived on May 5 to serve as a delegate to the second Continental Congress), pooled their resources to hurry Paine home from New York City, where he was visiting General Charles Lee, to respond. Paine would answer Smith in a series of letters signed “The Forester,” the pseudonym of a political essayist from his days in Lewes.

A great controversy in those early years of democratic republics was the question: Where should the fulcrum of power between the governors and the governed be placed? *Common Sense* moved it dramatically to the side of the citizen, arguing that as many adult males as possible should be eligible to vote; that elections should be held annually to quell corruption; that power should be reduced for officeholders and strengthened for Congress, which should be enlarged (he estimated a need for 390 legislators); and that the great power of government be held in one elected legislature for the nation and one for each individual province (a position favored by Franklin and followed in Pennsylvania).

These suggestions found little favor with the melodramatic John Adams. After *Common Sense* had turned him from a voice in the wilderness to a commanding presence in the mainstream of Congress, Adams would at first give great praise to, and then in time turn completely against Paine:

In the course of this winter appeared a phenomenon in Philadelphia, a star of disaster, a disastrous meteor, I mean Thomas Paine. He came from England, and got into such company as would converse with him, and ran about picking up what information he could concerning our affairs . . .

[*Common Sense's*] arguments in favor of independence I liked very well; but . . . his arguments from the Old Testament were ridiculous. . . . The other third part relative to a form of government I considered as flowing from simply ignorance and a mere desire to please the democratic party. . . . I regretted to see so foolish a plan recommended to the people of the United States. . . . I dreaded the effect so popular a pamphlet might have among the people and determined to do all in my power to counteract the effects of it. . . . It is the fate of men and things which do great good that they always do great evil, too. "Common Sense," by his crude, ignorant notion of a government by one assembly, will do more mischief, in dividing the friends of liberty, than all the Tory writings together. . . . It was so democratical, without any restraint or even an attempt at any equilibrium or counterpoise, that it must produce confusion and every evil work.

Adams was that sort of man who felt the need to compete with everyone he met, and since everyone Adams met included George Washington, Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Jefferson, Alexander Hamilton, and other titans of his century, it is easy to imagine how difficult this must have been. Adams will in time have many terrible things to say about Paine, just as he had many dreadful things to say about everyone he ever knew save Abigail, and it is a benefit to remember at those moments that, besides the rhetorical melodrama inherent in every eighteenth-century attorney, one of Adams's great boyhood heroes was Roman lawyer and orator Cicero, and that in emulation of that classical republican, Adams embraced the pleasures of floridity, of being a cascading font of words, surging in torrents from his pen or his lips. Scholars John Ferling and Lewis E. Braverman have additionally proposed that the second American president was a victim of the overactive thyroid of Graves' disease, noting his painfully owl-like eyes, history of mental breakdowns, lifelong irritability, and fits of paranoia. As biographer James Grant would describe it, Adams's hatreds were "throbbing, intricately constructed, and obsessive."

For various reasons, Adams would be especially roused to vitriol with each publication of Thomas Paine's, to the point where he would respond, in writing, as the anti-Paine. It is possible to see in the conflict between these two every essential argument at the heart of democratic republics. After copies of the American Constitution arrived in Europe in 1787, Adams and Jefferson argued over its many points, with Adams finally stating that the key point distinguishing him from Paine's ideological brother was that "you are afraid of the one, I, the few. . . . You are apprehensive of monarchy; I, of aristocracy." In fact what Adams really feared was not aristocracy but mob rule, the tyranny of the many and the power of the demagogue, and he would respond to *Common Sense* with *Thoughts on Government*, calling for two legislative bodies, an independent judiciary, and a veto-wielding chief selected by the legislatures in order to counter "democratic tyranny" and ensure that government was the bailiwick of "a few of the most wise and good."

After *Thoughts* was published, Adams reported that “Mr. Thomas Paine was so highly offended with it that he came to visit me at my chamber at Mrs. Yard’s [boardinghouse] to remonstrate and even scold me for it, which he did in very ungentle terms.” The lawyer held firm to his belief that a multipart system would follow the British model in solving the great riddle posed by the Real Whigs: preventing tyranny from accruing to any one person or branch of government. Paine’s real criticism of Adams, however, was that a public attack on *Common Sense* by so respected a patriot could only help reinforce the American loyalist faith in King George. They fought terribly, and eventually to the ruin of their friendship. Until the Revolution was won, though, Paine and Adams remained on good terms, the hatred of their common foe outweighing their personal differences.

On June 7, 1776, Virginian Richard Henry Lee, a forty-four-year-old radical ally of Samuel Adams, moved that Congress issue *Common Sense*’s recommendations of a conference to draft a constitution for the new nation, laws to bypass the United Kingdom and promote trade with the rest of Europe, and most important, what Paine called “a manifesto to be published” announcing “that these United Colonies are, and of right ought to be, free and independent states, that they are absolved from all allegiance to the British Crown, and that all political connection between them and the state of Great Britain is, and ought to be, totally dissolved.”

Congressional committees were named to prepare the documents for foreign alliances, colonial unity, and independence from Britain; the independence committee included Ben Franklin, John Adams, and a thirty-two-year-old, thin-skinned, and redheaded Virginian, who constantly loved to sing or hum, and who had been raised in a life of such immense wealth that his first childhood memory was of being carried, on a pillow, by a slave to his grandfather’s plantation. Though hundreds of thousands of pages have been written on this man, there is so much we will never know about him: were his eyes hazel, green, or blue? Was his complexion clear or freckled? Did he speak with a Wessex, English, or Southern accent? Just before his death, he was described by Daniel Webster as “above six feet high, of an ample long frame, rather thin and spare. His head, which is not peculiar in its shape, is set rather forward on his shoulders, and his neck being long, there is, when he is walking or conversing, an habitual protrusion of it. It is still well covered with hair. . . . His eyes are small. His chin is rather long, but not pointed, his nose small, regular in its outline, and the nostrils a little elevated. His mouth is well formed and still filled with teeth; it is generally strongly compressed, bearing an expression of contentment and benevolence. His limbs are uncommonly long, his hands and feet very large, and his wrists of a most extraordinary size. His walk is not precise and military, but easy and swinging; he stoops a little, not so much from age, as from natural formation. When sitting he appears short, partly from the disproportionate length of his limbs. His general appearance indicates an extraordinary degree of health, vivacity, and spirit.”

Thomas Jefferson had just arrived in Philadelphia that May of 1776, having postponed his trip after suffering six weeks of searing migraines. According to *Common Sense*, the key point of the independence manifesto should be to promote the drive for American liberty as a cause greater than just a quarrel within the boundaries of the

British Empire, and should encourage support for the American rebellion against a monarchy from other European nations (which were themselves monarchies). In the Declaration of Independence, Jefferson would carry this idea forward, as well as blame King George for American slavery (another Paine motif). In fact, there are so many common elements between Paine's first American writings and the Declaration that some historians have claimed that Paine himself secretly wrote it, or that Jefferson copied him so thoroughly that it amounted to the same thing.

Though no documentary record exists today, Paine and Jefferson likely met at this time, and they would become friends for life, a bond for Paine second in importance and strength only to that with Benjamin Franklin. These three men would come to illustrate the remarkable paradox at the heart of American political life, a paradox that the founding fathers would create from their Enlightenment heritage of Locke and Newton. Beginning with Franklin and Washington, every successful American leader throughout the nation's history would balance the pragmatic with the utopian. Where Franklin the master politician would be almost entirely pragmatic, Paine would be too fervidly utopian in ways that would not just damage him financially, but imperil him physically. Though his "political father" was easily the foremost American negotiator of both the colonial and revolutionary eras, Paine would never be capable of learning Franklin's easy way with flattery and finesse, his method of drawing a blank curtain over his own personality in service to compromise and politics, whether for business or for the nation. Paine would instead always be too ardent with his religion of the light, a Savonarola of reason and liberty, and as inept a political operator as any fervid Christian saint.

Jefferson, nearly Franklin's equal in political legerdemain, would be tormented for his entire life by the conflicting demands of pragmatic utopianism, of balancing need with desire, freedom and state, meritocrats and common men, independence and slavery. Bernard Bailyn would comment that "he remained throughout his long career the clear voice of America's Revolutionary ideology, its purest conscience, its most brilliant expositor, its true poet, while struggling to deal with the intractable mass of the developing nation's everyday problems. In this double role—ideologist and practical politician, theorist and pragmatist—he sought to realize the Revolution's glittering promise, and as he did so he learned the inner complexities of these ideals as well as their strengths. . . . He hoped, with increasing confidence, that the common sense of the people and their innate idealism would overcome the obstacles and somehow resolve the ambiguities, and that America would fulfill its destiny—which was, he believed, to preserve, and to extend to other regions of the earth, 'the sacred fire of freedom and self-government,' and to liberate the human mind from every form of tyranny." The success or failure of any leader in U.S. history can be judged through their successes or failures at reaching the pragmatic utopian paradox that remains at the heart of the American experiment.

In the summer of 1776, Paine lobbied the Tory-dominated Pennsylvania Assembly and the fractious Continental Congressmen to support the Jefferson committee's manifesto. The Assembly vacillated on the matter, but on July 2, three of Pennsylvania's five delegates voted with the majority of Congress to form a new nation, and after

news reached Congress that Britain was preparing to invade New York City, the Declaration ultimately won by a unanimous vote. When it was then published and distributed, Samuel Adams reported from Boston that “the people seem to recognize this resolution as though it were a decree promulgated from heaven.” After it appeared in London, England’s minister plenipotentiary secretly purchased the services of sixteen thousand German mercenaries for £522,628.

Another congressional committee formed in the wake of Lee’s various *Common Sense* motions was one to encourage European support of the American cause. The Committee of Secret Correspondence—Benjamin Harrison, John Dickinson, Thomas Johnson, John Jay, and Benjamin Franklin—at first met regularly with M. Bonvouloir, a spy working for the court of Versailles, and soon employed as a European agent Silas Deane, a one-term Connecticut congressman whose overseas business as a merchant gave him cover to carry letters for the traitors. Deane reported back to the Committee that in France “*Common Sense* has been translated, and has a greater run, if possible, here than in America.” M. Dubourg, Franklin’s publisher in Paris, introduced Deane to the comte de Vergennes, the French foreign minister who was intrigued by the thought of working with America as a means of extracting revenge against the British for the Seven Years War. Vergennes in turn put Deane in touch with Caron de Beaumarchais, a watchmaker, playwright, and spy for the French court, who was establishing a money-laundering operation in support of the United Colonies.

The world is so very small. In time, through the efforts of this committee, what Thomas Paine will help to start, Benjamin Franklin will help to finish, and any hope that Franklin’s adopted political son might play an important role in the development of a new nation will be undermined by the machinations of Silas Deane.