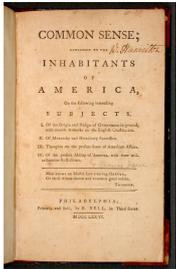


Common Sense (pamphlet)

<i>Common Sense</i>	
	
Author(s)	Thomas Paine
Language	English
Pages	48

Common Sense^[1] is a pamphlet written by Thomas Paine. It was first published anonymously on January 10, 1776, during the American Revolution. *Common Sense*, signed "Written by an Englishman", became an immediate success.^[2] In relation to the population of the Colonies at that time, it had the largest sale and circulation of any book in American history. *Common Sense* presented the American colonists with an argument for freedom from British rule at a time when the question of independence was still undecided. Paine wrote and reasoned in a style that common people understood; forgoing the philosophy and Latin references used by Enlightenment era writers, Paine structured *Common Sense* like a sermon and relied on Biblical references to make his case to the people.^[3] Historian Gordon S. Wood described *Common Sense* as, "the most incendiary and popular pamphlet of the entire revolutionary era".^[4]

Publication history

Thomas Paine began work on *Common Sense* in late 1775 under the working title of *Plain Truth*. With the help of Benjamin Rush, who suggested the title *Common Sense* and helped edit and publish, Paine developed his ideas into a forty-eight page pamphlet. Paine published *Common Sense* anonymously because of its treasonous content. Printed and sold by R. Bell, Third Street, Philadelphia, it sold as many as 120,000 copies in the first three months, 500,000 in the first year, and went through twenty-five editions in the first year alone.^[4] ^[5] Paine donated his royalties from *Common Sense* to George Washington's Continental Army, saying:

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.^[6]

—Thomas Paine

Sections

Four sections are noted on the title page, which quotes James Thomson's poem "Liberty" (1735–36):

Man knows no master save creating Heaven,
Or those whom choice and common good ordain.

—James Thomson, "Liberty"

I. Of the Origin and Design of Government in general, with concise Remarks on the English Constitution.

Paine begins this section by making a distinction between society and government, and then goes on to consider the relationship between government and society in a state of "natural liberty". He next tells a story of a few isolated people living in nature without government, explaining how the people find it easier to live together rather than apart and thereby create a society. As the society grows problems arise, so all the people meet to make regulations to mitigate the problems. As the society continues to grow a government becomes necessary to enforce the regulations, which over time, turn into laws. Soon there are so many people that they cannot all be gathered in one place to make the laws, so they begin holding elections. This, Paine argues, is the best balance between government and society. Having created this model of what the balance should be, Paine goes on to consider the Constitution of the United Kingdom.

Paine finds two tyrannies in the English constitution; monarchical and aristocratic tyranny, in the king and peers, who rule by heredity and contribute nothing to the people. Paine goes on to criticize the English constitution by examining the relationship between the king, the peers, and the commons.

II. Of Monarchy and Hereditary Succession.

In the second section Paine considers monarchy first from a biblical perspective, then from a historical perspective. He begins by arguing that all men are equal at creation and therefore the distinction between kings and subjects is a false one. Several Bible verses are posed to support this claim. Paine then examines some of the problems that kings and monarchies have caused in the past and concludes:

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.

—Thomas Paine^[7]

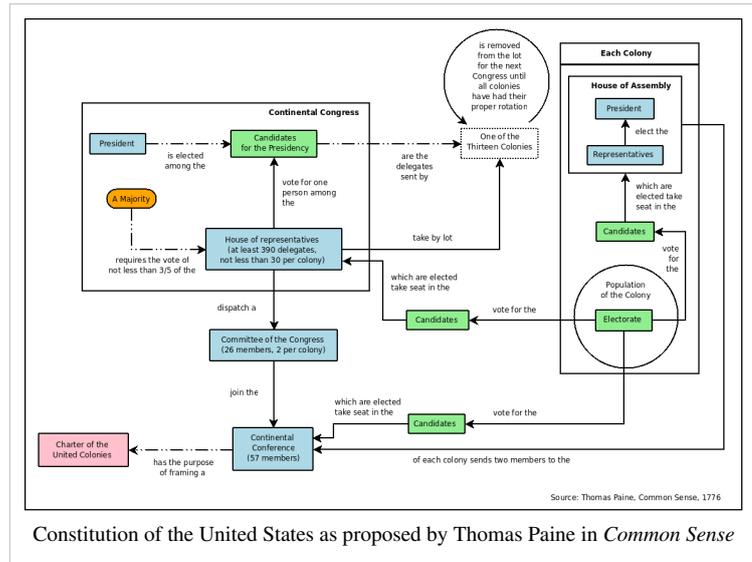
In this section, Paine also attacks one type of "mixed state" – the constitutional monarchy promoted by John Locke in which the powers of government are separated between a Parliament or Congress that makes the laws, and a monarch who executes them. The constitutional monarchy, according to Locke, would limit the powers of the king sufficiently to ensure that the realm would remain lawful rather than easily become tyrannical. According to Paine, however, such limits are insufficient. In the mixed state, power will tend to concentrate into the hands of the monarch, permitting him eventually to transcend any limitations placed upon him. Paine questions why the supporters of the mixed state, since they concede that the power of the monarch is dangerous, wish to include a monarch in their scheme of government in the first place.

III. Thoughts on the present State of American Affairs.

In the third section Paine examines the hostilities between England and the American colonies and argues that best course of action is independence. Paine proposes a *Continental Charter* (or *Charter of the United Colonies*) that would be an American *Magna Carta*. Paine writes that a Continental Charter "should come from some intermediate body between the Congress and the people" and outlines a Continental Conference that could draft a Continental Charter.^[8] Each colony would hold elections for five representatives; these five would be accompanied by two members of the colonies assembly, for a total of seven

representatives from each colony in the Continental Conference. The Continental Conference would then meet and draft a Continental Charter that would secure "freedom and property to all men, and... the free exercise of religion."^[8] The Continental Charter would also outline a new national government, which Paine thought would take the form of a Congress.

Thomas Paine suggested that a Congress may be created in the following way, each colony should be divided in districts; each district would "send a proper number of delegates to Congress".^[8] Paine thought that each state should send at least 30 delegates to Congress, and that the total number of delegates in Congress should be at least 390. The Congress would meet annually, and elect a President. Each colony would be put into a lottery; the President would be elected, by the whole Congress, from the delegation of the colony that was selected in the lottery. After a colony was selected it would be removed from subsequent lotteries until all of the colonies had been selected, at which point the lottery would start anew. Electing a President or passing a law would require three-fifths of the Congress.



Constitution of the United States as proposed by Thomas Paine in *Common Sense*

IV. On the Present Ability of America, with some Miscellaneous Reflections.

The fourth section of the pamphlet includes Paine's optimistic view of America's military potential at the time of the Revolution. For example, he spends pages describing how colonial shipyards, by using the large amounts of lumber available in the country, could quickly create a navy that could rival the Royal Navy.

Paine's arguments against British rule

- It was absurd for an island to rule a continent.
- America was not a "British nation"; it was composed of influences and peoples from all of Europe.
- Even if Britain were the "mother country" of America, that made her actions all the more horrendous, for no mother would harm her children so brutally.
- Being a part of Britain would drag America into unnecessary European wars, and keep it from the international commerce at which America excelled.
- The distance between the two nations made governing the colonies from England unwieldy. If some wrong were to be petitioned to Parliament, it would take a year before the colonies received a response.
- The New World was discovered shortly before the Reformation. The Puritans believed that God wanted to give them a safe haven from the persecution of British rule.

- Britain ruled the colonies for its own benefit, and did not consider the best interests of the colonists in governing them.

Impact

There were at least two reasons why Paine's brief pamphlet is believed to be "the most incendiary and popular pamphlet of the entire revolutionary era".^[4] Most people who then lived in "the colonies" had little if any schooling and did not know how to read. Those who could read and who bought or were given a copy of *Common Sense* would take the pamphlet to public gatherings and would read it to those who could not read. Paine's new style of political writing avoided using complex Latin phrases, instead opting for a more direct, concise style that helped make the information accessible to all. Thusly, Paine's "incendiary" words were heard even by those common folk who had never learned to read. The second reason involves the way the vast majority of people felt about the idea of independence from British rule. Except for a few radical thinkers, the people of the colonies were "up on the fence" about freedom. Individuals were in conflict with themselves. There were those who were leaning toward reconciliation with the king. George Trevelyan in his *History of the American Revolution* had this to say about Paine's pamphlet:

It would be difficult to name any human composition which has had an effect at once so instant, so extended and so lasting [...] It was pirated, parodied and imitated, and translated into the language of every country where the new republic had well-wishers. It worked nothing short of miracles and turned Tories into Whigs.^[9]

There were those in high places who, while in agreement with Paine's sentiments, voiced criticism of his method. John Adams, who would succeed George Washington to become the new nation's 2nd president, in his *Thoughts on Government* wrote that Paine's ideal sketched in *Common Sense* was "so democratical, without any restraint or even an attempt at any equilibrium or counter poise, that it must produce confusion and every evil work".^[10] In spite of Adams' formidable influence, most people praised Paine's brief work. The editors of *The Thomas Paine Reader*, Michael Foot and Isaac Kramnick, in their introduction to *Common Sense* wrote:

Published anonymously, *Common Sense* appeared on Philadelphia streets in January 1776. It was an instant success, and copies of the pamphlet were soon available in all the thirteen colonies. Paine's was an unequivocal call for independence, and many Americans wavering between reconciliation with and independence from Britain were won over to separation by Paine's powerful polemic against monarchy, in general, and the British, in particular.^[11]

The impact of Paine's thin little pamphlet upon the general call for independence, upon the other Founding Fathers and their construction of the Declaration of Independence, and upon the common folk, many of whom would soon join General Washington to fight the British military, was quickly spread and deeply felt. The moving words of *Common Sense* virtually knocked colonists down off the fence and into the fight for freedom of a new nation, into the American Revolutionary War.

Notes

- [1] Full title – *Common Sense; Addressed to the Inhabitants of America, on the Following Interesting Subjects.*
- [2] Introduction to *Rights of Man* (<http://www.trussel.com/hf/rights.htm>), Howard Fast, 1961
- [3] Gordon Wood, *The American Revolution: A History* (New York: Modern Library, 2002), 55-56.
- [4] Wood, *American Revolution*, 55.
- [5] Isaac Kramnick, "Introduction," in Thomas Paine, *Common Sense* (New York: Penguin, 1986), 8
- [6] Craig Nelson, *Thomas Paine: Enlightenment, Revolution, and the Birth of Modern Nations* (New York: Penguin, 2007), 90.
- [7] Paine, *Common Sense*, excerpted from *The Thomas Paine Reader*, p. 79
- [8] Paine, *Common Sense*, 96-97.
- [9] Foot, Kramnick (1987). p 10.
- [10] Foot, Kramnick (1987). p 11.
- [11] Foot, Kramnick (1987). p 65.

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- Paine, Thomas (1986) [1776], Kramnick, Isaac, ed., *Common Sense* (<http://books.google.com/?id=Gtindh2lo3QC&printsec=frontcover&q=>), New York: Penguin Classics, ISBN 0140390162
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External links

- *Common Sense*, complete text in various formats with audio (http://publicliterature.org/books/common_sense/xaa.php)
- On Line Full Text Google Books Scan & downloadable PDF (<http://books.google.com/books?id=DTsPAAAYAAJ&printsec=frontcover>)
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