# Common Sense

## INTRODUCTION

### BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF THOMAS PAINE

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

### HISTORICAL CONTEXT

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

### RELATED LITERARY WORKS

As a political philosopher, Paine was particularly influenced by fellow Enlightenment thinkers. Significant works in the Enlightenment movement include John Stuart Mill's *On Liberty*, Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *The Social Contract*, and Immanuel Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*. In writing *Common Sense*, Paine was particularly influenced by Enlightenment philosopher John Locke's conceptions of human equality and inalienable rights. Paine followed up *Common Sense* in 1776 with *The American Crisis*, a pamphlet intended to inspire the American Army in its efforts against the British. In 1791, while living in France, he wrote *The Rights of Man* in response to Edmund Burke's anti-revolutionary *Reflections on the Revolution in France*. Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792) was part of the same "pamphlet war" in which Burke and Paine were engaged and shared Paine's Enlightenment commitments to human equality and natural rights. Paine's even more controversial pamphlet, *The Age of Reason* (1793-1794), advocated free thought and deism.

### KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** Common Sense: Addressed to the Inhabitants of America
- **When Written:** 1775-1776
- **Where Written:** Philadelphia, Pennsylvania
- **When Published:** January 10, 1776 (first edition)
- **Literary Period:** Enlightenment
- **Genre:** Political Pamphlet
- **Climax:** After breaking down his moral reasoning for American independence, Paine urges his readers not to wait—the present is the appropriate time to incite a revolution.
- **Antagonist:** Great Britain; King George III
- **Point of View:** First Person; Second Person

### EXTRA CREDIT

**Gone Viral.** *Common Sense* was an unprecedented publishing success. Though estimates vary, it may have sold as many as 500,000 copies in the colonies by the end of the American Revolution, meaning that an estimated 20 percent of colonists would have owned a copy—especially remarkable given that its popularity spread primarily by word of mouth.

**Trying Times.** In late 1776, George Washington ordered his officers to read part of Paine's *The American Crisis*, a pamphlet series following up on *Common Sense*, to the Continental Army on the eve of the crossing of the Delaware.

## PLOT SUMMARY

Thomas Paine argues that because the American colonies have suffered oppression at the hands of Britain's King and Parliament, Americans are justified in investigating and even rejecting Britain's "usurping" power. He further argues that Britain has attacked "natural rights" that should be of concern to humanity as a whole, not just America.

Paine begins with comments on the nature of government, first distinguishing between society and government. He argues that "society" is a blessing, the result of human wants and united affections. Government, on the other hand, is no better than a "necessary evil" which serves to restrain human vices. In other words, government is only needed where moral virtue fails. Because the goal of government is to secure freedom for society, the most desirable form of government is the simplest one. The English constitution, by contrast, is harmfully complex and only enshrines tyranny.

Paine offers a deeper critique of monarchy and hereditary succession. He does this on the basis of a belief in human equality. Paine argues that biblical history demonstrates that monarchy is unchristian, inclined to violence, and to be rejected. Hereditary succession is even worse than kingship, because it arbitrarily imposes rulers—typically corrupt ones—on posterity for generations. It also produces monarchs who are arrogant and isolated from the needs and concerns of real people. Finally, he tallies a long list of wars and rebellions that monarchy and conflicts over succession have engendered in England alone, arguing that this further disproves the validity of the practice.

Paine turns to the heart of his argument in the section titled "The Present State of American Affairs." He claims that his discussion will be grounded on nothing more than "common sense." Because Britain has taken up arms, he argues, the time of hoping for reconciliation has passed, and it's time for a new way of thinking. He argues that it's a fallacy to claim that because America once thrived in its connection with Great Britain, that things will always remain that way—it's like saying that a **child** must be fed baby food forever. Furthermore, America is made up of civil and religious refugees from all parts of Europe, not just England. Thus, America's strong resources for trade and commerce will better serve the country diplomatically than Britain's military protection ever could—Britain's continued military oversight will only serve to ensnare America in foreign wars.

Paine shifts to an emotional appeal by charging his audience—ordinary Americans—with passivity and unfeeling temperaments if they fail to sympathize with the sufferings of besieged Boston. Anyone who looks at Britain's recent behavior with natural human feelings should conclude that separation is the only healthy and just course of action. And even if reconciliation with Britain were now possible, King George III would insinuate himself as the oppressive ruler of America, ruining the country in the long run even if peace were achieved in the short run. Paine offers some suggestions for the future governance of an independent America, such as a Continental Congress and Charter and alternating between the colonies in the choice of a president. Always, the protection of property, freedom, and free exercise of religion should be paramount concerns for government.

Paine addresses some practical considerations for an independent America, such as the necessity of building a navy. He also points out certain favorable circumstances, such as America's youth and ideal size (neither too small nor too confusedly populous and diverse) for drawing up and putting in place a new government. Until America takes the initiative to seek independence, he concludes, the necessity will only become more pressing and America's circumstances more dire.

To the second and subsequent editions of Common Sense, Paine appends some responses to a speech of King George III which he describes as "a piece of [...] villainy." In the Appendix, he chiefly reiterates objections to America's readiness for independence. For example, he argues that America has recently gained sufficient military experience in order to fight for independence, and that the longer the task is delayed, the harder it will be. The longer it's delayed, the longer the risk of a mob or factional mentality setting in and distracting America from the task of establishing a sound constitution. Finally, he refutes a Quaker objection to rebellion, arguing that the Quakers should object to unprovoked British aggression as much as to American rebellion, or else their pacifist stance merely amounts to inconsistent, unwelcome meddling.

## CHARACTERS

**Thomas Paine** – Thomas Paine (1737–1809) is the author of *Common Sense*. Born in England and inspired by Enlightenment political philosophy, he became an activist for American independence after moving to the colonies in 1774. Drawing inspiration from Enlightenment thinker John Locke, Paine believed in the inherent equality and inalienable rights of man that would go on to form the basis of the US Declaration of Independence. In *Common Sense*, Paine portrays himself as an ordinary citizen motivated by concern for justice, not by political partisanship. He appeals to everyday colonists' moral reasoning abilities to inspire them to support the Revolutionary cause against England—particularly against George III's tyranny—and decries the heredity monarchical system in general. In order to illustrate his argument, Paine likens the connection between Britain and America to that of a **parent and child**: if the colonies don't fight for independence, he reasons, America will be kept paralyzed in a constant state of underdevelopment and oppression. *Common Sense* was

perhaps the most influential political pamphlet of the American Revolution for the patriot cause, and played an integral role in the country achieving its independence in 1776.

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

## THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

### THE ROLE OF GOVERNMENT

Thomas Paine's 1776 political pamphlet, *Common Sense*, was revolutionary in a number of ways. Paine was one of the first to openly advocate for American independence from Great Britain, and in doing so, he sought to appeal to the everyday colonial American reader instead of to fellow political theorists. In order to make his radical case, he first lays the groundwork for his argument by discussing the nature of government itself, building on a prior tradition of English political thought. Paine argues that government is actually, at best, a "necessary evil" for restraining human vice, and therefore that the simplest, least intrusive form of government should be sought.

Paine's argument rests on the fundamental assertion that society and government are altogether different things. People conflate society and government, but they're actually distinct aspects of human experience: "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. [...] The first is a patron, the last a punisher." Essentially, society consists of those things that citizens enjoy pursuing in common, while government is there to protect such pursuits by punishing vice. Government only exists to ensure that society remains sustainable. Embedded within this argument is Paine's belief that human beings are naturally inclined to vice. This human corruption means that even "society"—a good thing—inevitably lapses at some point, and people's voluntary commitment to each other suffers as a result: "but as nothing but heaven is impregnable to vice, it will unavoidably happen, that in proportion as they surmount the first difficulties of emigration, which bound them together in a common cause, they will begin to relax in their duty and attachment to each other; and this remissness, will point out the necessity, of establishing some form of government to supply the defect of moral virtue." In other words, virtue in and of itself isn't sufficient to govern society; some sort of external enforcement is required. Again, in Paine's view, government exists to guard against humanity's inevitable faltering in moral virtue.

Unsurprisingly, given Paine's belief in human vice, he argues that government is inherently limited in how much good it can achieve, and that, in fact, it can often do harm. In Paine's view, government, by its nature, can never be as good as society: "Society in every state is a blessing, but government even in its best state is but a necessary evil [...] 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." Paine means that, even at its best, government is only a restraining influence; at its worst, it creates new obstacles to people's happiness. Given the fact that government is a necessary evil, the simplest possible form of government is the most desirable. Paine explains, "I draw my idea of the form of government from a principle in nature, [...] that the more simple any thing is, the less liable it is to be disordered, and the easier repaired when disordered[.]" That is, whatever form of government "appears most likely to ensure [security] to us, with the least expence and greatest benefit, is preferable to all others." People should seek a form of government that's least likely to create worse problems than it solves, in other words—one that's not overly complex or burdensome to the people it's designed to serve.

Later in *Common Sense*, Paine offers some proposals for the establishment of a new American government. For example, he maps out a representative scheme for a new congress and suggests a method by which the colonies can take turns putting forward one of its citizens as president. Of course, none of these proposals survived in their original form, even once the 13 colonies declared independence. But Paine's basic instincts about the nature and purpose of government have remained influential in the American consciousness ever since, among commoner and career politician alike—much as he intended.

### THE CASE AGAINST MONARCHY

After establishing his views on government in general, Paine takes the more radical step of arguing that monarchy is a bankrupt institution and must be abandoned. In his view, there are many absurdities of monarchy to choose from, such as the isolation and ignorance of rulers from those they govern: "There is something

exceedingly ridiculous in the composition of monarchy [...] The state of a king shuts him from the world, yet the business of a king requires him to know it thoroughly[.]" But this is just one example of the weaknesses of a form of governance that Paine sees as not only ineffectual, but actively harmful. By appealing to historical and literary precedents and showing how monarchical succession worsens conditions over time, Paine argues that monarchy isn't just corrupt in itself, but ultimately corrupting of society more broadly.

Historically, Paine claims, it's been proven that monarchy is corrupt and corrupting. Paine builds an anti-monarchical case on the basis of the Bible. In the early ages of humanity, "there were no kings; the consequence of which was there were no wars; it is the pride of kings which throw mankind into confusion." Whether Paine considers this part of Christian scripture to be straightforward history or not is beside the point. Regardless, he makes rhetorical use of the Bible to persuade his largely Christian audience that kingship is a corrupt form of government, founded on pride, that only leads society into strife. Even though there were eventually biblical kings, even *good* kings, that doesn't prove that kingship in itself is a desirable form of government. Paine points out that "[...n]either do the characters of the few good kings which have lived since, either sanctify the title, or blot out the sinfulness of the origin; the high encomium given of [Israel's King] David takes no notice of him officially as a king, but only as a man after God's own heart." In other words, individual virtuous examples don't negate the fact that the office of kingship is still inherently faulty, the result of human pride and envy and thus inevitably tending toward corruption of society at large.

Though bad enough in itself, monarchy is made worse for society by its connection to the practice of hereditary succession. The idea of succession, in fact, is insulting to humanity. Succession "claimed as a matter of right, is an insult and an imposition on posterity. For all men being originally equals, no one by birth could have a right to set up his own family in perpetual preference to all others for ever, and though himself might deserve some decent degree of honors of his contemporaries, yet his descendants might be far too unworthy to inherit them." Paine is saying that, while monarchy denigrates humanity by artificially elevating a select few over the vast majority of others, succession multiplies the insult by arbitrarily embedding those honors in a single family line forever. Such a tradition can only lead to disaster, since "it opens a door to the foolish, the wicked, and the improper, it hath in it the nature of oppression. Men who look upon themselves born to reign, and others to obey, soon grow insolent; selected from the rest of mankind their minds are early poisoned by importance; and the world they act in differs so materially from the world at large, that they have but little opportunity of knowing its true interests, and when they succeed to the government are frequently the most ignorant and unfit of any throughout the dominions." Not only does hereditary succession inevitably lead to the coronation of individuals unworthy of the office, it weakens the character of those who wear the crown. It feeds entitlement, and, as Paine elsewhere argues, a lifetime of royal privilege fails to prepare individuals for the duties they'll one day assume. In fact, it does the opposite, ensuring a pattern of incompetent rulers who cannot effectively serve their people.

Paine's anti-monarchical stance is one of the most radical aspects of his pamphlet. To make his case, he doesn't rely on abstract political theory, but on examples and arguments that would have been culturally familiar and therefore plausible to a mass readership. By portraying monarchy as distorted and oppressive, he helps build his larger case for America's independence from Britain and the move toward a more representative form of government.

## INDEPENDENCE VS. DEPENDENCE

Paine's major goal in *Common Sense* is to convince his American readership to embrace the cause of independence. To do that, he builds a case that remaining connected to Great Britain would be harmful to the American colonies. By first building on the imagery of America's "**childhood**" in a variety of ways and presenting long-term risks of reliance on the "mother country," Paine implies that America's subservience to Britain is inherently unhealthy and limiting. Thus, he argues that it's unnatural and counterproductive for the young American colonies to remain perpetually linked to Great Britain.

Paine uses the metaphor of parent and child, and the imagery of youth, to argue against continued connection to Britain. Continued dependence keeps America in perpetual childhood: "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." In other words, just as a child or youth isn't expected to maintain childish ways throughout life, common sense dictates that an infant nation shouldn't have to remain indefinitely dependent on its mother country. Paine also uses the argument about youth in another way—to argue that America's youth is the most promising time to form healthy habits of nationhood. "Youth is the seed time of good habits, as well in nations as in individuals. It might be difficult, if not impossible, to form the Continent into one government half a century hence. The vast variety of interests, occasioned by an increase of trade and population, would create confusion." By contrast, the colonies' "present union is marked with both these characters: we are young, and we have been distressed; but our concord hath withstood our troubles, and fixes a memorable aera for posterity to glory in." In other words, as the nation grows in size and complexity, the difficulties of forming a nation will compound. It's better, then, to undertake the task while the

colonies' youthful friendship with one another, founded on shared suffering, remains vibrant.

In addition, Paine claims that it's not even just for England to claim sole "parentage" of America. "Europe, and not England, is the parent country of America," he argues. "This new world hath been the asylum for the persecuted lovers of civil and religious liberty from every part of Europe. Hither have they fled, not from the tender embraces of the mother, but from the cruelty of the monster; and it is so far true of England, that the same tyranny which drove the first emigrants from home, pursues their descendants still." In Paine's view, it's presumptuous to call England America's parent when refugees from so many European countries now call America home. He uses America's reputation as a refuge for the persecuted to further weaken England's claim on America—England is now behaving like a "monster," not a mother, and thereby forfeits whatever claim it might once have had for America's childlike, dutiful dependence. Not only is the young nation hampered by continued dependence, but its continued connection to Britain actively cuts against American interests in a number of other practical ways. Regardless of what Britain claims, Paine argues that the country hasn't been looking out for America's present advantages. "We have boasted the protection of Great-Britain, without considering, that her motive was interest not attachment; that she did not protect us from our enemies on our account, but from her enemies on her own account." The American colonies, then, have been passively taking for granted the value of British guardianship, when, all the while, Britain has been maintaining its hold on America with its own political and economic benefit at the forefront of its concerns.

Continued dependence would actually hamper America's long-term prospects, too: "any submission to, or dependance on Great-Britain, tends directly to involve this continent in European wars and quarrels; and sets us at variance with nations, who would otherwise seek our friendship, and against whom, we have neither anger nor complaint." The biggest example of such a hindrance is that America would become needlessly entangled in Britain's foreign concerns—including antagonizing countries that would otherwise become America's allies. Finally, delaying an effort toward independence only serves to make America a less desirable homeland in the long run: "[A] kind of government by guardianship, which can last no longer than till the colonies come of age, […] will be unsettled and unpromising. Emigrants […] will not choose to come to a country whose form of government hangs but by a thread, […] numbers of the present inhabitants would lay hold of the interval, to dispose of their effects, and quit the continent." If America is maintained in this unsettled state for long, it will lose its appeal to both potential and even current occupants, which would be disastrous for America's continued thriving.

Near the end of *Common Sense*, Paine raises the stakes of his argument by claiming that Britain's King George III "MAY ACCOMPLISH BY CRAFT AND SUBTILTY, IN THE LONG RUN, WHAT HE CANNOT DO BY FORCE AND VIOLENCE IN THE SHORT ONE. Reconciliation and ruin are nearly related." In other words, even if an outward "reconciliation" were achieved with the British crown, the crown's agreement would be merely an alternate means of maintaining oppressive rule in the long run. But Paine doesn't present this more forceful and radical part of his argument until he's established a foundation for it by showing how dependence, in and of itself, is an unfruitful condition for America.

## REASON, MORALITY, AND RHETORIC

Paine argues that "a long habit of not thinking a thing wrong, gives it a superficial appearance of being right, and raises at first a formidable outcry in defence of custom. But the tumult soon subsides. Time makes more converts than reason." This is a good summary of Paine's approach throughout *Common Sense*—of making a rhetorical appeal to his readership's ability to evaluate long-held traditional assumptions. Though he characterizes this evaluative ability as mere "common sense," his approach is multi-faceted. By repeatedly appealing to his readers' reason, and even encouraging them to reassess their moral faculties, Paine makes a rhetorically powerful case that independence is ultimately not just a reasonable step, but a moral imperative.

Paine appeals to his readers' rational and emotional faculties in order to sway their opinions, encouraging them to rely on these faculties themselves to evaluate his claims. Early in *Common Sense*, he writes, "In the following pages I offer nothing more than simple facts, plain arguments, and common sense; and have no other preliminaries to settle with the reader, than that he will divest himself of prejudice and prepossession, and suffer his reason and his feelings to determine for themselves; that he will put on, or rather that he will not put off, the true character of a man, and generously enlarge his views beyond the present day." Paine is actually saying a lot with this statement. He asserts that he's only offering common-sense facts—that he's simply appealing to the reader's reasoning abilities and readiness to set aside preconceived ideas. He essentially asks the reader to aspire to a generous character. In sum, Paine is inviting the reader to engage in an active process of evaluation that draws upon one's own intellect and character and (at least ostensibly) doesn't just take Paine's ideas at face value.

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

often escape unpunished, did not the injuries which our tempers sustain, provoke us into justice." In other words, the desire for independence is, ultimately, a concern for justice, out of respect for human dignity—on the same level as the desire to punish a robber or murderer. Readers should employ those healthy "affections" in the service of the cause of independence.

Not only does Paine encourage his audience to employ their reasoning skills, he doesn't hesitate to impugn those who fail to do so—or those whose faculties are, in his view, insufficiently developed. Paine argues that those who continue to push for America's reconciliation with Britain have suspect motives. "Though I would carefully avoid giving unnecessary offence, yet I am inclined to believe, that all those who espouse the doctrine of reconciliation, may be included within the following descriptions. Interested men, who are not to be trusted; weak men, who cannot see; prejudiced men, who will not see; and a certain set of moderate men, who think better of the European world than it deserves; and this last class, [...] will be the cause of more calamities to this continent, than all the other three." In other words, supporters of reconciliation have vested interests in England or the war, or else they're blind to reason, whether willfully or not. Others are simply too attached to the comforts of continued attachment to Europe to recognize what's best for them. Interestingly, Paine sees the latter group as the most potentially problematic, because they are insufficiently attached to *American* interests. But no matter the specific motive at play, Paine urges his readers toward self-examination and a possible reassessment of their moral reasoning.

Paine goes on to argue that those who don't support independence, on the grounds that they don't see British behavior as atrocious, are either sheltered from suffering or else morally debased. "But if you say, you can still pass the violations over, then I ask. Hath your house been burnt? Hath your property been destroyed before your face? [...] Have you lost a parent or a child by their hands, and yourself the ruined and wretched survivor? If you have not, then are you not a judge of those who have. But if you have, and still can shake hands with the murderers, then are you unworthy the name of husband, father, friend, or lover[.]" Paine appeals to the sufferings of those who've lost property or loved ones at the hands of the British army in order to stir fervor for independence. By implication, not only should those who have suffered these "violations" desire independence, but everyone who hears of them should be moved accordingly.

*Common Sense* is a short, rather unsystematic pamphlet, but its argumentation is surprisingly complex. Having made a case for government as a "necessary evil" and rejected monarchy as a viable form of government, then argued for the practical desirability of independence, Paine goes on to make his most effective moves through a memorable and affecting moral appeal. The latter is what fired the American popular imagination most strongly and likely did the most to garner support for Paine's revolutionary cause.

## SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

### PARENT AND CHILD

Paine uses the symbolism of parent and child to argue that America has outgrown its dependence on Great Britain and should seek independence. For example, he argues that delayed independence keeps America in a state of perpetual childhood: "we may as well assert that because a child has thrived upon milk, that it is never to have meat[.]" In this sense, he encourages his readers to be courageous and optimistic about independence, rather than fearing America's failure without its current ties to Britain. Paine also uses the metaphor of parenthood to argue that England has forfeited any respect it was owed as "mother" by acting oppressively toward its colonial "child." Finally, he uses the "child" metaphor in a more positive sense by suggesting that America should take advantage of its youthful vigor in order to cultivate healthy habits of nationhood: "youth is the seed time of good habits [...] a memorable aera for posterity to glory in." In contrast to the heredity monarchy of Great Britain, what Paine portrays as an antiquated system, he encourages his readers to think of America as young and vital in its ability to be molded into a fair representative democracy.

## QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Dover Thrift Editions edition of *Common Sense* published in 2016.

### Introduction Quotes

"The cause of America is in a great measure the cause of all mankind. Many circumstances hath, and will arise, which are not local, but universal, and through which the principles of all Lovers of Mankind are affected, and in the Event of which, their Affections are interested. The laying a Country desolate with Fire and Sword, declaring War against the natural rights of all Mankind, and extirpating the Defenders thereof from the Face of the Earth, is the Concern of every Man to whom Nature hath given the Power of feeling; of which Class, regardless of Party Censure, is the AUTHOR.

**Related Characters:** Thomas Paine (speaker)

**Related Themes:**

**Page Number:** 2

**Explanation and Analysis**

In this introductory quote, Paine lays out several of the central themes he will develop in *Common Sense*. He does so by framing these concerns as ideas that are significant not only for the present American colonists, but for anyone who has an interest in freedom universally, as well as for posterity. He evokes the idea of "natural rights"—the Enlightenment view that certain things like life, liberty, and property, discernible by human reason, belong to every person. The idea of natural rights, which originated in earlier English and French political theory, went on to become the bedrock of the Declaration of Independence. Paine portrays British aggression as a fundamental attack not just on America, but on the concept of natural rights—thereby bolstering his argument for independence. He also refers to the "affections" of the lovers of humanity and the "power of feeling"—making a rhetorical appeal not just to reason, but to the "natural" human sympathies that, in Paine's view, undergird human reason and natural rights. This anticipates one of his major techniques in *Common Sense*—appealing not merely to bare rationality, but to inner motivations that, he argues, should rally his readership to his cause.

## 1. Of the Origin and Design of Government Quotes

❝ Some writers have so confounded society with government, as to leave little or no distinction between them; whereas they are not only different, but have different origins. Society is produced by our wants, and government by our wickedness; the former promotes our happiness positively by uniting our affections, the latter negatively by restraining our vices. The one encourages intercourse, the other creates distinctions. The first is a patron, the last a punisher.

**Related Characters:** Thomas Paine (speaker)

**Related Themes:** 

**Page Number:** 2

**Explanation and Analysis**

In this quote, Paine lays out the understanding of government that guides his argument throughout *Common Sense*. This understanding is based on a clear distinction between society and government. Society, he argues, has to do with those activities human beings enjoy pursuing in common. On the other hand, government is a structure that emerges subsequently, in order to preserve and support society. This necessity emerges because human beings are inclined to wickedness. Even if society could be sustained peacefully for a certain amount of time, it could not continue indefinitely, because human beings would sooner or later fail to respect one another's rights. Thus government must step in to ensure that vice is restrained, such that the enjoyment of society can continue. This is why, looking ahead in *Common Sense*, the form of government is so important to Paine. Great care must be taken to select and structure a form of government that doesn't just create more obstacles to the flourishing of human society (such as monarchy, in Paine's view).

## 2. Of Monarchy and Hereditary Succession Quotes

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

**Related Characters:** Thomas Paine (speaker)

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 16

**Explanation and Analysis**

In the second section of *Common Sense*, Paine builds a case against monarchy. He argues that monarchy is not just one form of government among many, but that it's an inherently corrupt and corrupting one. He makes this case by trying to demonstrate that monarchy has been corrupt from its inception. For instance, he argues that even the Bible bears testimony against monarchy. He begins his argument by explaining that early Israelite society did not have a king, and that when kingship was introduced at the people's demand, the people underwent God's judgment and faced a long succession of mostly wicked kings. Paine then goes on to argue that, whatever the shady origins of modern kingship, it has always tended to produce greater strife than it solves. He tallies up those civil conflicts, such as the Wars of the Roses, that have divided and harmed England throughout its history. Paine's point in making this case—which is not, by modern standards, a rigorously historical one—is simply to show that monarchy is one of those forms of government which impedes society rather than helping it. In turn, he makes a case for America's revolt against monarchical rule, which he sees as not accidentally,

but *inherently*, tyrannical.

## 3. Thoughts on the Present State of American Affairs Quotes

The sun never shined on a cause of greater worth. 'Tis not the affair of a city, a country, a province, or a kingdom, but of a continent— of at least one eighth part of the habitable globe. '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. Now is the seed time of continental union, faith and honor. The least fracture now will be like a name engraved with the point of a pin on the tender rind of a young oak; the wound will enlarge with the tree, and posterity read it in full grown characters.

**Related Characters:** Thomas Paine (speaker)

**Related Themes:**

**Page Number:** 18

**Explanation and Analysis**

This quote sums up Paine's call to action in the third and longest section of *Common Sense*. He has just finished admonishing those who wish to postpone conflict indefinitely and avoid war, arguing that future generations will look at this one with disdain if they fail to do what's right. He tries to summon his audience to action by urging them to expand their outlook. They might have looked at independence as if it's a local or regional matter, he says, but instead, they should consider the repercussions for a large portion of the globe. Likewise, they shouldn't think of this as a matter for just their generation, or indeed as a mere political matter, but a question of "faith and honor" whose neglect will have far-reaching implications. Paine builds on this call for urgency by going on to explain that, when Britain took up arms against America, the conflict entered a new phase in which mere argumentation will no longer do—it's time to act.

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 even this is admitting more than is true, for I answer roundly, that America would have flourished as much, and probably much more, had no European power had any thing to do with her. The commerce, by which she hath enriched herself are the necessaries of life, and will always have a market while eating is the custom of Europe.

**Related Characters:** Thomas Paine (speaker)

**Related Themes:**

**Related Symbols:**

**Page Number:** 19

**Explanation and Analysis**

In this section of *Common Sense*, Paine addresses objections to the idea of independence. One of the chief objections is that England is America's "mother country," and therefore it's disloyal to declare independence against her. Paine attacks this as fallacious reasoning. He does so by introducing the parent/child metaphor he uses several times throughout *Common Sense*. The symbolism is simple: that an infant who's been fed on milk should not be expected to thrive under such limitations forever, but should naturally progress to a diet of solid food. Likewise, one's youth should not be looked upon as a model for the rest of life. With this simple metaphor, Paine associates America with the vigor and potential of youth and attracts his audience to the idea that independence is within the natural course of things, just as it's natural for a child to grow up and separate from his or her parents. Paine also goes on to argue that America, in fact, has everything within it that the country will ultimately need to thrive (e.g., food products for European markets). With this answer to a common objection against independence, Paine is also able to champion a future-looking cause and to portray opponents as stuck in the past.

Europe, and not England, is the parent country of America. This new world hath been the asylum for the persecuted lovers of civil and religious liberty from every part of Europe. Hither have they fled, not from the tender embraces of the mother, but from the cruelty of the monster; and it is so far true of England, that the same tyranny which drove the first emigrants from home, pursues their descendants still.

**Related Characters:** Thomas Paine (speaker)

**Related Themes:**

**Related Symbols:**

**Page Number:** 20

**Explanation and Analysis**

In this quote Paine builds on his parent/child metaphor in a particularly striking way. He has just finished arguing that England's status as "mother country" doesn't justify continued connection to it. But here he suggests that even that parental status is questionable. He argues that the American colonies are peopled by refugees from all parts of Europe, so it makes more sense to speak of Europe as truly being America's parent. An example here would be the French Huguenots, persecuted Protestants who migrated to America beginning in the 1600s. Paine also argues that, by taking up arms against the colonists, England is now no better than those countries, like France, that have actively turned "monstrous" against their own citizens by persecuting them. Thus this minor point is doing a lot for Paine's overall argument—not only attacking England's status by likening it to more notorious regimes, but putting forward an idea of America as a haven for the oppressed.

> But if you say, you can still pass the violations over, then I ask. Hath your house been burnt? Hath your property been destroyed before your face? Are your wife and children destitute of a bed to lie on, or bread to live on? Have you lost a parent or a child by their hands, and yourself the ruined and wretched survivor? If you have not, then are you not a judge of those who have. But if you have, and still can shake hands with the murderers, then are you unworthy the name of husband, father, friend, or lover, and whatever may be your rank or title in life, you have the heart of a coward, and the spirit of a sycophant.

**Related Characters:** Thomas Paine (speaker)

**Related Themes:**

**Page Number:** 24

**Explanation and Analysis**

With this quote Paine makes reference to the siege of Boston, which began in June 1774. The British would evacuate Boston in March 1776—within several weeks of the writing of *Common Sense*. So at the time Paine was writing, the British presence was very much a live issue in American minds, and Paine takes full rhetorical advantage of the fact here. In fact, he uses the British situation to press forcefully on his readers' consciences. He vividly describes situations of destruction of property, destitution, and even death that some Bostonians have faced. If someone has encountered such things, yet persists in loyalty to the British, then Paine does not hesitate to attack them as cowardly and servile toward the British occupiers. If they haven't, then they shouldn't judge the appetite for rebellion among those who have. By implication, any reader of *Common Sense* should summon the imaginative sympathy to side with those who have suffered. This is an example of the way that Paine's "common sense" encompasses more than bare logic; for him, sympathy and outrage are divinely given sensibilities that can and should guide human reasoning and loyalties.

> Wherefore, her own interest leads her to suppress the growth of ours in every case which doth not promote her advantage, or in the least interferes with it. A pretty state we should soon be in under such a second-hand government, considering what has happened! [...] And in order to shew that reconciliation now is a dangerous doctrine, I affirm, that it would be policy in the king at this time, to repeal the acts for the sake of reinstating himself in the government of the provinces; in order, that HE MAY ACCOMPLISH BY CRAFT AND SUBTILTY, IN THE LONG RUN, WHAT HE CANNOT DO BY FORCE AND VIOLENCE IN THE SHORT ONE. Reconciliation and ruin are nearly related.

**Related Characters:** Thomas Paine (speaker), King George III

**Related Themes:**

**Page Number:** 28

**Explanation and Analysis**

This quote comes near the conclusion of the central section of *Common Sense*, as Paine brings his primary argument to a close. In doing so, he strikes a final blow at the notion that continued connection to Great Britain would serve American interests whatsoever. He argues that, where Americans have assumed that Britain is watching out for America, Britain has actually been twisting American affairs to her own advantage whenever possible. This is why, in Paine's view, Americans must give up any lingering idealism

about reconciliation with Britain, since this would actually stifle American growth in the long run. Accordingly, America shouldn't trust any British pretensions toward repealing the offensive taxation laws that have been burdening Americans for the past decade. If this were to occur, Paine believes, it's merely a sign that King George is looking to conquer America by "subtlety" rather than outright violence. This is what he means by the idea that reconciliation is akin to America's ruin—it would prove to be a false reconciliation after all.

❝ 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.

**Related Characters:** Thomas Paine (speaker), King George III

**Related Themes:**

**Page Number:** 33

**Explanation and Analysis**

In this section of *Common Sense*, Paine has been laying out a proposal for America's future self-governance. While it's more of a loose proposal, not a firm plan, it's grounded on Paine's bedrock idea that government must serve society in a minimally intrusive way. This is shown by the fact (notwithstanding his initial implication that God is the true "king of America") that he hopes American government will not be founded on a singular personality like a king, but on a "continental charter" drawn up by delegates of the various colonies. It's not clear how serious Paine is about the idea of literally crowning said charter to honor it as "king"—given Paine's well-established objection to monarchy, it is rather unlikely. His point, in fact, is that the monarchy of a human king is so offensive that he can't overemphasize the importance of a charter decided upon by the people. Those who've been long accustomed to kingship must adjust their perception of what good governance is. Paine's epithet "Royal Brute of Britain" is also one of the boldest insults to appear in *Common Sense*.

## Appendix Quotes

❝ O ye partial ministers of your own acknowledged principles. If the bearing arms be sinful, the first going to war must be more so, by all the difference between wilful attack and unavoidable defence. Wherefore, if ye really preach from conscience, and mean not to make a political hobby-horse of your religion, convince the world thereof, by proclaiming your doctrine to our enemies, for they likewise bear ARMS.

**Related Characters:** Thomas Paine (speaker)

**Related Themes:**

**Page Number:** 54

**Explanation and Analysis**

In the Appendix to *Common Sense* (added several weeks after the publication of the first edition), Paine takes the time to address various recently emergent objections. One of these is a recent protest registered by the Religious Society of Friends, or Quakers, who were an influential religious minority in the colonies (particularly in Paine's Philadelphia) and themselves religious refugees from England. Paine himself would have grown up at least partially familiar with Quaker principles (chief among them nonviolence and pacifism), since his father was a Quaker. That makes his indictment come across as all the more stinging. He attacks the Quaker objection to revolution by arguing that the Quakers are being inconsistent to their own principles—if they object to the Americans for taking up arms against the British, then they should object even more strongly to the British for instigating war and behaving with unprovoked violence toward innocent civilians. Though Paine elsewhere describes himself as a fervent proponent of religious freedom and doesn't claim to object to the Quakers' pacifism per se, he argues that, until they rectify what he sees as a glaring inconsistency, their protest amounts to nothing more than unwonted meddling in politics.

# SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

## INTRODUCTION

Thomas Paine remarks that perhaps his ideas aren't "fashionable" enough to gain much popular support. After all, a long habit of thinking something's right gives that thing an *appearance* of being right, and people will defend it out of custom, even if it is actually wrong.

*Befitting a work titled* Common Sense, *Paine opens the pamphlet with an appeal to human reason. He points out that ideas are often defended out of tradition, not because those ideas are truly right, thus implying that the coming arguments will challenge people's comfortable assumptions about morality.*

A "long and violent abuse of power" is sufficient reason to question that power. Since Americans are oppressed by both England's King and Parliament, they are justified in investigating and even rejecting the "usurpation" of both.

*Paine previews some of the main arguments he will advance against British rule: that monarchical power tends toward oppression and that Americans are morally justified in rebelling against it.*

Paine says that in his pamphlet, he avoids personal attacks. He just wants to look into America's cause, which is, in large measure, the cause of "mankind" as a whole. Any person with the "power of feeling" should be concerned by England's declaration of war against the "natural rights of all mankind."

*Paine refers to the idea of "natural rights" such as life, liberty, and property, which were thought to be discernible by human reason and would become the bedrock of the Declaration of Independence. Paine would have developed this idea from the 17th-century English political philosopher John Locke. He also invokes moral instinct as a factor in human reason.*

In a postscript, Paine adds that it's unnecessary to know the identity of the pamphlet's author; rather, the attention should be on his ideas. He is not under the influence of any party, but merely "the influence of reason and principle."

*Paine remained anonymous as the author of* Common Sense *for about three months. When it was first published in January 1776, it was signed "by an Englishman." Perhaps he hopes to support the idea that reason, not personalities, should be the main factor in evaluating his argument.*

## 1. OF THE ORIGIN AND DESIGN OF GOVERNMENT IN GENERAL

Some writers barely distinguish between "society" and "government." However, those two things have completely different origins. Society is produced by human "wants" and government by human "wickedness." The first unites human affections; the latter restrains human vices.

*Paine follows Enlightenment ideas about the nature of society and government, breaking them down into simple distinctions accessible to the common reader. Government, basically, serves to check human wickedness so that people are free to pursue their desires in a moral way.*

While society is always a blessing, government is, at best, a "necessary evil." In fact, government can even cause great misery. Government is a "badge of lost innocence" in that, if human beings were always good, government wouldn't be needed. However, given that government is necessary in order to secure the goodness of society, it makes sense to prefer the form of government that will provide that security while incurring the least expense and offering the greatest benefit to people.

*Paine builds off his claim about human vice to show that government's restraining and preserving function is a sad necessity, and he anticipates his coming critique of monarchy by pointing out that government can take forms that actively oppress the people it's meant to serve.*

Paine argues that a small group of people settling in the wilderness will first be concerned with society. As long as members of this tiny society behaved justly to one another, government would remain unnecessary. However, inevitably, as the population grows, mutual bonds and duties will weaken, and government will become necessary "to supply the weakness of moral virtue." This will initially take the form of dividing up society and electing representatives for each part. The frequent mixing of elected with electors is the basis for strong government and the happiness of the governed.

*Paine illustrates the difference between government and society by imagining a voluntary "society" (implicitly America) which develops a need for government as it grows. He also envisions representative government, which depends on elected officials knowing their electorate and sharing their electorate's interests.*

So, the origin of government is the inability of moral virtue to govern the world. The end of government is "freedom and security." Paine further holds that, according to nature, the simpler something is, the less likely it is to become disordered, and the easier it is to fix if it does.

*Paine reiterates the origin and goal of government and suggests that complex governments are more likely to worsen the problems they're intended to solve.*

With this principle in mind, Paine offers a few comments on the constitution of England. When tyranny reigned, that constitution was indeed "noble" and "glorious." But it is imperfect and incapable of delivering what it promises. It is also fatally complex, thus it's difficult to remedy its faults.

*By "constitution," Paine doesn't refer to a specific document, but to a tradition of governance dating back to the medieval Magna Charta and currently embodied by England's King and Parliament.*


Paine argues that two "ancient tyrannies" are represented by the English constitution: monarchical tyranny (the King) and aristocratical tyranny (the Peers). These two tyrannies are compounded by "new republican materials" (the commons). It's not accurate to claim that these three powers provide an adequate check on one another, Paine claims. To say so presupposes that the King cannot be trusted. It also presupposes that the commons are more inherently trustworthy. But since the King in turn may check the power of the supposedly wiser commons, the system is absurd and seemingly no one can be trusted.

*Paine makes a bold critique of England's government, arguing that even its defenders don't have an adequate case—no matter what authority is claimed for the Peers and commons, it's obvious, he says, that the King holds ultimate power. Such a government goes far beyond the simplicity Paine envisions as ideal for society.*


Further, monarchy is inherently "ridiculous." A King is closed off from the very society he must know intimately in order to govern it well. The three powers provided for by the constitution are inevitably "a house divided" with the power to mutually destroy one another—the weightiest of the three will always rule over time, even if temporarily checked by the other two. Even though England isn't an absolute monarchy, it's obvious that the crown holds the greatest weight. The presence of a parliament only makes kings more "subtle," not more just.

*Paine directly mocks monarchy, showing his radicalism for the time. Because his own ideal government is based on the proximity of governors to the governed, the isolation of monarchs from the people is an offense to him. Further, he argues that the supposed checking influence of the parliament only enables monarchs to become craftier in maintaining their power.*

## 2. OF MONARCHY AND HEREDITARY SUCCESSION

Human beings were created equal, Paine argues. There is no natural or religious reason for dividing humanity into separate classes of king and subjects. The Bible shows that, at the beginning of history, there *were* no kings. Because of this, there were no wars, either. Only the pride of kings causes such strife.

*Paine's political philosophy is grounded on Enlightenment views of human equality, in contrast to pre-modern views that would have seen such class distinctions as natural and divinely ordained. To bolster his claim, Paine appeals to the Bible—by far the most familiar literary work for his audience.*

Ancient Israel copied monarchy from its heathen neighbors. Paine argues that neither nature nor scripture justifies this practice. Before kingship was introduced, Israel was administered by a kind of republic. When the people of Israel begged the prophet Samuel for a king, it was out of a desire to be more like their neighbors. This desire was idolatrous and displeasing to God, so God allowed the people to continue in their corrupt desires. Paine argues that the Bible is clear on the point that monarchy is an unchristian form of government.

*Whether Paine views the biblical account as reliable "history" in the modern sense isn't the main point of his argument (and his claim that earliest Israel was a "republic" is surely anachronistic). Besides its cultural familiarity, the biblical account of Israel's tradition of corrupt kings serves Paine's argument that monarchy is not only inherently corrupt, but it corrupts those who support and defend it.*

If monarchy is a degradation of humanity, then hereditary succession is even *more* corrupting, perpetuating the offense of monarchy unto posterity. Because human beings are equals, no person, even an exceptional one, has the right to set up his posterity as his or her indefinite successors—there is no guarantee that they will equal their ancestor's worthiness, and they typically don't. Furthermore, it's unjust to impose a ruler on future generations.

*Paine extends his argument about the corruption of monarchy to a similar claim about the typical monarchical practice of passing down the crown through generations. The practice is an unjust imposition on posterity and perpetuates the inequality which Paine finds intrinsically offensive.*

Since the emergence of most hereditary lines is shrouded in history and legend, it's uncertain how successions got started. Perhaps some began as conveniences and later came to be regarded as entitlements. Paine refers to William the Conqueror as "a French bastard" and a "rascally" originator of English kingship. Certainly, Paine says, William's legacy is of no divine origin.

*Paine also turns to familiar historical examples to support his rejection of hereditary succession. Certainly William the Conqueror—the Duke of Normandy who invaded England in 1066—would be among the most famous Paine could choose, but his characterization of William is deliberately provocative, and no doubt meant to reflect on the Conqueror's contemporary successor.*

The evil of hereditary succession is more pressing a concern than its absurdity—the practice lends itself to oppression. Men who consider themselves born monarchs easily grow insolent and become disconnected from the interests of ordinary people. This actually renders them dangerously ignorant and unfit to rule. Succession is also vulnerable to unscrupulous regents who take advantage of minor or weak kings. Paine tallies up eight civil wars and 19 rebellions in England alone, arguing that this proves that hereditary succession doesn't make for peace.

*Paine continues to build his argument about succession's oppressive potential, arguing that it undercuts its intended purpose by distancing monarchs from their subjects yet further. An example of war caused by conflict over succession is the Wars of the Roses, fought between the rival York and Lancaster branches of the royal House of Plantagenet.*

Finally, Paine argues that it's unclear what role a king really has in England. He has little to do besides conduct wars and dispense favors. Better is one honest man, he concludes, "than all the crowned ruffians that ever lived."

*If a king is far removed from his people and their needs, then he cannot be of much use to them, according to Paine's view of the role of government. His preference for "one honest man" is also consistent with his Enlightenment view of equality.*

## 3. THOUGHTS ON THE PRESENT STATE OF AMERICAN AFFAIRS

Paine states that in the coming pages, he will simply offer "simple facts, plain arguments, and common sense." His reader, he says, should rely on his own reason and feelings, "[putting] on […] the true character of a man" and "generously enlarge his views beyond the present day."

*Paine presents himself as offering simple arguments accessible to the common reader. Moreover, he appeals to his reader as being capable of evaluating his arguments and of the moral character befitting this historical moment.*

Paine declares that the time for debate is over—England has decided that war is the way to settle the dispute between England and America, and America has risen to the challenge. He argues that this matter is not just the concern of a country or a kingdom, but of an entire continent; likewise, it's not just an issue for the current age, but for posterity.

*Paine argues that England is the aggressor in the current conflict, and that the conflict transcends the current historical moment. This is why his readers must "enlarge [their] views" and, unlike a self-serving monarch, show generous concern for future generations.*

Because the matter has progressed "from argument to arms," Paine argues that "a new aera for politics is struck," which calls for a new manner of thinking. Previously, both Britain and America saw reconciliation between their two sides as the ultimate goal, whether that goal was achieved by means of war or diplomacy. The time has come, however, to look into the contrary point of view.

*Now that Britain is the aggressor, old arguments for reconciliation no longer apply. Paine's open call for rebellion is radical, and because of this, he is careful to establish a reasonable basis for the shift from reconciliation to resistance.*

The colonies will sustain "many material injuries" by remaining dependent upon Great Britain. Paine proposes to examine the nature of that dependence, by the light of common sense, in order to determine what the consequences would be if America remained connected to Britain, and what would happen if it separated from Britain.

*Paine sets out his plan of argument: he will assess the current state of things as well as the possible repercussions of both separation and reconciliation. Again, he grounds the rhetoric of rebellion in an appeal to "common sense" that is meant to resonate with the everyday citizen.*

Some have argued that because America once flourished in its connection to Great Britain, circumstances will remain that way forever. This is a fallacious argument, Paine says. It makes as much sense as saying that because a **child** has thrived on milk, he should never be given meat.

*Paine introduces the recurrent symbol of the parent-child relationship to support his argument for separation—one to which ordinary readers can easily relate. He likens America's colonial status to infancy, a stage of development that, as everyone knows, only lasts for a short time. By likening America's connection with Great Britain to a child never trying solid food, Paine makes the case that to stay dependent upon the British would be akin to preventing a young person from growing up and reaching their full potential.*

Some argue that America has benefited from Britain's protection in the past. Paine retorts that Britain would have defended any other possession in the same way, if its own trade and empire were at stake. People who make this argument fail to consider that Britain's motive is the country's *own* interests, not concern for America's interests. If America were no longer attached to Britain, it would no longer have to worry about conflict with Britain's enemies, should Britain go to war with Spain or France, etc.

*Paine challenges the common assumption that Britain is beneficial to America even now. As a colony, America is of use to Britain, not the other way around. This argument is in line with Paine's assertions about the fundamental selfishness and corruption of monarchy. In addition, it's clear that Britain's governance is not as answerable to the people as Paine believes it should be.*

Some also argue that Britain is America's "**parent** country." Paine argues that the King exploits this phrase in order to prey on weak minds. The reality, he says, is that *Europe* is America's parent, not England. America has been a refuge for those seeking civil and religious liberty from all parts of Europe. England now directs tyranny toward its own descendants; this is the mark of a "monster," not a mother.

*Boldly, Paine directly attacks King George III as exploitative of his subjects. He also challenges the underlying logic of the parent/child metaphor, going so far as to suggest that England isn't America's parent after all. He points to America's growing diversity as evidence for this, simultaneously strengthening a case for independence.*

Were it the case that all Americans were of English descent, that still wouldn't obligate America to continued connection, now that Britain has shown itself to be America's enemy. Furthermore, William the Conqueror and most English Peers are of French descent—if the logic followed, England ought to be under French rule.

*Paine's point about the ancestry of many English is likely meant to be somewhat tongue-in-cheek, but it gives further support to his argument that the* current *allegiance of a country shouldn't necessarily be based on its historical ties.*

In addition, continued military alliance with Britain is not a compelling argument, since America's long-term desire is peaceful trade, not war. Paine holds that the desirability of trade with America will always serve as better protection than Britain's military could, and that America is safe from invasion because of its lack of gold and silver.

*With the benefit of hindsight, it's clear that Paine's claims here are short-sighted; America became entangled in its own military conflicts soon enough, and had richer natural resources than were known at the time. However, his larger point is that America should have the chance to develop commercially without being restrained by Britain's military interests.*

Paine challenges anyone to show him a single advantage that reconciliation with Britain would bring about—he maintains there is none. The disadvantages, on the other hand, would be many. Dependence on Britain would only ensnare America in European wars, whereas left to its own devices, America would befriend these countries and benefit from them in trade.

*Having argued that there's no inherent logic in remaining loyal to Britain, Paine now shifts to arguing that a continued allegiance would be actively harmful—starting with damage to potential allies.*

Even nature proves that separation between Britain and America is natural—the great distance between the two countries suggests that Britain was never meant to rule over America. The fact that America was discovered before the Reformation likewise suggests that God intended this land to become a haven for the religiously persecuted.

*It's not clear how seriously a Deist like Paine would even have taken such claims to divine providence (the 16th century Protestant Reformation led to sustained conflict between Catholic lands and Protestant subjects, creating many refugees)—but they may have appealed to his target readership.*

Paine believes that those who cling to the hope of reconciliation have unworthy motives. They either have some vested interest in Britain, are weak or prejudiced, or are "moderates" who think more highly of Europe than they ought. This last group, with their poor judgment, will do lasting harm to America.

*Where Paine has elsewhere made generous assumptions about his readers' motives, here he openly challenges the motives of those who disagree with independence. He views excessive attachment to Europe (hence inadequate attachment to America) as the most potentially dangerous to the cause.*

Some also have the privilege of living at a distance from the crisis. If one imagines oneself in Boston, however, the picture becomes clearer. Once affluent, the residents of Boston now risk starvation, friendly fire, and British plundering—essentially stuck between two armies.

*Paine appeals to his audience's imagination as well as their logic. Boston had been occupied by the British since June 1774. It was then besieged by American forces from April 1775 until the British evacuation in March 1776—about the time of this writing.*

"Passive" temperaments still think reconciliation possible. But if one considers Boston's plight with natural human feelings, one will realize that ongoing connection with Britain, for whom love and honor is no longer possible, will be a forced, unnatural arrangement. In time, the situation will only worsen.

*Paine suggests that a compassionate person will empathize with those who are most directly suffering under British occupation, and this will clarify the logical conclusion that attachment to Britain is no longer sustainable.*

If someone claims to be able to overlook British violations, Paine says he should examine himself: have you lost property, or even a loved one, due to British aggression? If not, then do not judge those who have. If so, it's cowardly and sycophantic to desire continued relationship with those who have committed such things.

*Here is Paine's most direct and harshest assessment of those who remain in favor of reconciliation—in effect, such people are complicit in the harms Britain has committed against innocent colonists. His rhetoric also serves to foster a sense of unity among Americans.*

Paine says that he is not being inflammatory, but only testing current events against those "feelings and affections which nature justifies." He doesn't wish to stir people to revenge, but to jar them from apathy. America must not conquer herself by timidity. The season for action is now. Since repeated petitioning has yielded nothing, it's time to bring about a final separation, and not leave the unpleasant task for a subsequent generation.

*Paine anticipates the criticisms of those who might accuse him of being needlessly provocative in his descriptions of American suffering. In so doing, he regards American indignation, and hence pro-revolutionary sentiments, as "natural."*

Britain cannot do justice to America at such a distance; it would take most of a year for petitions and resolutions to travel back and forth. Besides, it's unnatural for a larger country to be governed by a small island. It's not worthwhile to take up arms over a matter of law (the stamp-acts), or to fight at all, unless America is in earnest about independence. Ever since April 1775, Paine has rejected "the hardened [...] Pharaoh of England."

*Paine refers to British parliamentary acts that drew revenue from the American colonies through taxation without representation. These acts were bad enough, he implies, but revolution should aim for something bigger and more lasting. He also boldly likens King George III to the oppressive Pharaoh of the Old Testament Book of Exodus, another eminently familiar metaphor for his largely Christian audience.*

Even if matters were to be resolved now, it would be ruinous for America. First of all, King George III would have arbitrary sway over the laws of America. England will constantly try to suppress America's prosperity out of jealousy. Even if the King repealed the offensive acts, he would do so for the sake of reinstating himself as governor of America. Thus he would "accomplish by craft and subtlety [...] what he cannot do by force and violence [...] Reconciliation and ruin are nearly related."

*Paine reiterates that England, especially as represented by King George, is an abusive "parent" for America. By implication, he also ties this point back to his argument that those who govern should share in the interests of those governed. A monarch does not; he or she only oppresses. This is why reconciliation would ultimately be fruitless, even disastrous, for America.*

Secondly, even under the best of terms, America would be under a sort of temporary guardianship. Immigrants will not choose to move to a country that's in such an unsettled state, and current residents might decide to leave.

*Paine makes the interesting point that continued colonial dependence will make America unattractive to potential immigrants and thereby stunt its growth.*

Finally, the strongest argument is that only independence can guard against civil war. If reconciliation occurred, there would likely be a revolt somewhere in the colonies. There should not be any fear that, after independence, the colonies would fall into conflict among themselves, because they are equal.

*Paine holds that revolt against Britain is inevitable, and better that the colonies pursue it together than separately. He doesn't fear rivalry among the colonies themselves, taking for granted that they will be unified around a republican form of government.*

The only thing to be feared regarding independence is that there is not yet a plan laid down for its success. Paine offers a few suggestions. For example, each colony should send delegates to a Continental Congress. Presidents should be chosen by selecting a colony by lot, then voting for a delegate from that colony. There should also be a Continental Conference between Congress and people, which will undertake such tasks as writing a Continental Charter and choosing members of Congress. Their primary concerns should be securing people's freedom and property and ensuring the free exercise of religion.

*Though Paine's specific proposals were not exactly realized (short of there eventually being a Continental Congress), what's notable about his ideas is his emphasis on the people's proximity to their government—trying to ensure, for example, that there is another level of representation even between Congress and constituency. Enlightenment-influenced natural rights (like freedom of religion) are also paramount.*

Should anyone ask about a King of America, Paine retorts that "he reigns above, and doth not make havoc of mankind like the Royal Brute of Britain." But to satisfy everyone on an earthly level, a day should be set aside for the proclamation of the Continental Charter so that the world will know "that in America THE LAW IS KING" (in contrast to an absolute monarchy, where the King is Law).

*Paine takes a particularly bold jab at King George III while also contrasting the different forms of government. Monarchy lends itself to absolutism and hence abuse, while a country governed on the basis of law—especially on Paine's model—ideally is based on representation of the people's wishes.*

A government of the people's own is a "natural right," and it's wisest to decide upon a constitution in a spirit of calm deliberation, rather than delaying and risking an uprising of the discontented. The longer Britain remains in power, the greater the risk of the British trying to stir rebellion themselves, even using slaves and Native Americans for that purpose.

*Paine makes reference to a 1774 conflict known as Lord Dunmore's War, in which the royal Governor of Virginia declared war on bands of the Shawnee and Mingo nations within his territories. In 1776, some members of those nations joined together to attack colonists, with British backing.*

The time for forgiveness is past. God has wisely placed certain sentiments in people's hearts—those affections that seek justice for robbery, murder, and other grievances. Oppression is everywhere; it's up to America to stand as a refuge for freedom.

*Paine concludes his argument with another appeal to his readers' moral reasoning. Again, he equates the desire for independence with the desire for justice, arguing that both sentiments are God-given.*

## 4. OF THE PRESENT ABILITY OF AMERICA, WITH SOME MISCELLANEOUS REFLECTIONS

Paine proposes to survey America's present readiness for independence. America's greatest strength, he says, lies not in its numbers, but in its unity. That being said, America's army is still the largest and most disciplined on Earth. For that matter, it is also well worth going into debt in order to build and outfit a navy. Paine provides figures to demonstrate this claim, also pointing out that America is endowed with all the natural resources it needs for that task, needing to import nothing. America can have no hope of Britain defending it in the future, and its prosperity has grown to the point that self-defense is an important consideration. Further, raising a navy would allow a wise union of commerce and defense, displaying America's overall strength.

*Paine, moving from the moral imperative of seeking independence, addresses some practical considerations that America would need to face as a fledgling nation, arguing that its army is already well equipped and that establishing a navy is well within its resources and abilities. This section bolsters his previous arguments by demonstrating that independence is not just an idealistic daydream, but both achievable and sustainable over the long term.*

Paine also believes that the time is right because America is numerous, but not yet so large as to threaten its unity. "Youth is the seed time of good habits," and as both trade and population increase, so will confusion, and the potential for rivalry between colonies. As its situation currently stands, the colonies enjoy friendship and harmony that's been founded on shared misfortune. They should seize the opportunity to decide their form of government while these circumstances remain in place.

*Here Paine appeals to the imagery of youth, or childhood, in a different way than previously—portraying youth not as a liability, but as an ideal state in which to lay the groundwork for a future nation. Fresh from the joint struggles of Revolution, the colonies will be in a perfect temperament to cooperate in forging a new nation.*

Paine concludes that nothing but independence would so neatly conclude America's pressing issues. For one thing, if America declared independence, then another nation might be called upon to mediate between America and Britain. Secondly, if America is to remain under Britain's authority, then a power like France or Spain couldn't be expected to act against their own interests by intervening on America's behalf. Third, America would no longer have a reputation as rebellious. Finally, America could issue a manifesto to foreign courts, explaining their situation and explaining their peaceable intentions. Without independence, though, America will receive no overseas hearing or help. And until America resolves to take steps toward independence, the necessity for it will continue to haunt the country as a whole.

*Paine concludes his argument by addressing America's situation among the existing nations of the world. For now, it has no status among other world powers, and for that reason, it can't expect help from other nations, either. Declaring independence would change that, allowing America to solicit help and forge alliances with other countries. Until America is bold enough to act, however, its current problems will only fester.*

## APPENDIX

On the same day that *Common Sense* was released, a speech of King George III was published in Philadelphia. The speech helped ripen people's sentiments for independence. Paine describes the speech as "a piece of finished villainy," and libelous. He will argue that, first, it is in America's interest to be separated from Britain, and second, that separation it is a more practicable plan than reconciliation.

*The Appendix did not appear with the first edition of* Common Sense. *In light of the reaction to the King's published speech, Paine issues this appendix with the second edition in order to reiterate certain of his arguments with greater urgency.*

In answer to the first, Paine begins by arguing that independence is a worthy goal because it will be necessary sooner or later, and the longer it's delayed, the harder it will be to accomplish. For one thing, America's experience in the recent war means that, militarily, she has already gained valuable experience.

*Most of Paine's arguments in the Appendix are familiar. He restates both the urgency of independence and America's preparedness to pursue that goal.*

In answer to the second, Paine argues that independence is simple, whereas continued dependence on Britain is tremendously complicated. America's present condition of being held together by sentiment, not law, is precarious. Without a common goal, the opinions of the masses are subject to fancy. "The Continental Belt is too loosely buckled," and if something isn't ventured soon, it will be too late for either reconciliation or independence. And now that British soldiers have actually fired muskets against Americans, the way forward should be obvious.

*Paine has elsewhere favored simplicity as most conducive to society's thriving, and he reiterates that here, fearing the strangling entanglement of continued dependence on Britain. Toward that end, America needs to draw together more tightly for the sake of united action.*

Going forward, independence will either be achieved by law, by a military power, or by a mob. If the first prevails, then America has the chance "to begin the world over again" by creating the purest constitution ever seen. If one of the latter two options prevails, then America has no one to blame but herself. Independence is the only bond that can ensure ongoing union among Americans.

*Independence will occur one way or another, Paine argues, and if America is to have the most auspicious beginning possible, she must take initiative now. Doing so will have positive effects for the world at large as well as posterity.*

Paine rests his case here. He says that no one has refuted earlier editions of the pamphlet, which assures him that his case is correct and that it enjoys substantial popular support. He urges Americans therefore to unite, not to divide into divisions over such party lines as Whig or Tory, but seek in common to support the rights of mankind and an independent America.

*Paine fears the possibility that, if Americans delay for too long, they could easily splinter into factional disagreements that could endanger the cause of independence altogether. It's vital, therefore, to pursue action now. Note that the appendix was attached to the February 14th edition of the pamphlet; by the standards of the day, the rapid printing of the second edition shows considerable urgency.*

Lastly, Paine addresses a recently published piece by the Quakers with regard to America's situation. He does not quarrel with the Quakers' religious views, but with their "dabbling" in political matters. He shares the Quakers' desire for peace. He points out that most Americans are fighting in self-defense against British aggressions, and feel a tenderness for American sufferers that perhaps the Quakers don't. Against the Quaker view that all bearing of arms is sinful, he holds that there is a distinction between "willful attack and unavoidable defense." If the Quakers were serious in their objections, they would object equally to the behavior of the British crown. This, in Paine's view, makes them inconsistent in their principles.

*The Quakers, or Religious Society of Friends, were a radical Protestant group, with strong pacifist commitments, which was influential in Philadelphia at this time. Paine's father was a Quaker, so he was likely familiar with their beliefs, and his familiarity perhaps adds to his palpable sense of irritation with their unwelcome "dabbling" in his political cause. In accordance with his view that independence is a moral imperative, he argues that the Quakers are insufficiently outraged over British violence and unserious in their application of pacifist principles. Though Paine is a supporter of religious liberty, he sees the Quakers' position on revolution as undercutting that very principle.*


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