

Common Sense

Thomas Paine

1776

(adapted by E. Toth)

Thomas Paine came to the colonies from England in 1774 at the invitation of Benjamin Franklin. He was self-educated and had become well known as an essayist who wrote about political and social issues, always writing in favor of the common man. His style was simple and easily understood, so his ideas could reach those common men with whom he sympathized.

Paine published his famous collection of essays entitled "Common Sense" in 1776. The colonies had already engaged in the early battles of the Revolutionary War (Lexington, Concord, Breed's Hill,) but many colonists were still undecided about the idea about rebelling against Britain. After all, if they lost, they would be considered traitors. Paine wrote to convince the undecided colonists to side with the Revolutionaries. His arguments were published in pamphlet form (which was cheap to print) and sold 120,000 copies in the first three months; 500,000 were sold during the first year.

Common Sense...

In the following pages I offer nothing more than simple facts, plain arguments and common sense. I hope the reader will keep an open mind, use clear thinking and decide for himself about the struggle between England and America. We have been arguing and debating over this struggle for long enough. It is time that a fight decided who is right. After all, it was the King who first chose to fight and we must meet the challenge. At this point, reconciliation or becoming friends is just a dream that will disappear when we wake up. Besides, if we did reconcile, look what we would have!

Some people argue that America has done well under her connection with England and the future will be equally good if America continues this connection. This is a poor argument! Can we say that if a baby survives on milk it should never have meat? Or because our childhood is happy our adulthood will also be happy? Is there a guarantee? I think America would have done well without the influence of England or any other European power! Besides, American commerce and trade is "food" and eating is a popular custom in Europe!

Some people say that England has protected us at her expense as well as ours. This is true. But, she would have protected any country that is part of her rule and important to her ability to trade. She did not protect "us" in the French and Indian Wars but herself. She forces her enemies to become our enemies. If we gain our independence, we can be friends with France and Spain even if they are at war with her.

Some claim that Britain is our parent country. If this is so, then she should be ashamed. Even monsters don't devour their young or make war on their own families. The phrase "mother country" or "parent" has been adopted by the King and his parasites with the purpose of playing on our emotions.

If there is a parent to America, it is Europe and not England. This new world has been a safe haven for all persecuted people, those who were denied civil and religious

liberty. From every part of Europe, people have run away from cruelty and tyranny; they didn't run away from a mother's love! The first emigrants from England left for these reasons. As Americans, we claim brotherhood with every European Christian

Many argue that the combined strength of England and the Colonies would create a world power. But, the outcome of a war is always uncertain and we would end up providing men and money to fight in Asia, Africa, or Europe. Besides, we don't want to be part of a world power. All we want to do is live in peace and friendship and to trade freely. If we continue to be part of England, we will be involved in all of their fights and we won't be accepted as friends in European trading markets. If we want to prosper as a country and continue our trading, we must remain impartial and the enemy of no one. If we connect ourselves to England, American trade may be ruined.

It makes sense for Americans to stay neutral. After all, the distance between America and Europe is proof that Heaven intended America to be independent. Distance makes it difficult for England to conduct business with us, let alone, govern us. To be always running three or four thousand miles with a tale or petition, waiting four or five months for an answer which requires another five or six more months to explain is foolish and impractical. There was a time when this was all right, but now is the time for this to stop.

It isn't natural for a country the size of England to expect to rule a continent. Nowhere in space do we see a satellite orbiting a planet smaller than itself. England belongs to the solar system of Europe; America belongs to the solar system of itself.

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1. List 3 arguments Thomas Paine uses to convince colonists they would be better off to break away from England.
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 2. Paine wrote that England, as America's "parent country," should be ashamed of their treatment of the colonies. Describe 3 examples of the "shameful" treatment that Paine outlines in the pamphlet. Is this *propaganda*?
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 3. People who supported England declared "Common Sense" to be dangerous and it soon became illegal to print or own a copy of the pamphlet. Find a line or phrase in "Common Sense" that would be considered dangerous.
 4. If you were a colonist, which one of Paine's arguments would have been the most influential in convincing you to join the revolution against England? Explain your choice.