

Notes on "Common Sense"

By Thomas Paine
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A Pamphlet with a Purpose

Thomas Paine wrote this pamphlet for a specific purpose. It is not often that a work is so pointed. But this work is basically an extended argument directed at the citizens of the colonialists on the American Continent to reject efforts at reconciliation with England, and take up arms for independence.

Arguments

- I. **Status Quo does not equate with "right"**
 - a. "... a long habit of not thinking a thing wrong, gives it a superficial appearance of being right"
- II. **America is more than just a country, it is an idea.**
 - a. "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.
- III. **"Society" is a thing distinct and separate from "government."**
 - a. "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."
 - b. **"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."**
 - c. "Society in every state is a blessing, but government even in its best state is but a necessary evil...."
 - d. "Wherefore, security being the true design and end of government, it unanswerably follows that whatever form thereof appears most likely to ensure it to us, with the least expense and greatest benefit, is preferable to all others."
 - e. If you were to start a new society from scratch: "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."

- f. **“Here then is the origin and rise of government; namely, a mode rendered necessary by the inability of moral virtue to govern the world; here too is the design and end of government, viz. freedom and security.”**

IV. The English form of Government is not in accord with Nature, and should not be admired.

- a. “I draw my idea of the form of government from a principle in nature, which no art can overturn, viz. that the more simple any thing is, the less liable it is to be disordered....”
- b. “I offer a few remarks on the so much boasted constitution of England. That it was noble for the dark and slavish times in which it was erected, is granted. When the world was overrun with tyranny the least remove therefrom was a glorious rescue. But that it is imperfect, subject to convulsions, and incapable of producing what it seems to promise, is easily demonstrated.”
- c. “If we will suffer ourselves to examine the component parts of the English constitution, we shall find them to be the base remains of two ancient tyrannies, compounded with some new republican materials.
 - i. First. The remains of monarchical tyranny in the person of the king.
 - ii. Secondly. The remains of aristocratical tyranny in the persons of the peers.
 - iii. Thirdly. The new republican materials, in the persons of the commons, on whose virtue depends the freedom of England.

V. The King of England retains Absolute Power, despite the government checks.

- a. **“To say that the constitution of England is a union of three powers reciprocally checking each other, is farcical, either the words have no meaning, or they are flat contradictions.”**
- b. “The prejudice of Englishmen, in favor of their own government by king, lords and commons, arises as much or more from national pride than reason. Individuals are undoubtedly safer in England than in some other countries, but the will of the king is as much the law of the land in Britain as in France, with this difference, that instead of proceeding directly from his mouth, it is handed to the people under the more formidable shape of an act of parliament. For the fate of Charles the first, hath only made kings more subtle -- not more just.”

VI. Why do people believe having a King is necessary or desirable? How did we get here?

- a. “How came the king by a power which the people are afraid to trust, and always obliged to check?”
- b. “MANKIND being originally equals in the order of creation, the equality could only be destroyed by some subsequent circumstance; the distinctions of rich, and poor, may in a great measure be accounted for, and that without having recourse to the harsh ill-sounding names of oppression and avarice. Oppression is often the consequence, but seldom or never the means of riches; and though avarice will preserve a man from being necessitously poor, it generally makes him too timorous to be wealthy.”
- c. “...how a race of men came into the world so exalted above the rest, and distinguished like some new species, is worth enquiring into, and whether they are the means of happiness or of misery to mankind.”

VII. The Bible Does NOT justify the Rule of Kings.

- a. “In the early ages of the world, according to the scripture chronology, there were no kings; the consequence of which was there were no wars; it is the pride of kings which throw mankind into confusion.”
- b. “The Heathens paid divine honors to their deceased kings, and the Christian world hath improved on the plan by doing the same to their living ones.”

- c. "... the will of the Almighty, as declared by Gideon and the prophet Samuel, expressly disapproves of government by kings."
- d. Gideon
 - i. "I will not rule over you, neither shall my son rule over you, THE LORD SHALL RULE OVER YOU."
- e. Samuel
 - i. "Lord said unto Samuel, Hearken unto the voice of the people in all that they say unto thee, for they have not rejected thee, but they have rejected me, THAT I SHOULD NOT REIGN OVER THEM."
 - ii. "...all the people said unto Samuel, Pray for thy servants unto the Lord thy God that we die not, for WE HAVE ADDED UNTO OUR SINS THIS EVEL, TO ASK A KING."

VIII. Heredity of Succession is illogical

- a. "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."
- b. "Most wise men, in their private sentiments, have ever treated hereditary right with contempt; yet it is one of those evils, which when once established is not easily removed; many submit from fear, others from superstition, and the more powerful part shares with the king the plunder of the rest."**
- c. "Wherefore, hereditary succession in the early ages of monarchy could not take place as a matter of claim, but as something casual or complimentary; but **as few or no records were extant in those days**, and traditionary history stuffed with fables, it was very easy, after the lapse of a few generations, to trump up some superstitious tale, conveniently timed, Mahomet like, to cram hereditary right down the throats of the vulgar.
- d. "However, it is needless to spend much time in exposing the folly of hereditary right, if there are any so weak as to believe it, let them promiscuously worship the ass and lion, and welcome. I shall neither copy their humility, nor disturb their devotion."
- e. "The most plausible plea, which hath ever been offered in favor of hereditary succession, is, that it preserves a nation from civil wars; and were this true, it would be weighty; whereas, it is the most barefaced falsity ever imposed upon mankind."
- f. "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."**
- g. "The nearer any government approaches to a republic, the less business there is for a king."
- h. "... in countries where he is neither a judge nor a general, as in England, a man would be puzzled to know what is his business."

IX. The Period of Debate is Closed

- a. "Arms, as the last resource, decide the contest; the appeal was the choice of the king, and the continent hath accepted the challenge."
- b. "All plans, proposals, &c. prior to the nineteenth of April, i.e. to the commencement of hostilities, are like the almanacs of the last year; which, though proper then, are superseded and useless now."

X. Reconciliation is not to the benefit of the Colonies and would only delay the inevitable.

- a. "... inquire into some of the many material injuries which these colonies sustain, and always will sustain, by being connected with, and dependant on Great-Britain."
- b. Haven't we always flourished under Britain's Reign?
 - i. No. "America would have flourished as much, and probably much more, had no European power had any thing to do with her."
- c. Hasn't England protected us?
 - i. No. "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, from those who had no quarrel with us on any other account, and who will always be our enemies on the same account."
- d. But the Colonies have no connection with one another except through their common union through England, right?
 - i. No. "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."
- e. But, allied with England we might conquer the world!
 - i. No. "... what have we to do with setting the world at defiance? Our plan is commerce, and that, well attended to, will secure us the peace and friendship of all Europe; because, it is the interest of all Europe to have America a free port."
- f. "... 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."

XI. God provided America as an escape from Europe at the perfect time.

- a. "Even the distance at which the Almighty hath placed England and America, is a strong and natural proof, that the authority of the one, over the other, was never the design of Heaven. The time likewise at which the continent was discovered, adds weight to the argument, and the manner in which it was peopled encreases the force of it. **The reformation was preceded by the discovery of America, as if the Almighty graciously meant to open a sanctuary to the persecuted in future years, when home should afford neither friendship nor safety.**"

XII. Those who still desire reconciliation are weak or blind to the injustices in the land.

- a. "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."
- b. Consider Boston:
 - i. "The inhabitants of that unfortunate city, who but a few months ago were in ease and affluence, have now, no other alternative than to stay and starve, or turn out to beg."
- c. Some still say: "Come, come, we shall be friends again, for all this."
 - i. "Your future connection with Britain, whom you can neither love nor honor, will be forced and unnatural, and being formed only on the plan of present convenience, will in a little time fall into a relapse more wretched than the first."
- d. "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 can still 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."

- e. "I mean not to exhibit horror for the purpose of provoking revenge, but to awaken us from fatal and unmanly slumbers, that we may pursue determinately some fixed object."

XIII. This split is inevitable, let's do it right and be done with it! Britain cannot manage us.

- a. Paine Quotes Milton: "... never can true reconciliation grow where wounds of deadly hate have pierced so deep."
- b. "Wherefore, since nothing but blows will do, for God's sake, let us come to a final separation, and not leave the next generation to be cutting throats, under the violated unmeaning names of parent and child."
- c. "To be always running three or four thousand miles with a tale or a petition, waiting four or five months for an answer, which when obtained requires five or six more to explain it in, will in a few years be looked upon as folly and childishness -- There was a time when it was proper, and there is a proper time for it to cease."**
- d. "Britain hath not manifested the least inclination towards a compromise, we may be assured that no terms can be obtained worthy the acceptance of the continent, or any ways equal to the expense of blood and treasure we have been already put to."
- e. "...it is like wasting an estate of a suit at law, to regulate the trespasses of a tenant, whose lease is just expiring."

XIV. In fact, the Crown will only desire henceforth to keep the Americas down.

- a. "After matters are made up (as it is called) can there be any doubt, but the whole power of the crown will be exerted, to keep this continent as low and humble as possible?"
- b. "Is the power who is jealous of our prosperity, a proper power to govern us?"
- c. "America is only a secondary object in the system of British politics, England consults the good of this country, no farther than it answers her own purpose. 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 interfere with it."**

XV. Nothing but independence can secure the Americas.

- a. "But the most powerful of all arguments, is, that nothing but independence, i.e. a continental form of government, can keep the peace of the continent and preserve it inviolate from civil wars."

XVI. For those who do not see a way forward, Paine lays out a model government that could exist.

- a. Elect a President
- b. Elect Delegates with short terms in office so they must continue to represent the people.
- c. Call a Continental Conference to align government and business concerns.
- d. Craft a Continental Charter to secure the rights of citizens.
- e. Paine quotes Dragonetti: "The science" says he, "of the politician consists in fixing the true point of happiness and freedom. Those men would deserve the gratitude of ages,

who should discover a mode of government that contained the greatest sum of individual happiness, with the least national expense."

- f. "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."
- g. **"A government of our own is our natural right: And when a man seriously reflects on the precariousness of human affairs, he will become convinced, that it is infinitely wiser and safer, to form a constitution of our own in a cool deliberate manner, while we have it in our power, than to trust such an interesting event to time and chance."**

XVII. Freedom is everywhere under attack from Tyranny. We must act now.

- a. "Ye that oppose independence now, ye know not what ye do; ye are opening a door to eternal tyranny, by keeping vacant the seat of government. There are thousands, and tens of thousands, who would think it glorious to expel from the continent, that barbarous and hellish power, which hath stirred up the Indians and Negroes to destroy us, the cruelty hath a double guilt, it is dealing brutally by us, and treacherously by them."
- b. "Every day wears out the little remains of kindred between us and them, and can there be any reason to hope, that as the relationship expires, the affection will increase, or that we shall agree better, when we have ten times more and greater concerns to quarrel over than ever?"
- c. **"The last cord now is broken, the people of England are presenting addresses against us. There are injuries which nature cannot forgive; she should cease to be nature if she did. As well can the lover forgive the ravisher of his mistress, as the continent forgive the murders of Britain. The Almighty hath implanted in us these unextinguishable feelings for good and wise purposes. They are the guardians of his image in our hearts. They distinguish us from the herd of common animals. The social compact would dissolve, and justice be extirpated from the earth, or have only a casual existence 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."**
- d. "Freedom hath been hunted round the globe. Asia, and Africa, have long expelled her. - Europe regards her like a stranger, and England hath given her warning to depart. O! Receive the fugitive, and prepare in time an asylum for mankind."

XVIII. The Time Is Now! Final Arguments.

- a. Everyone knows independence must come.
 - i. "I have never met with a man, either in England or America, who hath not confessed his opinion, that a separation between the countries, would take place one time or other."
- b. We have the right number of people to secure ourselves and maintain prosperity.
 - i. "... our present numbers are sufficient to repel the force of all the world. The Continent hath, at this time, the largest body of armed and disciplined men of any power under Heaven; and is just arrived at that pitch of strength, in which, no single colony is able to support itself, and the whole, when united, can accomplish the fact."

- c. We should take on debt and build a navy to secure our coastline.
- i. "... Britain would never suffer an American man of war to be built, while the continent remained in her hands. Wherefore, we should be no forwarder an hundred years hence in that branch, than we are now; but the truth is, we should be less so, because the timber of this country is every day diminishing, and that, which will remain at last, will be far off and difficult to procure."
 - ii. **"Can we but leave posterity with a settled form of government, an independent constitution of its own, the purchase at any price will be cheap."**
 - iii. "America is without a debt, and without a navy; yet for the twentieth part of the English national debt, could have a navy as large again."
 - iv. "Let us build; if we want them not, we can sell; and by that means replace our paper currency with ready gold and silver."
 - v. "Ship-building is America's greatest pride, and in which, she will in time excel the whole world."
 - vi. "Some, perhaps, will say, that after we have made it up with Britain, she will protect us. Can we be so unwise as to mean, that she shall keep a navy in our harbours for that purpose?"
 - vii. "The English list of ships of war, is long and formidable, but not a tenth part of them are at any one time fit for service, numbers of them not in being; yet their names are pompously continued in the list, if only a plank be left of the ship: and not a fifth part, of such as are fit for service, can be spared on any one station at one time. The East, and West Indies, Mediterranean, Africa, and other parts over which Britain extends her claim, make large demands upon her navy."
 - viii. "...if America had only a twentieth part of the naval force of Britain, she would be by far an over match for her; because, as we neither have, nor claim any foreign dominion, our whole force would be employed on our own coast, where we should, in the long run, have two to one the advantage of those who had three or four thousand miles to sail over, before they could attack us, and the same distance to return in order to refit and recruit. And although Britain by her fleet, hath a check over our trade to Europe, we have as large a one over her trade to the West-Indies, which, by laying in the neighborhood of the Continent, is entirely at its mercy."
- d. We have the right sized population, not too many, not too few.
- i. "Another reason why the present time is preferable to all others, is, that the fewer our numbers are, the more land there is yet unoccupied, which instead of being lavished by the king on his worthless dependents, may be hereafter applied, not only to the discharge of the present debt, but to the constant support of government. No nation under heaven hath such an advantage as this."
 - ii. "We are sufficiently numerous, and were we more so, we might be less united. It is a matter worthy of observation, that the more a country is peopled, the smaller their armies are."
 - iii. "Commerce diminishes the spirit, both of patriotism and military defence. And history sufficiently informs us, that the bravest achievements were always accomplished in the non-age of a nation."
 - iv. "The more men have to lose, the less willing are they to venture. The rich are in general slaves to fear, and submit to courtly power with the trembling duplicity of a Spaniel."

- e. If we do not act, some other tyrant will subdue us and write the laws for us.
 - i. "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."
 - ii. "The vast variety of interests, occasioned by an increase of trade and population, would create confusion. Colony would be against colony. Each being able might scorn each other's assistance: and while the proud and foolish gloried in their little distinctions, the wise would lament, that the union had not been formed before."
 - iii. **"Our 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 era for posterity to glory in."**
 - iv. "The present time, likewise, is that peculiar time, which never happens to a nation but once, viz. the time of forming itself into a government. Most nations have let slip the opportunity, and by that means have been compelled to receive laws from their conquerors, instead of making laws for themselves."
- f. We should embrace all colonists are our brothers and write a charter to seal it.
 - i. **"Suspicion is the companion of mean souls, and the bane of all good society. For myself, I fully and conscientiously believe, that it is the will of the Almighty, that there should be diversity of religious opinions among us: It affords a larger field for our Christian kindness."**

XIX. Conclusion

- a. "TO CONCLUDE, however strange it may appear to some, or however unwilling they may be to think so, matters not, but many strong and striking reasons may be given, to show, that nothing can settle our affairs so expeditiously as an open and determined declaration for independence. Some of which are,
 - i. First. -- It is the custom of nations, when any two are at war, for some other powers, not engaged in the quarrel, to step in as mediators, and bring about the preliminaries of a peace: but while America calls herself the Subject of Great-Britain, no power, however well disposed she may be, can offer her mediation. Wherefore, in our present state we may quarrel on for ever.
 - ii. Secondly. -- It is unreasonable to suppose, that France or Spain will give us any kind of assistance, if we mean only, to make use of that assistance for the purpose of repairing the breach, and strengthening the connection between Britain and America; because, those powers would be sufferers by the consequences.
 - iii. Thirdly. -- While we profess ourselves the subjects of Britain, we must, in the eye of foreign nations, be considered as rebels. The precedent is somewhat dangerous to their peace, for men to be in arms under the name of subjects; we, on the spot, can solve the paradox: but to unite resistance and subjection, requires an idea much too refined for common understanding.
 - iv. Fourthly. -- Were a manifesto to be published, and despatched to foreign courts, setting forth the miseries we have endured, and the peaceable methods we have ineffectually used for redress; declaring, at the same time, that not being able, any longer, to live happily or safely under the cruel disposition of the British court, we had been driven to the necessity of breaking off all connection with her; at the same time, assuring all such courts of our peaceable disposition towards them, and of our desire of entering into trade with them: Such a

memorial would produce more good effects to this Continent, than if a ship were freighted with petitions to Britain.

- b. **“Under our present denomination of British subjects, we can neither be received nor heard abroad: The custom of all courts is against us, and will be so, until, by an independence, we take rank with other nations.”**
- c. “These proceedings may at first appear strange and difficult; but, like all other steps which we have already passed over, will in a little time become familiar and agreeable; and, until an independence is declared, the Continent will feel itself like a man who continues putting off some unpleasant business from day to day, yet knows it must be done, hates to set about it, wishes it over, and is continually haunted with the thoughts of its necessity.”