FREEDOM STORIES

Thomas Paine

January 10, 1776

Common Sense: The Winter Pamphlet of 1776

Historical Spotlight

January of 1776 in America was filled with unease. The year before, repeated conflicts with Britain, including the clashes at Lexington and Concord and the Battle of Bunker Hill, had more than hinted that America was drifting toward an explosive break. What had once been framed as protest now felt uncomfortably like war.

The American sentiment carried with it that peculiar combination of resignation and expectancy that belongs to people standing on the edge of a decision. Into this mood, Thomas Paine carried a thin stack of pages through the streets of Philadelphia that would change the course of liberty forever. He was only recently arrived from England, a man in a worn coat with printer's ink on his fingers and an insistence in his voice that ordinary people were not children in need of a crown, but adults whose daily competence ought to count for something in the councils of the world. He wanted to talk directly to the people, not just the lawyers or legislators.

Common Sense opened a window and let fresh air fall on questions that had grown stale beneath layers of official language. He separated *society*, which he praised as the natural good of neighbors trading favors and bearing one another's burdens, from *government*, which he treated as a necessary contrivance when virtue has gaps - useful as a brace, but dangerous as a master. From there, he turned his gaze not merely on George III but on monarchy itself, asking readers to consider how irrational, and even unchristian, it was to imagine that Providence had deeded one family a permanent claim on other people's futures. It was not enough he suggested, to polish the old machinery; one had to ask whether the machine had ever been built for free human beings at all.

Beneath the intellectual argument ran a very current reality. The last year had not felt like a quarrel in a parlor; it had looked like smoke rising over Lexington, stubborn lines forming at Bunker Hill, and wounded, dying men carried past sermons and shop signs. Reconciliation, which sounded so respectable in town meetings, meant submission to a fist that had already closed.

What made *Common Sense* extraordinary was not only its conclusions, but its audience. Paine did not write for lawyers or legislators. He wrote for farmers, artisans, sailors, and shopkeepers. These people had already learned self-government in their churches, their families, and their trades.

Portrait by Laurent Dabos, c. 1791

A government of our own is our natural right.
- Thomas Paine, Common Sense

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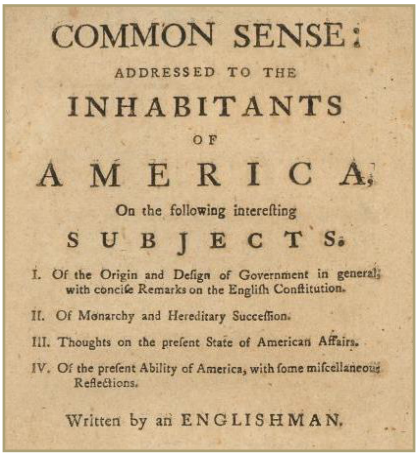
He trusted them with plain speech and moral clarity. He assumed they were capable of a good judgment and the ability to work out disagreement with their neighbor. That assumption, perhaps more than any single argument, was revolutionary.

By winter's end, the pamphlet had spread through the colonies with astonishing speed. It did not create the desire for independence so much as name it, steady it, and give it moral permission.

Yet, he refused to strand his readers with nothing but the severed rope of monarchy; he moved from demolition of power to a design of independence with the confidence of a craftsman, sketching a civil house whose supports were frequent elections, written limits, proportioned representation, federated states that were joined but not devoured, and an executive restrained by the knowledge that power is borrowed from the people, in trust and never owned.



COMMON SENSE:

ADDRESSED TO THE

INHABITANTS

OF

AMERICA,

On the following intereſting

SUBJECTS.

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

II. Of Monarchy and Hereditary Succeſſion.

III. Thoughts on the preſent State of American Affairs.

IV. Of the preſent Ability of America, with ſome miſcellaneous Reflections.

Written by an ENGLISHMAN.

What gave the pamphlet its peculiar voltage was Paine's decision to speak in the language of streets and fields rather than the dialect of the courts. He trusted the habits of the people who kept ledgers in their heads and barns in good repair; he believed that if you made the case plainly enough, they could see that an "island had no business ruling a continent" and that competence in one's private affairs implied adulthood in public ones. Printers copied the tract; riders carried it down frozen roads; tavern keepers read from it between customers; and in a few short weeks a community that had thought of itself as petitioners began to talk like partners, trading the timid grammar of grievance for the first-person plural of responsibility. Paine wrote, what Americans were already living out - the summary of a thousand small awakenings around kitchen tables and workshop benches.

If you measure patriotic events by signatures, the turning point arrives in July; if you measure them by ideas, the pivot comes in January, 6 months earlier when Paine's winter pamphlet told a dispersed people that freedom was not an inheritance to be admired but a discipline to be practiced. Paine did not flatter the crowd or canonize the moment. He simply made the oldest civic truth believable again. He believed that when men and women govern themselves under a law they respect, they become capable of governing, with humility and vigilance, the institutions that bear their names.

Independence followed, as it had to, but the more radical act came first: people who had been treated as toddlers began to act like adults, working with their neighbors inside a social contract. Inside that decision lay the seed of a nation.

Common Sense at its core, dissected monarchy and hereditary rule, appealed to Scripture, natural law, and common experience and showed the people that liberty is both rational and moral.

What this means for us (taxes!)

"...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 defense of Custom. But the Tumult soon subsides. Time makes more Converts than Reason."

- Thomas Paine, the introduction to Common Sense

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Paine's test for legitimate authority was disarmingly simple: government must serve the people's good and answer to them. That principle has sharp edges in our era of complex tax codes, fees, fines, and administrative edicts that can feel distant or arbitrary. His distinctions help us define:

- Society vs. Government: Society (families, churches, associations, businesses) creates value. It is the government's job to protect that value, including life, liberty and the fruit of honest labor, not to consume it without accountability. When taxes, fees and permits become difficult to understand or punitive, we've drifted from protection to predation.

- Consent & Representation: Taxation gains moral force when it's understandable, debated in the open, and approved by accountable representatives. If a charge is effectively a tax but arrived as an unelected agency rule or a stack of "gotcha" fines that have no regular citizen input or ability to change, Paine would call us back to consent and clarity. The sheer number of rules and laws on our books would be abhorrent to Paine, and the founders, if they were to see them now.

- Proportion & Restraint: Paine's blueprint assumes written limits and frequent review. Apply that locally: Do your city, county or school budgets clearly show how much is taken, for what purpose, and how outcomes are measured? From property taxes, habitat fees, septic requirements to school DEI initiatives and a new budget for special ed classes: Are these voted on frequently BY THE PEOPLE themselves, with sunset clauses for expenditures that require review? If not, he'd say the brace has started acting like a master.

Practical next steps

1. **Trace the line of authority for any new tax/fee you're analyzing:**
Who voted for it? What statue authorizes it? When does it sunset? Are there private mechanisms that can do this better?

2. **Ask for the ledger, not the slogan:**
What are the stated goals, timelines, and metrics - and who reports them publicly and who is expected to pay the cost?

3. **Bring decisions closer to the people and enforce term limits to discourage corruption:**
Attend the budget hearing; propose a sunset clause; insist on plain English summaries and line-item transparency.

4. **Model self-government first and hold the government to that standard:**
Common Sense explained effectively, that freedom is a practice and a habit. Not a one time chore. The keys to liberty are not complicated, but they do require involvement and education. When adults shoulder responsibility and insist on lawful, transparent, and limited authority, taxes can become a tool for common protection rather than a siphon for unaccountable power. As the people become more aware of this abuse, we need a framework for testing what is allowable and what is abuse.

That's how the winter pamphlet of Thomas Paine still speaks in the language of our consciences today. We encourage you to read his very apt essay in full on our website. Click "Paper Trail" under the "Resources" tab to find a copy!
Direct link:
Thomas Paine's Common Sense