

## Common Sense

The first clear call for American independence was voiced by Thomas Paine in his 1776 pamphlet, *Common Sense*. Written at a time when most people in the colonies were only debating the possibility of self-government, the pamphlet served to solidify the belief among colonists that the time was right to revolt against British domination. So powerful was the message contained in *Common Sense*, excerpted here, that within only a few months after its publication, thousands of copies had been circulated in the American colonies and four editions had been published in Europe.

In the following pages I offer nothing more than simple facts, plain arguments, and common sense; and have no other preliminaries to settle with [suggest to] the reader than that he will divest [strip] himself of prejudice and prepossession [bias], and suffer [allow] 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.

Volumes have been written on the subject of the struggle between England and America. Men of all ranks have embarked in the controversy, from different motives and with various designs; but all have been ineffectual, and the period of debate is closed. Arms as the last resource decide the contest; the appeal was the choice of the king, and the continent has accepted the challenge. . . .

The sun never shined on a cause of greater worth. 'Tis not the affair of a city, a county, a province, or a kingdom, but of a continent—of at least one-eighth part of a habitable globe. 'Tis not the concern of a day, a year, or an age; posterity [future generations] 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 would enlarge with the tree, and posterity read it in full-grown characters. . . .

I have heard it asserted by some that, as America has flourished under her former connection with Great Britain, the same connection is necessary toward her future happiness and will always have the same effect. Nothing can be more fallacious

than this kind of argument. 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 anything to do with her. The commerce by which she has enriched herself are the necessaries of life and will always have a market while eating is the custom of Europe. . . .

But Britain is the parent country, say some. Then the more shame upon her conduct. Even brutes do not devour their young nor savages make war upon their families. . . . Europe, and not England, is the parent country of America. This New World has 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. . . .

I challenge the warmest advocate for reconciliation to show a single advantage that this continent can reap by being connected with Great Britain. I repeat the challenge; not a single advantage is derived. Our corn will fetch its price in any market in Europe, and our imported goods must be paid for, buy them where we will.

But the injuries and disadvantages we sustain by that connection are without number, and our duty to mankind at large, as well as to ourselves, instruct us to renounce [abandon] the alliance; because any submission to or dependence 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. As Europe is our market for trade, we ought to form no partial [biased] connection with any part of it. . . .

Everything that is right or natural pleads for separation. The blood of the slain, the weeping voice of nature cries, "*Tis time to part.*" Even the distance at which the Almighty has 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 authority of Great Britain over this continent is a form of government which sooner or later must have an end. And a serious mind can draw no true pleasure by looking forward, under the painful and positive conviction that what he calls "the present constitution" is merely temporary. . . .

But where, says some, is the king of America? I'll tell you, friend, he reigns above, and does not make havoc of mankind like the royal brute of Britain . . . in America *the law is king*. For as in absolute governments the king is law, so in free countries the law *ought* to be king. . . .

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. . . .

Our present condition is legislation without law, wisdom without a plan, a constitution without a name, and, what is strangely astonishing, perfect independence contending for dependence. . . .

We ought to reflect that there are three different ways by which an independence may hereafter be effected; and that *one* of those *three* will, one day or other, be the fate of America, viz., by the legal voice of the people in Congress, by a military power, or by a mob. . . . Should an independence be brought about by the first of those means, we have every opportunity and every encouragement before us to form the noblest, purest constitution on the face of the earth. . . .

On these grounds I rest the matter . . . let none other be heard among us than those of a *good citizen, an open and resolute friend, and a virtuous supporter of the rights of mankind and of the free and independent states of America.*

### THINKING CRITICALLY

1. Why does Paine say that Europe, not England, is the parent country of America?
2. What argument does Paine give for abandoning the alliance with Great Britain?
3. Why do you think Paine's pamphlet was so successful?