



Uncommon Sense

It was a runaway bestseller before the concept existed, when printers set type by hand and the average American owned a Bible and perhaps a couple other books. Depending on the edition (and there were many — 25 the first year alone), it ran about 22,000 words, so few it's usually called a "pamphlet" rather than a book. Yet this slim octavo that influenced thinking on two continents continues inspiring today. Its author hid his identity, not because many writers either remained anonymous or used Latin pseudonyms then, but because he had narrowly escaped imprisonment for debt and didn't want to chance it for treason.

[Common Sense](#), Thomas Paine's magnificent, vivid defense of liberty, burst on Philadelphia 234 years ago this month. "Some writers have so confounded society with government," begins this brilliant attack on the latter, "as to leave little or no distinction between them ... [Yet s]ociety is produced by our wants, and government by our wickedness." With readers still reeling from that unanswerable logic, Paine detonates his next charge two sentences later: "Society in every state is a blessing, but government even in its best state is but a necessary evil in its worst state an intolerable one; for when we suffer, or are exposed to the same miseries by a government, which we might expect in a country without government, our calamities is heightened by reflecting that we furnish the means by which we suffer!" And so on, through paragraph after glorious paragraph, exposing and excoriating the oppression and corruption that are the State.

Robert Bell printed 1,000 copies and began selling them from his shop on Third Street January 10. That probably had Dr. Benjamin Rush smiling slyly, though not because his fame as a Patriot would one day equal his medical reputation. He had befriended Paine soon after the British immigrant sailed into town the previous year, so sick he debarked on a stretcher. Paine carried letters of introduction from no less





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than Benjamin Franklin, whom he had met before leaving London and who recommended the 37-year-old radical as “an ingenious worthy young man.” That may have been a tad optimistic, considering Paine’s abject failures, whether as a corset-maker, excise-tax-collector, or husband: widowed once, he separated from his second wife about six months before his voyage to America.

Franklin’s imprimatur may have endeared Paine to the doctor, but even more it was “conversation...Our subjects...were political,” Rush recalled. At some point, he urged Paine to pen the treatise Rush had planned — but feared — to write on the need for American independence: “My profession and connections...tied me to Philadelphia where a great majority of the citizens...were hostile to a separation of our country from Great Britain.” Fancy-free Tom could pick up and flee if the essay’s reception were as dire as the doctor expected.

Paine enthusiastically agreed. Rush helped by proof-reading; as editors are wont to do, he changed the title: *Plain Truth* became *Common Sense*. By now, ten days after “R. Bell, Printer” first offered the piece for sale, most of the city’s 25,000 inhabitants are talking about *Common Sense*. A copy has probably reached New York’s printers as well, though [it will be mid-February before readers there can buy copies](#), while residents of Providence, Rhode Island won’t savor Paine’s prose until February 24.

The Revolution divided Americans in the 1770’s as much as a shooting one would today. The Feds casually, constantly eviscerate the Constitution, yet how many of your friends and family even notice, let alone weep over it as you do? They gripe about their taxes, the dumb and dangerous public schools, or the surly airport screener who abused them, but the dissatisfaction doesn’t extend to government as a whole. Indeed, they may be as grateful for its “protection” from Islamic terrorists as some 18th-century Americans were for the British Empire’s wars against rapacious, tyrannical, Catholic France. Then there’s humanity’s inertia, as well as the belief that the devil you know is better than the one you don’t. Jefferson noted both in the Declaration: “...mankind are more disposed to suffer, while evils are sufferable, than to right themselves by abolishing the forms to which they are accustomed.”

Meanwhile, criticizing our rulers for their Constitutional violations, beseeching the Almighty for freedom, voting for Ron Paul or third-party candidates — all are very different from taking arms against Leviathan. Which also means against those friends and family who side with the beast. Finally, more often than not, governments defeat rebels. If you survive the warfare, and the revolution fails, you’ll wish you hadn’t.

Nevertheless, Paine sought to persuade Americans of a time and circumstances that only seem different from ours to overthrow their government. He understood his new compatriots perfectly, especially for someone in the country a scant year: logic moved them as effectively as emotion does today. So Paine built the case against government brick by reasonable brick. He explained how so dangerous an institution came into existence at all (as early civilizations grew, they “beg[an] to relax in their duty and attachment to each other” and believed they must “[establish] some form of government to supply the defect of moral virtue”). He defines the State’s “design and end” to be securing taxpayers’ “freedom and security.”

Alas, the British Empire had grown too complex to serve those elemental ends. “The more simple any thing is,” Paine observed, “the less liable it is to be disordered, and the easier repaired when disordered.” Americans should scour off the layers with which tradition and the centuries had encrusted the plain business of protecting “freedom and security.” Besides, the colonies *must* eventually be independent; even Nature herself proved that: “Small islands not capable of protecting themselves, are



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the proper objects for kingdoms to take under their care; but there is something very absurd, in supposing a continent to be perpetually governed by an island.”

Paine argued at length against monarchy. It “was first introduced into the world by the Heathens, from whom the children of Israel copied the custom,” says this canny Patriot, hurling the deadliest insult known to the Christian colonies. “It was the most prosperous invention the Devil ever set on foot for the promotion of idolatry.” To fully appreciate the absurdity that some men rule the rest, Paine advised “trac[ing kings] to their first rise” through the “dark covering of antiquity”; we’ll find them to be “nothing better than the principal ruffian of some restless gang, whose savage manners of preeminence in subtlety obtained him the title of chief among plunderers; and who by increasing in power, and extending his depredations, overawed the quiet and defenseless to purchase their safety by frequent contributions.”

Monarchy was virtually the only shape government assumed in the eighteenth century. That Paine mocks and scorns it makes *Common Sense* deeply anarchic — and contemporary readers knew it. Landon Carter of Virginia denounced the work as “advanc[ing] new and dangerous doctrines to the peace and happiness of every society” while a British officer in New York sniffed that it was “a most flagitious Performance...His attempt to justify Rebellion by the Bible is infamous beyond Expression... GOD ... instituted Civil Government that all things might be done decently, and in order.” Meanwhile, the British darkly suspected Sam Adams, another American enamored of anarchism, as the anonymous author.

The folks buying *Common Sense* in droves cheered Paine’s exuberant, vigorous debunking of the State. “Of more worth is one honest man to society,” crowed this honest man, “and in the sight of God, than all the crowned ruffians that ever lived.”

We no longer crown our ruffians, but they’re every bit as worthless. Let’s oppose their evil as vigorously as Paine’s first readers did.

Becky Akers, an expert on the American Revolution, writes frequently about issues related to security and privacy. Her articles and columns have been published by *Lewrockwell.com*, *The Freeman*, *Military History Magazine*, *American History Magazine*, the *Christian Science Monitor*, the *New York Post*, and other publications.



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