

THOMAS PAINE, COMMON SENSE (1776)

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The following excerpts are from Thomas Paine's *Common Sense*. Originally published in 1776, this pamphlet lays out Paine's theory for why the American colonies should declare independence.

One of the all-time American best sellers, Thomas Paine's *Common Sense*, exploded on the scene in January 1776, at a precarious moment when reconciliation with Great Britain seemed unlikely, yet, to many, independence still seemed unthinkable. In electric prose, Paine, a recent English immigrant, made a forceful case in defense of separation. On multiple scores, the pamphlet radiated a radical democratic spirit. In plain, unadorned writing, it appealed to the common capacities of all people to evaluate the case for independence. It left few traditional hierarchies untouched, meanwhile, nowhere more strikingly than its vigorous condemnation of the institution of monarchy, which Paine claimed was in fact an affront to God. *Common Sense* seized public opinion, propelling American colonists toward independence.

Excerpt:

Why should we think that some people are born to be rulers and some born to be subjects? "[T]here is another and greater distinction for which no truly natural or religious reason can be assigned, and that is the distinction of men into **KINGS** and **SUBJECTS**. Male and female are the distinctions of nature, good and bad the distinctions of Heaven; but how a race of men came into the world so exalted above the rest, and distinguished like some new species, is worth inquiring into, and whether they are the means of happiness or of misery to mankind.

The divine right of kings is a lie; monarchy runs against God's plans. These portions of scripture are direct and positive. They admit of no equivocal construction. That the Almighty hath here entered his protest against monarchical government is true, or the scripture is false. . .

Passing down power from father to son is a bad idea; no reason to think that royal children will make good rulers. To the evil of monarchy we have added that of hereditary succession; and as the first is a degradation and lessening of ourselves, so the second, claimed as a matter of right, is an insult and imposition on posterity. 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 tho' himself might deserve some decent degree of honours of his cotemporaries, yet his descendants might be far too unworthy to inherit them. One of the strongest natural proofs of the folly of hereditary right in Kings, is that nature disapproves it, otherwise she would not so frequently turn it into ridicule, by giving mankind an *Ass for a Lion*.

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Think for yourself, and follow common sense. In the following pages I offer nothing more than simple facts, plain arguments, and common sense: and have no other preliminaries to settle with the reader, than that he will divest himself of prejudice and prepossession, and suffer 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.

Why should a tiny island across the sea rule a massive place like America? Small islands not capable of protecting themselves are the proper objects for government to take under their care; but there is something absurd, in supposing a Continent to be perpetually governed by an island. In no instance hath nature made the satellite larger than its primary planet; and as England and America, with respect to each other, reverse the common order of nature, it is evident that they belong to different systems. England to Europe: America to itself.

We have an opportunity to remake America and make it an example of freedom for the world; we should seize it. I shall conclude these remarks, with the following timely and well-intended hints. We ought to reflect, that there are three different ways by which an independancy 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: It may not always happen that our soldiers are citizens, and the multitude a body of reasonable men; virtue, as I have already remarked, is not hereditary, neither is it perpetual. Should an independancy 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. We have it in our power to begin the world over again. A situation, similar to the present, hath not happened since the days of Noah until now. The birthday of a new world is at hand, and a race of men, perhaps as numerous as all Europe contains, are to receive their portion of freedom from the events of a few months. The reflection is awful, and in this point of view, how trifling, how ridiculous, do the little paltry cavilings of a few weak or interested men appear, when weighed against the business of a world.

Let's unite on behalf of America and win our independence. WHEREFORE, instead of gazing at each other with suspicious or doubtful curiosity, let each of us hold out to his neighbor the hearty hand of friendship, and unite in drawing a line, which, like an act of oblivion, shall bury in forgetfulness every former dissention. Let the names of Whig and Tory be extinct; and 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 INDEPENDANT STATES OF AMERICA.* . . .

In America, the rule of law is king. 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. For as in absolute governments the King is law, so in free countries the law ought to be King; and there *ought* to be no other. But lest any ill use

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should afterwards arise, let the crown at the conclusion of the ceremony be demolished, and scattered among the people whose right it is.

Now is the moment to declare independent and form our own government. 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. If we omit it now, some Massanello may hereafter arise, who laying hold of popular disquietudes, may collect together the desperate and the discontented, and by assuming to themselves the powers of government, may sweep away the liberties of the continent like a deluge. . . . Ye that oppose independance now, ye know not what ye do; ye are opening a door to eternal tyranny, by keeping vacant the seat of government. . . .

We must seize this opportunity to create a government of our own based on the right principles. 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. First, they had a king, and then a form of government; whereas, the articles or charter of government, should be formed first, and men delegated to execute them afterward: but from the errors of other nations, let us learn wisdom, and lay hold of the present opportunity—To begin government at the right end

***Bold sentences give the big idea of the excerpt and are not a part of the primary source.**