

THOMAS PAINE | COMMON SENSE (1776)

Thomas Paine (1737-1809), was an English born American political theorist, activist, & ardent revolutionary. He came to America in 1774 in the midst of the colonies embroiled debates and protests over whether to remain loyal to England or not. In 1776 he published a fifty-five page pamphlet called "Common Sense" in which he denounced the English monarchy as an irrational institution and called for immediate independence. His candor, logic, and eloquent penmanship was significant in swaying many a reluctant colonists to believe that severing ties with Mother England was the only feasible, justice, and practical option for the colonies.



1. The cause of America is, in a great measure, the cause of all mankind. Many circumstances have, 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...

2. 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. 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.... 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.... Government, like dress, is the badge of lost innocence; the palaces of kings are built on the ruins of the bowers of paradise.... [The] necessity, of establishing some form of government [is] to supply the defect of moral virtue.... 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. And... however prejudice may warp our wills, or interest darken our understanding, the simple voice of nature and of reason will say, it is right.

3. I know it is difficult to get over local or long standing prejudices, yet 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. First. — The remains of monarchical tyranny in the person of the king. Secondly. — The remains of aristocratical tyranny.... [T]hey contribute nothing towards the freedom of the state.... There 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 enquiring into, and whether they are the means of happiness or of misery to mankind.... Government by kings was first introduced into the world by the Heathens.... It was the most prosperous invention the Devil ever set on foot for the promotion of idolatry.... How impious is the title of sacred majesty applied to a worm, who in the midst of his splendor is crumbling into dust!...

As the exalting one man so greatly above the rest cannot be justified on the equal rights of nature, so neither can it be defended on the authority of scripture.... That the Almighty hath...entered his protest against monarchical government is true, or the scripture is false.... Monarchy is ranked in scripture as one of the sins of the Jews, for which a curse in reserve is denounced against them. The history of that transaction is worth attending to.... For monarchy in every instance is the Popery of government....

To the evil of monarchy we have added that of hereditary succession...[which] is an insult and an 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 though himself might deserve some decent degree of honors of his contemporaries, 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....

4. Should a thought so fatal and unmanly [as reconciliation] possess the colonies in the present contest, the name of ancestors will be remembered by future generations with detestation. The sun never shined on a cause of greater worth. 'Tis not the affair of a city, a country, a province, or a kingdom, but of a continent — of at least one eighth part of the habitable globe. 'Tis not the concern of a day, a year, or an age; posterity 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 will enlarge with the tree, and posterity read it in full grown characters.... Men of passive tempers look somewhat lightly over the offenses of Britain, and, still hoping for the best, are apt to call out, Come we shall be friends again for all this. But examine the passions and feelings of mankind. Bring the doctrine of reconciliation to the touchstone of nature, and then tell me, whether you can hereafter love, honor, and faithfully serve the power that hath carried fire and sword into your land? If you cannot do all these, then are you only deceiving yourselves, and by your delay bringing ruin upon posterity. 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. 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....

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.... Though I would carefully avoid giving unnecessary offence, yet 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; and this last class by an ill-judged deliberation, will be the cause of more calamities to this continent than all the other three...

5. I have heard it asserted by some, that as America hath flourished under her former connection with Great Britain, that the same connection is necessary towards 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 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; wherefore the assertion, if true, turns to her reproach; but it happens not to be true, or only partly so.... 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. 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.... The authority of Great Britain over this continent, is a form of government, which sooner or later must have an end.... As parents, we can have no joy, knowing that this government is not sufficiently lasting to ensure anything which we may bequeath to posterity: And by a plain method of argument, as we are running the next generation into debt, we ought to do the work of it, otherwise we use them meanly and pitifully. In order to discover the line of our duty rightly, we should take our children in our hand, and fix our station a few years farther into life...

6. [1]It is not in the powers of Britain to do this continent justice: The business of it will soon be too weighty, and intricate, to be managed with any tolerable degree of convenience, by a power, so distant from us, and so very ignorant of us; for if they cannot conquer us, they cannot govern us. 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. Small islands not capable of protecting themselves, are 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. In no instance hath nature made the satellite larger than its primary planet, and as England and America, with respect to each Other, reverses the common order of nature, it is evident they belong to different systems: England to Europe — America to itself....

7. O ye that love mankind! Ye that dare oppose, not only the tyranny, but the tyrant, stand forth! Every spot of the old world is overrun with oppression. 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.... 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....

Reflecting on What You Have Read

50PTS

NOTE: You need to give me thoroughly thought out responses in complete sentences for each question. Some questions are quite extensive and therefore require multiple sentences and even paragraphs to answer correctly.

1. In your own words summarize Paine's argument in excerpt #1. What is your own reflection upon his argument? Agree, disagree?
2. Look at excerpt #2. What differences are there between society and government in Paine's eyes? What is the design or role of government in Paine's argument?
3. Look at excerpt #3. What two ancient tyrannies plague England's government? Why are these considered bad in Paine's eyes? How does Paine argue against these tyrannies?
4. According to Paine in excerpt #4 what kinds of people "espouse the doctrine of reconciliation" with England? What does Paine's language tell you about how he feels about these people?
5. In excerpt #5 how does Paine challenge the argument, "England is the mother country?"
6. What kind of appeal is Paine making in excerpt #6? What examples does he use to make strengthen his argument?
7. Based off excerpt #7 what does Paine see America as? Do you agree or disagree? Why or why not? Was his call to independence legitimate? Why or why not?