

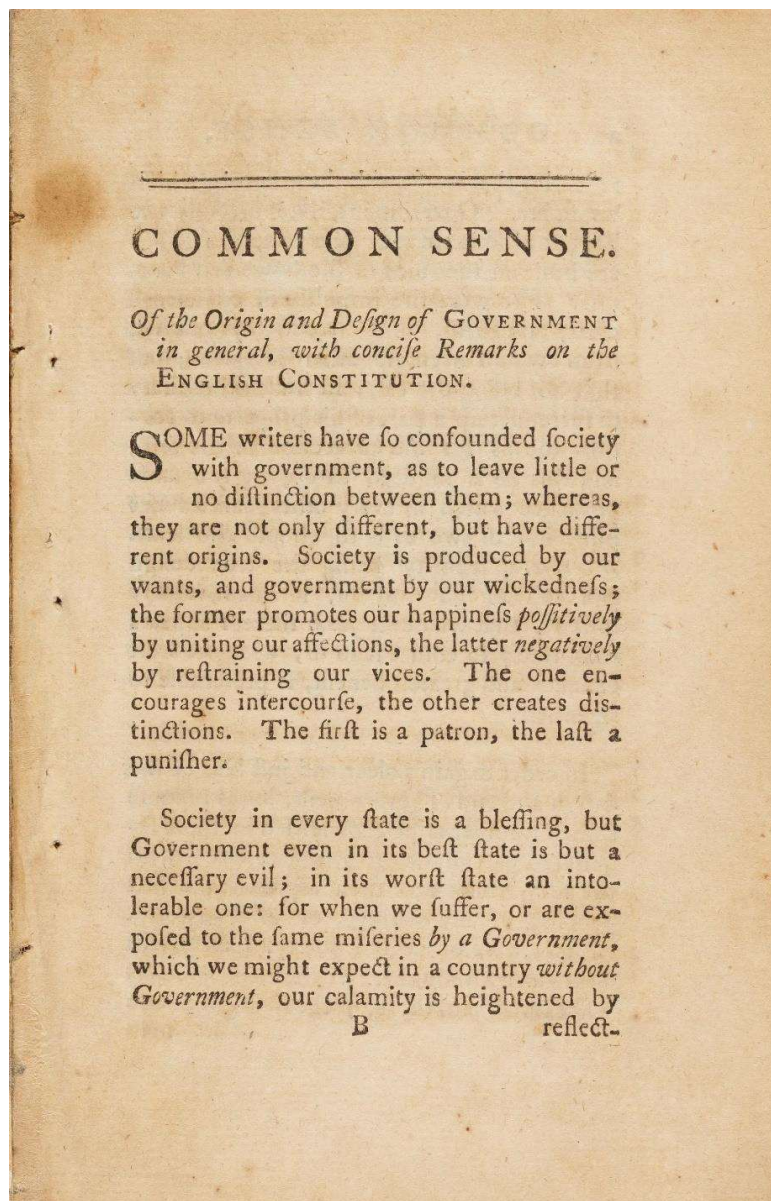
"Common Sense" (1776) by Thomas Paine: A Canonical Pamphlet

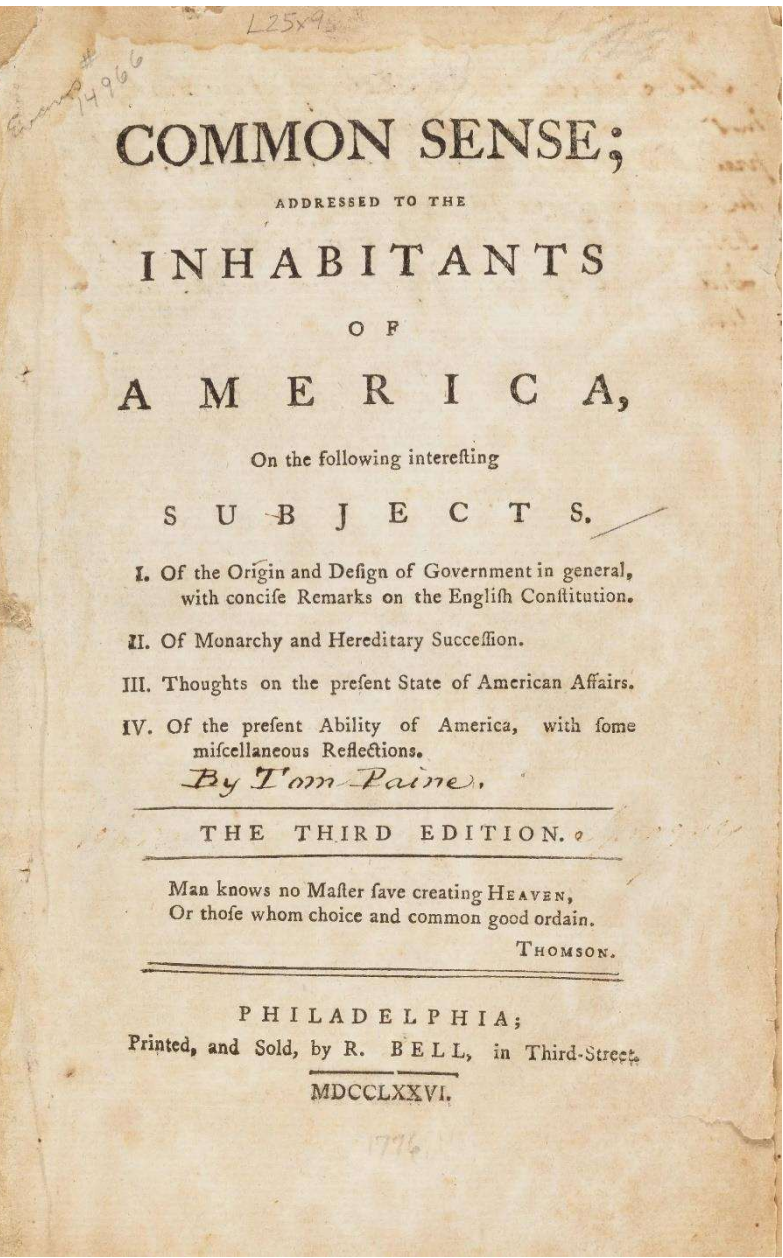
Curated by Stephen A Batman

Wednesday, March 12, 2025

Summary of this Particular Rare First Edition

Thomas Paine, *Common Sense*, 1776





L25x4
4966

COMMON SENSE;
ADDRESSED TO THE
INHABITANTS
OF
A M E R I C A,

On the following interesting

S U B J E C T S.

- I. Of the Origin and Design of Government in general, with concise 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.

By Tom Paine.

THE THIRD EDITION.

Man knows no Master save creating HEAVEN,
Or those whom choice and common good ordain.

THOMSON.

PHILADELPHIA;
Printed, and Sold, by R. BELL, in Third-Street.
MDCCLXXVI.

1776

L A R G E
A D D I T I O N S
T O
C O M M O N S E N S E ;

ADDRESSED TO THE INHABITANTS OF AMERICA;
ON THE FOLLOWING INTERESTING SUBJECTS.

- I. The American Patriot's Prayer.
- II. American Independancy defended, by Candidus.
- III. The Propriety of Independancy, by Demophilus.
The dread of Tyrants, and the sole resource
Of those that under grim Oppression groan.
T H O M S O N .
- IV. A Review of the American Contest, with some
Strictures on the King's Speech. Address'd to all
Parents in the Thirteen United Colonies, by a
Friend to Posterity and Mankind.
- V. Letter to Lord Dartmouth, by an English American.
- VI. Observations on Lord North's Conciliatory Plan,
by Sincerus.

TO WHICH ARE ADDED AND GIVEN
An Appendix to Common Sense; Together with an Ad-
dress to the people called Quakers, on their Testimony
concerning Kings and Government, and the present
Commutations in AMERICA.

P H I L A D E L P H I A :

Printed, and Sold, by R. B E L L, in Third-Street.

M D C C L X X V I .

RARE FIRST PRINTING OF PAINE'S *COMMON SENSE*.

FIRST EDITION, THE FIRST PRINTING SHEETS, CONFORMING TO ALL OF GIMBEL'S INTERNAL POINTS FOR THE FIRST PRINTING, with title page and prefatory leaf (A1/A2) from the 3rd edition, as well as leaf K1, with inscription to verso.

"It is not too much to say that the Declaration of Independence of July 4, 1776, was due more to Paine's *Common Sense* than to any one other single piece of writing" (Grolier).

Alongside the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, and *The Federalist*, *Common Sense* stands as one of the foundational documents of the birth of the United States. "Paine told Americans what they had been waiting to hear. In a few short pages he summarized the case against the institution of monarchy and presented an argument for American independence that was elegantly yet so simply stated that it could be understood by nearly every American. *Common Sense* was by far the most influential tract of the American Revolution, and it remains one of the most brilliant pamphlets ever written in the English language." (*A Covenanted People*, 27).

The most recent census of *Common Sense* locates just seventeen complete first editions. Only two of these remain in private hands, and neither is likely to appear for sale. *A Covenanted People* 27; Adams 222a; Church 1135; Evans 14954; Gimbel CS-1 (all first issue points); Grolier *American* 14; Sabin 58211; Streeter *American Beginnings* 43.

PAINE, THOMAS. 1737-1809. *Common Sense; Addressed to the Inhabitants of America...* Philadelphia: R. Bell, 1776.

2 volumes in 1. 8vo (200 x 127 mm). Leaves A1/A2 and K1 supplied from another copy. BOUND WITH: *Large Additions to Common Sense*. Philadelphia: Bell, 1776. Disbound, original stab-holes visible in two sets, stabholes on A1/A2 match the second set, and K1 supplied. Later manuscript note to verso of title page, with earlier annotation adding "Tom Paine" beneath Introduction, K1 missing 1 inch at bottom edge, no text loss.

Introduction

On January 10, 1776, six months before the adoption of the Declaration of Independence, Thomas Paine published "Common Sense," a pamphlet that would become one of the most influential political writings in American history. This 47-page work advocated for American independence from Great Britain at a crucial moment when many colonists still hoped for reconciliation with the Crown. Written in clear, persuasive prose accessible to ordinary citizens, "Common Sense" made a compelling case for independence by collecting various moral and political arguments that encouraged common people to fight for an egalitarian government.

The pamphlet appeared at a time of growing tension between the American colonies and Great Britain. The Battles of Lexington and Concord had already occurred, and hostilities had commenced, yet the thought of complete independence remained controversial. When Paine

arrived in the American colonies in November 1774, he found that "the disposition of the people such, that they might have been led by a thread and governed by a reed. Their attachment to Britain was obstinate, and it was, at that time, a kind of treason to speak against it." The political climate was characterized by colonial grievances against British policies, including the Proclamation Line of 1763, the Currency Act of 1764, the Sugar Act of 1764, the Stamp Act of 1765, and the Coercive Acts of 1774, all of which had steadily increased tensions.

Paine's motivation was to break this attachment to Britain and inspire Americans to embrace independence. He began writing under the working title "Plain Truth," initially intending it as a series of letters for Philadelphia newspapers. However, as the work grew longer, he opted for the pamphlet format, which allowed for wider distribution. Published by Robert Bell, "Common Sense" became an immediate sensation, selling approximately 120,000 copies in its first three months—an extraordinary achievement in a nation of just 2.5 million people. It was read aloud in taverns and meeting places throughout the colonies, helping to transform public opinion at a pivotal moment in American history.

The Author

Thomas Paine was born on January 29, 1737, in Thetford, Norfolk, England, to a Quaker father and an Anglican mother. His father was a poor corset maker, which limited Paine's formal education to just seven years at the Thetford Grammar School. Despite these humble beginnings, Paine was committed to self-education, attending lectures on Newtonian physics and purchasing books and scientific apparatus whenever possible. He often remarked, "Every person of learning is finally his own teacher" and claimed he "seldom passed five minutes of my life, however circumstanced, in which I did not acquire some knowledge."

Before becoming a revolutionary writer, Paine held various occupations in England, including working as an excise officer. His first known published work, "The Case of the Officers of Excise" (1772), advocated for higher wages for his fellow excise officers. In 1774, Paine arrived in America with a letter of recommendation from Benjamin Franklin, whom he had met in London. Within thirteen months of his arrival, he had written "Common Sense," which would transform him into a central figure of the American Revolution.

Following the success of "Common Sense," Paine wrote "The American Crisis" (1776-1783), a series of pamphlets supporting the revolutionary cause. The first Crisis paper, published in December 1776 during a bleak period of the war, was so moving that General Washington ordered it read to his troops before the pivotal Battle of Trenton. After the American Revolution, Paine traveled to France in 1787, where he became involved in the French Revolution, publishing "Rights of Man" (1791) in defense of the revolution against its critics. This work sold two million copies in France within months.

Paine's later works, including "The Age of Reason" (1794-1795), which criticized supernatural aspects of Christianity and pointed out contradictions in the Bible, and his "Letter to George Washington" (1796), in which he criticized Washington and other political figures, damaged his reputation in America. Despite his crucial contributions to American independence, Paine's religious views and political controversies led to his marginalization in later life. He died on June

8, 1809, in New York, with his funeral attended by only a handful of people—a stark contrast to his earlier influence and fame.

Why this is a Canonical Book

"Common Sense" must be included in the canon of books containing major ideas that reflect elements of America's politics, governance, economics, and culture for several compelling reasons. First and foremost, it played a pivotal role in catalyzing American independence. The pamphlet transformed the colonial mindset from seeking reconciliation with Britain to embracing full independence, making it not just a reflection of American political thought but a formative influence on the very existence of the United States.

The work's significance lies in its revolutionary challenge to monarchical authority and hereditary rule. Paine's argument that "a thirst for absolute power is the natural disease of monarchy" and his assertion that "in America, the law is king" established foundational principles of American governance. By denouncing monarchy as "the most prosperous invention the Devil ever set on foot for the promotion of idolatry," Paine articulated a vision of government based on natural rights and popular sovereignty that would become central to American political identity.

"Common Sense" is also canonical because it democratized political discourse. Written in accessible language, it brought complex political ideas to the common people, embodying the democratic ethos that would become a hallmark of American culture. Paine's deliberate choice to write in "simple facts, plain arguments, and common sense" rather than the formal, learned style favored by many of his contemporaries represented a revolutionary approach to political writing that aligned with the democratic society he envisioned.

Furthermore, the pamphlet articulated a distinct American identity at a time when such an identity was still forming. Paine's argument that "we have it in our power to begin the world over again" positioned America as not just a new nation but as a model for the world—a beacon of liberty and democracy. This exceptionalist vision would become a recurring theme in American self-conception.

Finally, "Common Sense" established the principle that government derives its legitimacy from the consent of the governed, a concept that would later be enshrined in the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution. Paine's assertion that "government even in its best state is but a necessary evil" reflected a distinctly American skepticism toward centralized authority that continues to influence American political culture today.

In sum, "Common Sense" is canonical not merely because it reflected American values but because it helped create them, articulating principles of democratic governance, individual liberty, and national purpose that would define the American experiment.

Five Timeless Quotes

1. "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."

This quote remains profoundly relevant today as America continues to grapple with entrenched systems and prejudices. Paine's insight speaks to how societies normalize injustices through habit and custom, making them appear right simply because they've existed for so long. In our current era of social justice movements, from Black Lives Matter to gender equality initiatives, we see this dynamic at work as Americans confront long-standing inequities that were once accepted as normal. The quote also offers hope, suggesting that over time, even the most deeply rooted customs can be recognized as wrong and changed. This perspective is valuable for civic-minded Americans who seek to reform systems that no longer serve the common good, reminding us that resistance to change is often loudest at first but subsides as new ideas gain acceptance.

2. "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 calamity is heightened by reflecting that we furnish the means by which we suffer."

This quote captures a fundamental tension in American political thought between the necessity of government and skepticism toward centralized power. In today's polarized political landscape, where debates rage about the proper size and role of government, Paine's words remind us that government should be judged by its practical effects on citizens' lives. The quote speaks to contemporary concerns about government overreach, inefficiency, and corruption, while acknowledging that some form of government remains necessary for social order. It encourages Americans to maintain a healthy vigilance toward their government, recognizing that its power comes from the people themselves and should be exercised judiciously. As debates continue over healthcare, taxation, regulation, and other issues, Paine's balanced perspective offers a framework for evaluating government actions based on their outcomes rather than ideology.

3. "It is not in numbers, but in unity, that our great strength lies; yet our present numbers are sufficient to repel the force of all the world."

In our deeply divided nation, where partisan polarization has reached historic levels, Paine's emphasis on unity carries special significance. The quote reminds us that America's strength has always derived not just from its size or resources but from its ability to unite diverse peoples around common principles. As the 2024 presidential election revealed a country nearly evenly split between red and blue, with democracy itself perceived to be under threat by many Americans, Paine's words offer a timely reminder that division weakens us while unity strengthens us. The quote challenges today's Americans to look beyond partisan differences to find common ground and shared purpose, just as the colonists had to transcend their differences to achieve independence. It suggests that our diversity can be a source of strength rather than division when we unite around core democratic values.

4. "From the errors of other nations, let us learn wisdom."

This concise statement encapsulates an approach to governance and policy that remains vital today. In an interconnected global community, America has unprecedented opportunities to learn from both the successes and failures of other nations. Whether addressing climate change, healthcare, education, or economic inequality, Paine's words encourage Americans to look beyond their borders with humility and openness, recognizing that wisdom can be found in diverse approaches. This perspective counters both isolationist tendencies and American exceptionalism that might prevent us from adopting beneficial practices from elsewhere. As the United States faces complex challenges that other nations have also confronted, from aging infrastructure to political polarization, Paine's advice to learn from others' errors offers a pragmatic path forward based on evidence rather than ideology.

5. "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."

This quote articulates America's global significance and responsibility in ways that remain powerfully relevant. Paine positioned America not just as a new nation but as a model for humanity—a beacon of liberty and democratic governance. Today, as the United States navigates its role in a multipolar world, this quote reminds Americans that their democratic experiment has implications far beyond their borders. It speaks to America's continued responsibility to uphold democratic principles and human rights both at home and abroad. The quote also connects to contemporary global challenges like climate change, pandemic response, and technological disruption that are "not local, but universal" and require international cooperation. It encourages Americans to see their national interests as aligned with broader human interests, offering a vision of patriotism that embraces rather than rejects global engagement and responsibility.

Five Major Ideas

1. Rejection of Monarchy and Hereditary Rule

A central theme in "Common Sense" is Paine's categorical rejection of monarchy and hereditary succession as legitimate forms of government. He argues that monarchy is fundamentally unnatural and contrary to reason, writing that "for all men being originally equals, no one by birth could have the right to set up his own family in perpetual preference to all others forever." Paine specifically attacks the notion that certain individuals are born with the right to rule over others, calling it "the most prosperous invention the Devil ever set on foot for the promotion of idolatry." He uses both logical arguments and biblical references to demonstrate that monarchy contradicts natural law and divine will.

Paine's critique extends beyond abstract principles to practical governance, arguing that monarchs, being "selected from the rest of mankind," have "minds early poisoned by importance" and little understanding of ordinary people's concerns. This disconnect makes them unfit to govern. By systematically dismantling the legitimacy of monarchy, Paine laid the groundwork for a new conception of government based on popular sovereignty and natural rights—ideas that would become foundational to American political thought.

2. Government as a Necessary Evil

Paine presents a nuanced view of government as a necessary but inherently problematic institution. He famously states that "society in every state is a blessing, but government even in its best state is but a necessary evil." This perspective reflects a fundamental skepticism toward centralized authority that would become a hallmark of American political culture. Paine distinguishes between society, which he sees as naturally arising from human needs and promoting happiness "positively by uniting our affections," and government, which emerges from human wickedness and promotes happiness "negatively by restraining our vices."

This conception of government as a necessary constraint rather than a positive good established an enduring tension in American political thought between the need for effective governance and wariness of government power. It influenced the system of checks and balances in the U.S. Constitution and continues to shape debates about the proper scope and role of government. Paine's view that government should be judged by its practical effects rather than abstract principles also reflects the pragmatic strain in American political philosophy.

3. Natural Rights and Popular Sovereignty

"Common Sense" articulates a theory of government based on natural rights and popular sovereignty that would become central to American political identity. Paine argues that all individuals possess inherent rights by virtue of their humanity, and that legitimate government must protect these rights and derive its authority from the consent of the governed. He writes that "a government of our own is our natural right" and that the people have the right to establish, modify, or abolish government based on how well it serves their interests.

This idea directly challenged the prevailing notion that political authority flowed from divine right or tradition. Instead, Paine positioned the people as the ultimate source of political legitimacy, arguing that government should be a representative institution accountable to those it governs. This conception of popular sovereignty informed the Declaration of Independence's assertion that governments derive "their just powers from the consent of the governed" and remains a foundational principle of American democracy.

4. American Exceptionalism and Global Mission

Paine presents America not just as a new nation but as a model for the world and a haven for liberty. He declares that "the cause of America is in a great measure the cause of all mankind" and that America has "it in our power to begin the world over again." This framing positioned American independence as part of a broader human struggle for freedom and self-governance, giving the revolution universal significance beyond its immediate political context.

This idea of American exceptionalism—that America has a special role in human history as an exemplar of liberty and democracy—became a persistent theme in American self-conception. Paine's vision of America as an "asylum for mankind" established the notion that America's significance lies not just in its political institutions but in its embodiment of universal principles

of freedom and equality. This conception of America's global mission has influenced American foreign policy and national identity from the founding era to the present day.

5. Democratization of Political Discourse

Beyond its specific arguments, "Common Sense" represents a revolutionary approach to political writing that democratized political discourse. Paine deliberately wrote in clear, accessible language, stating that he offered "nothing more than simple facts, plain arguments, and common sense." This approach reflected his belief that political ideas should be accessible to ordinary citizens, not just educated elites. By bringing complex political concepts to the common people in language they could understand, Paine embodied the democratic ethos he advocated.

This democratization of political discourse had profound implications for American political culture. It established the principle that ordinary citizens could and should participate in political debate, reinforcing the idea that sovereignty ultimately resided with the people. Paine's approach to political writing helped create a distinctively American political discourse characterized by plain speaking and appeals to common understanding rather than abstract theory or classical allusions. This legacy continues in American political communication, where effectiveness often depends on the ability to connect with ordinary citizens in accessible language.

Three Major Controversies

1. Radical Democracy vs. Conservative Republicanism

"Common Sense" sparked significant controversy among American revolutionaries themselves regarding the proper form of government that should replace British rule. Paine advocated for a radical form of democracy that would extend voting rights to men who did not own property, a position that alarmed more conservative revolutionaries who feared "mob rule." John Adams, who later called "Common Sense" a "crapulous mass," published "Thoughts on Government" in 1776 as a direct response, advocating for a more conservative approach to republicanism with stronger checks on popular power.

This controversy reflected fundamental tensions about the nature of the new American government. While Paine emphasized popular sovereignty and broad participation, Adams and others worried about the potential tyranny of the majority and advocated for stronger institutional constraints. The debate between Paine's more radical democratic vision and the more conservative republican approach of figures like Adams would continue throughout the founding era and beyond, shaping the development of American political institutions. This tension between popular democracy and republican restraint remains evident in contemporary debates about voting rights, representation, and the proper balance between majority rule and minority rights.

2. Religious Implications and Criticisms

Although "Common Sense" itself used religious arguments to support independence, Paine's later work, particularly "The Age of Reason" (1794-1795), generated intense controversy over his

religious views. In "The Age of Reason," Paine criticized supernatural aspects of Christianity and pointed out contradictions in the Bible, positions that were received with great animosity in both England and America. While "Common Sense" had positioned American independence as consistent with divine will, Paine's subsequent religious writings led many Americans to view him as an atheist or heretic.

This controversy highlights the complex relationship between religion and politics in early America. Many who had embraced Paine's political arguments in "Common Sense" rejected his religious views, illustrating the centrality of Christianity to American identity despite constitutional separation of church and state. The backlash against Paine's religious writings contributed to his marginalization in later life and complicated his legacy in American history. This tension between secular and religious conceptions of American identity continues to influence American political culture, as seen in ongoing debates about the role of religion in public life and the proper interpretation of the First Amendment's religion clauses.

3. Criticism of Established Elites and Economic Interests

"Common Sense" not only attacked the British monarchy but also implicitly challenged the authority of colonial elites who had benefited from British rule. Paine's democratic vision threatened the privileged position of the "colonial aristocracy," many of whom "were by no means ready to follow Paine down the road leading to Independence and Republicanism" because they feared it "would bring to an end the rule of the upper classes in America." These elites worried that Paine's ideas would unleash democratic forces that would undermine their social and economic position.

This controversy extended beyond the revolutionary period through Paine's criticism of corruption and profiteering during the war. His public criticism of Silas Deane, whom he accused of war profiteering, led to Paine being denounced as unpatriotic and even physically assaulted by Deane's supporters. This episode revealed tensions between Paine's principled idealism and the practical compromises and self-interest that often characterized revolutionary politics.

The controversy over Paine's challenges to established elites reflects enduring tensions in American politics between democratic ideals and economic interests. His criticism of those who profited from their political connections anticipates later concerns about corruption and the influence of wealth in American democracy. These issues remain contentious in contemporary debates about campaign finance, lobbying, and economic inequality, highlighting the ongoing relevance of Paine's concerns about the relationship between economic power and democratic governance.

In Closing

Civic-minded Americans should read "Common Sense" not merely as a historical document but as a living text that continues to illuminate fundamental questions about democratic governance, liberty, and national purpose. In an era of deep political polarization, when nearly three-quarters of Americans believe our democracy is under threat, Paine's pamphlet offers crucial insights into

the foundations of American political identity and the conditions necessary for democratic renewal.

First, "Common Sense" reminds us that democracy requires active citizen participation. Paine did not write for political elites but for ordinary Americans, demonstrating his belief that self-governance depends on an informed and engaged citizenry. In an age of declining civic knowledge and participation, his work challenges Americans to reclaim their role as active citizens rather than passive subjects. By making complex political ideas accessible to all, Paine embodied the democratic principle that sovereignty ultimately resides with the people—a reminder that democracy is not a spectator sport but a collective responsibility.

Second, the pamphlet offers a powerful antidote to political cynicism by articulating an inspiring vision of America's purpose and potential. Paine's assertion that "we have it in our power to begin the world over again" speaks to America's capacity for renewal and reinvention. At a time when many Americans feel pessimistic about the nation's future, "Common Sense" reminds us that previous generations faced even more daunting challenges yet found the courage to imagine and create new possibilities. This hopeful vision can inspire civic action and commitment to democratic ideals even in difficult times.

Third, Paine's work provides a model for how to communicate effectively across social and educational divides. His deliberate choice to write in clear, accessible language demonstrates that democratic discourse need not be esoteric or exclusive. In our current media environment, characterized by echo chambers and specialized vocabularies that often exclude ordinary citizens from meaningful participation,

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