

“We have it in our power to begin the world over again”

250 years since the publication of Tom Paine’s Common Sense

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Few revolutionary tracts match in importance Tom Paine’s *Common Sense*. Published for the first time on January 9, 1776, 250 years ago this month, the pamphlet, a frontal assault on the entire aristocratic world, is widely credited with clearing the way for the Declaration of Independence, which was ratified just six months later.

The anniversary arrives under conditions that make Paine’s assault on monarchy newly relevant. Donald Trump’s unconcealed attraction to the prerogatives of absolute rule and his contempt for the Constitution are not just his own pathologies. He is the chosen leader of a staggeringly wealthy oligarchy and the product of a diseased political order increasingly divorced from popular life, conditions that echo—albeit in modern form—the world Paine confronted. At the same time, mass opposition—expressed in the “No Kings” demonstrations and the eruption of protest following murderous state violence in Minneapolis—has again raised fundamental questions of sovereignty, equality, and the right of the people to resist arbitrary power. *Common Sense* speaks to this moment.

Also much like the present, in its own time *Common Sense* addressed a conjuncture in which the central issues had not yet been widely grasped. Until its publication, the public debate about “the Imperial Crisis” between Great Britain and its rebellious North American colonies had revolved around whether Parliament had lived up to its ancient duties under the British constitution, not whether or not the existing order—as in fact *constitution* was then understood—was itself to blame. The debate was motivated by colonists’ desire to return to an imagined *status quo ante*, before the ever-greater assertion of the Empire’s authority in the years following the Stamp Act of 1765. This took the form of polemics over Parliament’s right to tax the colonists, who were not directly represented in that body.

Despite its legalistic appearance, it would be a mistake to treat this as a merely “conservative” debate. For beneath the controversy over taxation and representation lay revolutionary stakes—questions of power, liberty, and, above all, equality.

Through 1775 most colonists could not face up to the explosive implications of the positions they advanced, a weakness their Loyalist opponents exploited. The Tories leaned on the great English jurist William Blackstone, who argued that in every government there must be a single, final authority—an “absolute despotic power,” as he put it, that has the last word. In the British Empire that power lay with the “King?in?Parliament,” the king, lords, and commons acting together as one sovereign body. To question any part of that body was to challenge the whole.

From this widely accepted premise flowed a direct challenge to the colonial position. If Parliament, the very body that “constituted the Realm,” would not rule the colonies, where then would sovereignty reside?

Paine had an answer. “But where, say 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. In America the law is king.” Here Paine predicted what has been called “the American theory of the government”—at least before its complete inversion by the Trump administration. The people, not the monarch, would be sovereign. Paine used a metaphor to describe this transformation in sovereignty from king to citizen, urging that the crown itself be “demolished, and scattered among the people whose right it is.”

By the time Paine wrote these lines the constitutional crisis had already slid into war. The Crown had placed Boston under martial law, declared the colonies in open rebellion, and sent armies to pacify Massachusetts, leading to the first battles of the revolution. The Ministry’s escalation only deepened resistance. Across the colonies, revolutionary committees emerged, weakening—and in some places chasing out—royal authority. At a proto-national level, the Continental Congress formed in Philadelphia, creating a rival center of power that in 1775 deployed its own army with George Washington at its head. This was plainly illegal under the very British constitution most colonists still professed to uphold.

Yet even amid war and the multiplication of extralegal institutions, talk of “independency” largely remained private and tentative, imagined as a distant possibility rather than an immediate program. To be sure, some colonial leaders—among them Samuel and John Adams, Benjamin Franklin, and the young Thomas Jefferson—had come to favor a complete rupture. But the dominant view still held that Parliament and a corrupt Ministry, not the King, bore responsibility for the crisis.

Conciliationists such as John Dickinson and Joseph Galloway of Pennsylvania continued to hope for a settlement through some imperial reconfiguration—perhaps separate legislatures under a shared monarchy. In fact, on the day *Common Sense* appeared, Dickinson’s allies created a committee to reassure the inhabitants—and the King—that the Continental Congress was not seeking independence. This was true. Not a single colonial assembly had instructed its delegation at Philadelphia to consider independence. Monarchy itself had yet to be placed in the dock.

Into this impasse—between a king waging war on his colonies and a political culture still reluctant to indict kingship itself—entered Tom Paine.

He might have seemed an unlikely candidate for the dramatic role he was about to take up. Paine had arrived in America only 14 months earlier, a letter of reference in hand from Franklin, whom he had met in London to discuss their shared interest in Newtonian physics. Then utterly unknown in his native England, Paine, 39, “had failed at everything he had ever tried,” writes historian Robert Middlekauff—as a corsetmaker, the trade he inherited from his father in Norfolk; as a school teacher; and as a petty bureaucrat.

Disembarking in Philadelphia on November 30, 1774, just as the First

Continental Congress was retiring from the city, Paine found himself in exactly the right place at exactly the right moment. Philadelphia was then still the largest colonial city—though with only 30,000 inhabitants just a large town by our standards. It was also the third busiest port in the British Empire after London and Liverpool, and the most cosmopolitan place in America, with substantial numbers of immigrants from many parts of Europe and a large laboring population of artisans and common workers.

Philadelphia was also home to the most radical politics. Paine situated himself in this milieu, befriending figures such as the scientist David Rittenhouse, the artist Charles Willson Peale, and the physicians Thomas Young and Benjamin Rush, who treated the city's poor free of charge and advocated the new idea of administering inoculations against disease. It was Rush who suggested Paine take up his pen for independence.

This proved a perspicacious choice.

Common Sense hit with meteoric force. The pamphlet “burst from the press,” Rush wrote, “with an effect which has rarely been produced by types and papers in any age or country.” Paine had “put the torch to the combustibles,” said Edmund Randolph of Virginia. The pamphlet was “like a landflood that sweeps all before it,” wrote a contemporary from Connecticut. “We were blind, but... the scales have fallen from our eyes.”

No part of the debate would ever be the same again. *Common Sense* sold 120,000 copies in its first three months and went through 25 separate editions in its first year. A comparable publishing run in America today would require some 15 million copies sold over a few months. But at that time, readership meant something more, reaching beyond those who were literate or who could purchase a book. One account from Philadelphia noted that the pamphlet was “read to all ranks” (emphasis added). It was discussed in public squares, in taverns, and in homes. Washington ordered passages of it read to whole regiments of the Continental Army. *Common Sense*, in short, saturated the population with revolutionary ideas.

Such a triumph cannot be located solely in Paine’s prose. Franklin’s much earlier success with the serialized *Poor Richard’s Almanack* and his development of the colonial postal system helped create a shared print culture—and the means to circulate it—that made possible the vast debate among pamphleteers and editorialists of which *Common Sense* was the crowning achievement. This print culture, in turn, had been prepared by incremental but decisive advances in printing and papermaking, the growth of cheap-print markets, and expanding networks of newspapers, booksellers, and informal reprinting that allowed short, topical works to be produced rapidly and carried across the colonies.

These developments now interacted with the transformations in consciousness produced by the Imperial Crisis itself, the changes “in the minds of the people,” as John Adams later put it. Paine’s genius lay in giving this evolving sensibility compelling expression, articulating thoughts that, after years of crisis, were broadly shared: “Time makes more converts than reason,” he observed.

History may have done the lion’s share of the work, as Paine suggested, but it is not clear that any other figure could have done what he did. Little is known about his life in England, but his writing reveals an immersion in the eighteenth-century Enlightenment world’s “republic of letters.” It is just as certain that Paine had absorbed the underground radical traditions of the English Civil War—antimonarchical, republican currents that survived Cromwell’s defeat and continued to circulate, half-suppressed, in English political culture.

On top of this, Paine’s very failures and poverty contributed to his talent, suggests Bernard Bailyn. The pamphlet channeled

the indignation and rage of the semi-dispossessed, living at the margins of respectable society and hanging precariously over the abyss of debtors prison, threatened at every turn with an irrecoverable descent into the hell that Hogarth painted so

brilliantly and so compulsively in his savage morality tales.

Whatever his own origins, there was something radically new about Paine’s work. He wrote in an accessible way designed not only to influence what would today be called “opinion makers,” but masses of colonists. Raised in and among England’s despised “lower orders,” Paine knew his audience. He wrote in simple, direct, and vivid language, appealing to considerable knowledge of the Old Testament and the Book of Common Prayer. He eschewed Latin phrases and arcane references to the Roman Republic that had filled the pamphlets and newspaper columns of a decade of debate reaching back to Dickinson’s highly influential *Letters from a Pennsylvania Farmer*, which had framed the crisis as one over representation and taxation.

In this unadorned style, Paine stated what *was*: Reconciliation with the Empire was no longer possible. Not the Parliament, not the Ministry, not even King George as an individual, was to blame. Tyranny and all the threats against the people emerged out of the system of monarchy and aristocracy, the very Empire itself. Revolution, independence, with the goal of creating a republican government, was the only answer.

Much of the pamphlet was devoted to a ferocious—and often hilarious—attack on monarchy and aristocracy. To appreciate its audacity, contemporary readers must grasp that only a decade earlier colonists bowed, scraped, and doffed their caps before even the lowest ranks of the British aristocracy represented in the colonies. Royal symbols were everywhere. The King’s birthday was celebrated as a holiday. Monarchy aimed to overawe its subjects.

And now Paine could state, with ruthless humor, that hereditary rule violated both reason and nature. “One of the strongest natural proofs of the folly of hereditary right in kings is, that nature disapproves it,” he wrote, “otherwise she would not so frequently turn it into ridicule by giving mankind an ass for a lion.”

Paine did not stint in laying out a reasoned case for his contempt for monarchy as a form of rule, writing:

There is something exceedingly ridiculous in the composition of Monarchy; it first excludes a man from the means of information, yet empowers him to act in cases where the highest judgment is required. The state of a king shuts him from the World, yet the business of a king requires him to know it thoroughly; wherefore the different parts, by unnaturally opposing and destroying each other, prove the whole character to be absurd and useless.

This description of an increasingly complex society ruled over by entitled ignoramuses applies with even greater force to the America of Donald Trump, ruled by giant corporations with CEOs paid many hundreds of times the salary of the average workers, who collectively know the business far better.

In Paine’s view, the long history of feudalism offered no refuge for the crowned heads of Europe. William the Conqueror—from whom all English monarchs were (and are) descended—was merely a “French bastard landing with an armed banditti,” a usurper who made himself king “against the consent of the natives.” Such ignominious origins spawned a corrupt political order in which centuries later George III “hath little more to do than to make war and give away places,” yet was rewarded extravagantly—“a pretty business indeed,” Paine scoffed, “for a man to be allowed eight hundred thousand sterling a year for, and worshipped into the bargain.”

Paine summed up his views of monarchy with a stark calculus that does not have to be changed by one word after 250 years: “Of more worth is

one honest man to society and in the sight of God, than all the crowned ruffians that ever lived.”

But Paine’s immediate target was not King George but the suggestion from temporizers such as Dickinson that an understanding might yet be reached with monarchy. Paine insisted that Lexington and Concord made conciliation as antiquated as “the almanacks of the last year.” After the King’s armies marched into the Massachusetts countryside and shed colonial blood, reconciliation became, in Paine’s phrase, “a fallacious dream,” for King George now revealed himself as a “hardened, sullen tempered Pharaoh of England... a wretch, that with the pretended title of father of his people, can unfeelingly hear of their slaughter, and composedly sleep with their blood upon his soul.” One cannot help but think, in reading this last line, of Donald Trump’s embrace of the police murders of Alex Patti and Renée Nicole Good in Minneapolis.

From the blood spilled at Lexington and Concord, Paine turned outward. Britain’s conduct—“declaring War against the natural rights of all Mankind”—thus elevated the conflict beyond a colonial dispute, transforming it into a struggle with universal human stakes. “The cause of America,” he proclaimed, “is in a great measure the cause of all mankind.”

Paine’s pamphlet breathed the spirit of revolutionary optimism in its call for American independence from British rule. It told Americans they could take the step that they were on the brink of. “We have it in our power,” he assured, “to begin the world anew.” He explained that it was a moment that would be remembered for ages the world over:

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.

America would serve as “the asylum for the persecuted lovers of civil and religious liberty” and “a sanctuary to the persecuted in future years, when home should afford neither friendship nor safety.” In Paine’s vision, all those meeting in America were “countrymen,” and the new republic existed to welcome those fleeing oppression—lines that stand as a direct rebuke to Trump’s language of “invasion,” “animals,” and “poisoning our country” when he speaks of immigrants and refugees.

Paine’s view of the struggle from a global standpoint was not unique in the revolutionary generation. The Founding Fathers, writes Gordon Wood, “never intended to make a national revolution in any modern sense.” Summarizing Paine’s views, the historian explains that “the Americans were the most cosmopolitan people in the world. They regarded everyone from different nations as their countrymen and ignored neighborhoods, towns, and country as ‘distinctions too limited for continental minds.’”

The imagination of the republican revolutionaries of the 1770s and 1780s, Paine foremost among them, may have been expansive, even universal. But it was not matched, at that moment in history, by the development of the world economy. The material foundations for a genuinely global fraternity did not yet exist. Production remained fragmented, communication slow, and social life overwhelmingly organized within imperial and emerging national-capitalist frameworks that constrained even the boldest revolutionary aspirations.

The present is different. Capitalism itself has created what earlier revolutionaries could only intuit: an integrated global economy and a working class whose labor, supply chains, and struggles cross every border. The idea of universal fraternity is no longer merely a moral appeal

or philosophical hope; it is rooted in objective social relations.

Workers today, for the first time in history, possess the material conditions that make Paine’s promise concrete. They have it in their power, in a far more literal sense than Paine could have imagined, “to begin the world over again.”



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