

Thomas Paine's Inspirational Words

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The American colonies were in the midst of a rebellion against a tyrant over three thousand miles away, across the Western Ocean. If one Englishman could create such chaos and conflict, then one Englishman could speak the truths that spring the people to action. That man was Thomas Paine. In 1774, Paine emigrated from England to the American colonies at the insistence of Benjamin Franklin.¹ Two years later, Paine published "Common Sense," the first literature to ask openly for independence from Great Britain.² The popularity and personal influence of Paine's literary works, "Common Sense" and "The Crisis," united the colonies in this war for independence from Great Britain.

In a time when unification was of utmost importance, Thomas Paine published his "Common Sense" to "offer nothing but the simple facts, plain arguments and common sense"³ to every colonist and convince him to join the revolutionary cause. The pamphlet sold 150,000 copies, the "equivalent sale of fifteen million in modern America."⁴ Thousands of undecided Americans became active participants in the revolution, giving the Continental Congress the public support needed to formally break from the British crown.⁵ Without Paine's "Common Sense" to arouse the colonists' desire for independence, the Continental Congress would have postponed political action. At a time when King George III had already rejected the Olive

¹ Edward L. Purcell, Who was Who in the American Revolution (New York: Facts on File, Inc., 1993) 364.

² Introduction, "Common Sense," Ushistory.org, 2006, Independence Hall Association, 31 Oct 2006, <<http://www.ushistory.org/paine/commonsense/singlehtml.htm>>

³ "Common Sense" Ushistory.org, 2006, Independence Hall Association, 31 Oct 2006, <<http://www.ushistory.org/paine/commonsense/singlehtml.htm>>

⁴ Thomas Fleming, Liberty! The American Revolution (New York: Penguin Putnam Inc., 1997) 160.

⁵ Robert G. Ferris and Richard E. Morris, The Signers of the Declaration of Independence (Flagstaff: Interpretive Publications, Inc., 1982) 15.

Branch Petition⁶ and military skirmishes were intensifying, Congress needed to organize and ground the colonies.⁷

Paine persuaded thousands of people by simply stating the truths of reality. In an anonymous letter written to Connecticut schoolteacher Nathan Hale, the author admits that he was indecisive of his political position concerning independence despite the constant debate by his elders. In the end, Paine's "little pamphlet"⁸ solidified his stand. The letter continued, "Upon my word 'tis well done—'tis what would be common sense were not most men so blinded by their prejudices."⁹ Paine's ability to open the eyes of his countrymen allowed them to see that "the Sun never shined on a cause of greater worth" and that "now is the seed-time of Continental union, faith and honour" for their prosperity.¹⁰

The colloquial nature of Paine's essay connected with his audience, making it easier to read and understand than the works of Paine's contemporary authors whose language contained too many "high-flown phrases."¹¹ By communicating to the common man, Paine was able to distribute his political opinions to the masses. He "attack[ed] the 'myth' of an evil Parliament and benevolent King"¹² by condemning George III and challenged those who "dare oppose, not

⁶ Despite forming the Continental Army with George Washington as the Commander in Chief, the Second Continental Congress attempted to reconcile peace directly with King George III by adopting the Olive Branch Petition. King George III dismissed the Petition, declaring the colonies "in a state of rebellion" (Ferris 14).

⁷ Ferris 14.

⁸ Fleming 160.

⁹ Fleming 160.

¹⁰ "Common Sense"

¹¹ Purcell 364.

¹² Ferris 15.

only the tyranny, but the tyrant, stand forth!”¹³ Paine’s powerful phrasing and eloquence instilled a charge of burning patriotism into the American colonists. A sense of American individuality and pride emerged from Paine’s words. The same year “Common Sense” was published, Ambrose Serle stated in his journal that the essay “induce[d] the full avowal of the Spirit of Independence.”¹⁴ The tens of thousands of colonists who read “Common Sense” and supported the revolutionary cause were filled with Serle’s “Spirit of Independence,” uniting the colonists together to fight for their freedoms.

In the winter of 1776, the colonies were headed toward a pothole in the journey for independence. George Washington’s army had collapsed in New York, forcing a retreat to New Jersey. Paine, sensing that the coming panic could overturn the canoe that held the colonies together, attacked the enemy of division with his pen. By the light of a campfire in Washington’s “exceedingly cramped” campsite,¹⁵ Paine began composing another masterpiece.

“The Crisis” advocated endurance, loyalty, and determination for the American people. Paine asserted that “tyranny, like hell, is not easily conquered... the harder the conflict, the more glorious the triumph.”¹⁶ He reestablished the cause of the revolutionary war, elevating the price of independence by stating “it would be strange indeed, if so celestial an article as FREEDOM should not be highly rated... [for] it is dearness only that gives everything its value.”¹⁷ By

¹³ “Common Sense”

¹⁴ Ambrose Serle, “Journal, July 12-23, 1776,” The American Revolution: Writings from the War of Independence, ed. John Rhodehamel (New York: Literary Classics of the United States, Inc., 2001) 149.

¹⁵ Thomas Paine, “The American Crisis,” The American Revolution: Writings from the War of Independence, ed. John Rhodehamel (New York: Literary Classics of the United States, Inc., 2001) 239.

¹⁶ Paine 238.

¹⁷ Paine 238.

December 19, Paine's newest essay was published as a series in *The Pennsylvania Journal*.¹⁸ Distributed as a pamphlet four days later, "The Crisis" made its way into the homes of Americans, testing their loyalty to the revolutionary cause. Beginning with the now famous line "These are the times that try men's souls,"¹⁹ Paine reached out to the common man and challenged each of the "summer soldier and the sunshine patriot"²⁰ to stand firm in the face of crises. Writing to her husband John in March of 1777, Abigail Adams predicted that the "posterity who are to reap the Blessings [of our cause] will scarcely be able to conceive the Hardships and Sufferings of their Ancestors."²¹ Adams illustrated the despairs and uncertainties of the surrounding political situation. However, she is comforted by Paine's words: " 'But tis a day of suffering says the Author of the Crisis, and we ought to expect it...What are the inconveniences of a few Months or years to the Tributary bondage of ages?' These are Sentiments which do Honour to Humane Nature."²² Paine's words prompted the hearts of the American people to stay the course of the revolution, to never give up. His works united the colonists again, uplifting them in their times of hardships to maintain hope for the future.

Throughout the course of the Revolutionary War, Thomas Paine composed eighteen essays.²³ "Common Sense" and "The Crisis" were widely read, moving patriots of all classes to join the revolutionary cause. With the support of the colonies, the Continental Congress was able to take the steps toward colonial independence that led to the signing of the Declaration of

¹⁸ Fleming 214.

¹⁹ Paine 238.

²⁰ Paine 238.

²¹ Abigail Adams, "Hardship in Massachusetts: March 1777," *The American Revolution: Writings from the War of Independence*, ed. John Rhodehamel (New York: Literary Classics of the United States, Inc., 2001) 301.

²² Adams 301.

Independence and the Treaty of Paris. In addition, the spirit of the revolution inspired men to become soldiers of the Continental Army. Paine's ability to connect to the common man on a personal level multiplied the success of his literature and the strength of his support. Thomas Paine's devotion to the revolutionary cause uplifted and unified the colonies to continue fighting for independence.

²³ Fleming 214.

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