



Common Sense Thomas Paine (1776)

White magazine editor Thomas Paine was a fairly recent immigrant from England—having lived in Pennsylvania for a little over a year—when, in January 1776, he published the first edition of his widely read revolutionary pamphlet Common Sense. These excerpts from the pamphlet highlight Paine’s use of religious appeals to support the cause of colonial independence, his vision of the United States’ place in the world, and his placement of indigenous Americans and enslaved Africans in relation to the colonists’ revolution.

Volumes have been written on the subject of the struggle between England and America. Men of all ranks have embarked in the controversy, from different motives and with various designs; but all have been ineffectual, and the period of debate is closed. Arms, as the last resource, decide the contest; the appeal was the choice of the king, and the continent has accepted the challenge.

[...] The sun never shined on a cause of greater worth. 'Tis not the affair of a city, a county, 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. [...]

But Britain is the parent country, say some. Then the more the 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, and the phrase *parent* or *mother country* hath been jesuitically adopted by the king and his parasites, with a low papistical design of gaining an unfair bias on the credulous weakness of our minds. 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.

In this extensive quarter of the globe, we forget the narrow limits of three hundred and sixty miles (the extent of England) and carry our friendship on a larger scale; we claim brotherhood with every European Christian and triumph in the generosity of the sentiment. [...] Not one third of the inhabitants even of this province^a are of English descent. Wherefore I reprobate the phrase of *parent* or *mother country* applied to England only as being false, selfish, narrow, and ungenerous. [...]

Much hath been said of the united strength of Britain and the colonies, that in conjunction they might bid defiance to the world. But this is mere presumption; the fate of war is uncertain, neither do the expressions mean anything, for this continent would never suffer itself to be drained of inhabitants to support the British arms in either Asia, Africa, or Europe.

^a “this province” = Pennsylvania, where Paine lived

Besides, what have we to do with setting the world at defiance? Our plan is commerce; and that, well attended to, will secure us the peace and friendship of Europe, because it is the interest of all Europe to have America a free port. Her trade will always be a protection, and her barrenness of gold and silver will secure her from invaders. [...]

Everything that is reasonable pleads for separation. The blood of the slain, the weeping voice of nature, cries: 'TIS TIME TO PART. Even the distance at which the Almighty hath placed England and America is a strong and natural proof that the authority of the one over the other was never the design of heaven. The time, likewise, at which the continent was discovered adds weight to the argument, and the manner in which it was peopled increases the force of it: The Reformation was preceded by the discovery of America, as if the Almighty graciously meant to open a sanctuary to the persecuted in future years, when home should afford neither friendship nor safety. [...]

Small islands not capable of protecting themselves are the proper objects for government 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, reverse the common order of nature, it is evident they belong to different systems: England to Europe, America to itself.

I am not induced by motives of pride, party, or resentment to espouse the doctrine of separation and independence. I am clearly, positively, and conscientiously persuaded that 'tis the true interest of this continent to be so; that everything short of that is mere patchwork, that it can afford no lasting felicity—that it is leaving the sword to our children and shrinking back at a time when a little more, a little farther, would have rendered this continent the glory of the earth.

As Britain hath not manifested the least inclination towards a compromise, we may be assured that no terms can be obtained worth the acceptance of the continent or anyways equal to the expense of blood and treasure we have been already put to. [...] No man was a warmer wisher for reconciliation than myself before the fatal 19th of April, 1775. But the moment the event of that day was made known, I rejected the hardened, sullen-tempered Pharaoh of England forever and disdain the 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. [...]

[Paine proposes a charter, or constitution, to govern the united independent colonies. His charter calls for a representative Congress, without a king or other executive apart from Congress. Paine then answers an imagined objection to his proposal, as follows.]

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

A government of our own is our natural right [...] There are thousands, and tens of thousands, who would think it glorious to expel from the continent that barbarous and hellish power which hath stirred up the Indians and Negroes to destroy us. The cruelty hath a double guilt: it is dealing brutally by us and treacherously by them. [...]

There are injuries which nature cannot forgive; she would cease to be nature if she did. As well can the lover forgive the ravisher of his mistress, as the continent forgive the murders of Britain. The Almighty hath implanted in us these unextinguishable feelings for good and wise purposes. They are the guardians of his image in our hearts. They distinguish us from the herd of common animals. The social compact would dissolve and justice be extirpated the earth, or have only a casual existence, were we callous to the touches of affection. The robber and the murderer would often escape unpunished, did not the injuries which our tempers sustain provoke us into justice.

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.

Source: [Thomas Paine], *Common Sense: Addressed to the Inhabitants of America* [...] (Philadelphia: R. Bell, 1776), 17-34 (sect. 3). From a digital transcript created for the Eighteenth Century Collections Online Text Creation Partnership, <http://name.umdl.umich.edu/004831091.0001.000>. Licensed for reuse under Creative Commons Zero 1.0 Universal Public Domain Dedication.

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