

Common Sense

Updated into Today's English,
Illustrated, with Footnotes and
Background Historical Information

Thomas Paine

Today's
English
Editions

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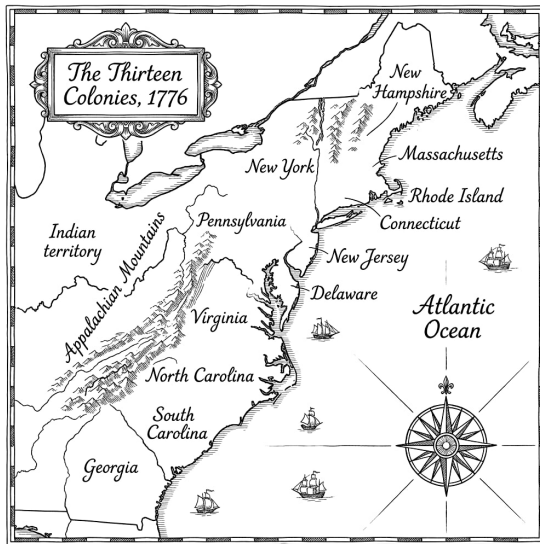
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Thomas Paine published *Common Sense* in Philadelphia in January 1776, and it became the most explosive pamphlet in American history. In a population of roughly 2.5 million, it sold something like 120,000 copies in a matter of months, and within half a year the colonies had declared independence.

Paine wrote in plain language meant to persuade a farmer as readily as a lawyer. But plain language from 250 years ago is no longer plain to us, so we've discreetly updated the wording to read naturally today. The argument itself is untouched: every point and every blast of Paine's anger at kings and hereditary power is exactly as he meant it. We've simply cleared away the cobwebs.

We've also added footnotes to explain the people, events, and references Paine took for granted, along with additional material at the back of this book. That includes two viewpoints from Paine's opponents that he mentions in his text: a speech by King George III against the rebels and an extensive pamphlet arguing against independence, both also updated into today's english.

Finally, any readers who want to read Paine in his own eighteenth-century voice can find the complete original text preserved at the end of this book.

We hope you find *Common Sense* a fascinating read.
—The Publishers



Preface

Addressed to the people of America, this pamphlet covers the following main topics:

- The origins and purpose of government, along with brief notes on the English constitution
- Monarchy and hereditary succession
- The current state of American affairs
- America's present capabilities, plus a few additional observations

This edition includes several additions to the text, an appendix, and a direct appeal to the Quakers¹.

Man knows no Master save creating Heaven
Or those whom choice and common good ordain.
—Thomson.²

Philadelphia

Printed and sold by W. & T. Bradford, February 14, 1776.

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1. The Quakers (Religious Society of Friends): a Christian pacifist sect founded in 17th-century England, with a large and influential presence in colonial Pennsylvania. Paine addresses them specifically because their pacifist principles led many to oppose armed resistance to Britain.
 2. This is by James Thomson (1700–1748), a Scottish poet best known for *The Seasons* and the song *Rule, Britannia*. These lines are from his long poem *Liberty* (1735–1736).



Introduction

Perhaps the ideas in these pages are not yet widely accepted. When people grow accustomed to a bad practice, it can seem reasonable on the surface, sparking an initial wave of loud protests to defend the status quo. But that noise eventually fades. Time changes more minds than argument does.

Sustained abuse of power is usually what drives people to question its legitimacy — often forcing them to look into issues they otherwise never would have. Since the King of England has claimed the right to back Parliament with his own authority,³ insisting this falls within his prerogative, and since ordinary citizens here suffer greatly under this arrangement, the people have every right to examine both sides' claims and reject any overreach.

In these pages, the author deliberately avoids personal attacks. Neither praise nor criticism of specific individuals belongs here. Reasonable readers do not need a pamphlet to see the truth, and those with fixed or hostile views will not change their minds anyway, so there is no point in wasting time trying to persuade them.

The American cause is, to a large extent, the cause of all humanity. Many events have already occurred, and more will follow, that go beyond local concerns and touch the core principles of anyone

3. George III (r. 1760–1820), the British monarch against whom the American colonies declared independence.

who cares about human welfare. Everyone's future is at stake. Ravaging a country, declaring war on the natural rights of all people, and trying to erase their defenders from the face of the earth — all of this should concern anyone with a conscience. Beyond partisan disagreements, the author considers himself among those who share this view.

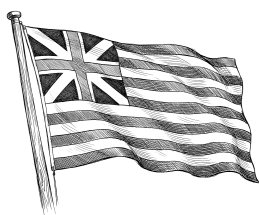
— The Author

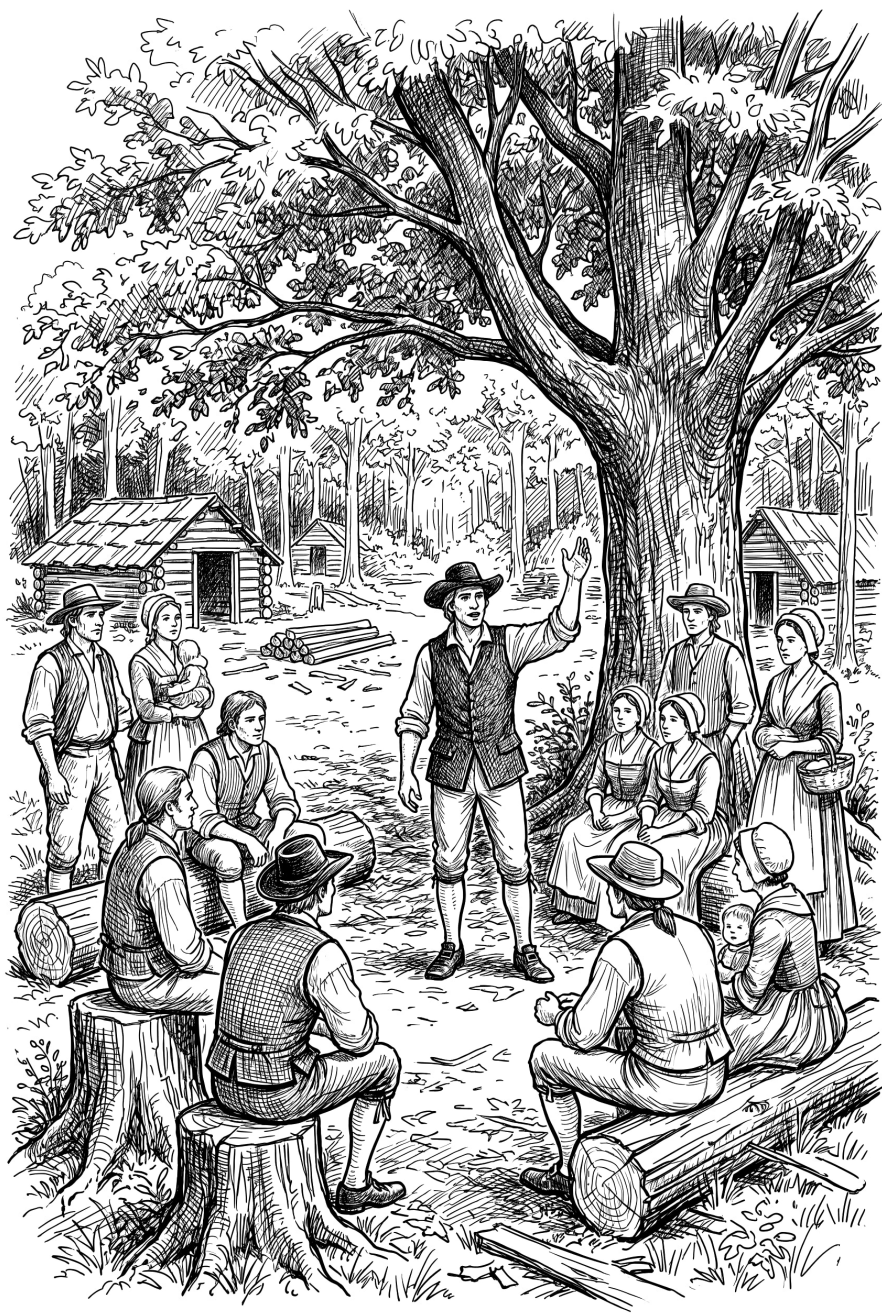
P.S. The release of this new edition was delayed to allow time for any rebuttal to the doctrine of independence, if one was to be published.⁴ Since no response has appeared, we can safely assume none will come; the time needed to prepare and publish such a work has long passed.

Readers do not need to know the author's identity, since the focus is on the doctrine itself, not the man. It is worth noting, however, that he belongs to no political party and is guided solely by reason and principle, free from any public or private influence.

Philadelphia, February 14, 1776

4. The first edition of *Common Sense* was published anonymously on January 10, 1776. This second edition, which contained the Appendix and the "P.S.," appeared in mid-February 1776 after a delay to allow time for any published reply to the independence argument.





1

Of the Origin and Design of Government in General, with Concise Remarks on the English Constitution

Some writers have conflated society and government to the point that they treat them as essentially the same, even though the two are not only distinct but also arise from different origins. Society arises from our needs, and government from our wickedness. The former actively promotes our happiness by bringing people together, while the latter aims to do so only by restraining our vices. One encourages open communication; the other creates divisions. Society supports us; government punishes us.

Society in any form is a blessing, but even in its best form, government is merely a necessary evil. In its worst form, it is intolerable. When we suffer under a government, or face the same

miseries that we might encounter in a state of nature, our hardship is only worsened by the realization that we ourselves set the conditions for our own suffering. Like clothing, government marks our loss of innocence; the palaces of kings are built on the ruins of the leafy retreats of paradise.⁵ If conscience were clear, consistent, and always followed, people would need no other law-giver. But since that is not the case, we must give up a portion of our property to fund the protection of the rest. Sound judgment leads us to do this, using the same reasoning that guides us to choose the lesser of two evils in any other situation. Therefore, since security is the true aim of government, it follows that whichever form is most likely to guarantee it for us — at the lowest cost and with the greatest benefit — is preferable to all others.

[How Government Begins]

To understand clearly and fairly how governments are designed and what they aim to achieve, imagine a small group of people settled in some isolated part of the earth, independent of the rest. They would then represent the initial settlement of any country, or of the world itself. In this state of natural freedom, forming a community would be their first priority. Many practical reasons would drive them to do so: one person's strength isn't enough on its own, and the human mind isn't built for permanent isolation, so we naturally turn to others for help—and those others will need the same support in return. Four or five people working together could build a decent shelter in the wilderness, but a single person might labor longer than a full lifespan without accomplishing anything. Once he felled the timber, he couldn't move it, nor raise it into a structure. Hunger would soon pull him away from his work, and every new demand would divert his attention elsewhere.

5. Paine alludes to the Garden of Eden story in Genesis: after the Fall, Adam and Eve became aware of their nakedness and covered themselves with leaves (Genesis 3:7). In Christian tradition, the loss of innocence and the need for clothing are consequences of original sin. Paine uses the image to suggest that government, like clothing, is a product of humanity's moral imperfection.

1. On the Origin and Design of Government

Disease, or even simple bad luck, could prove fatal. Even if neither was outright fatal, either would make life unsustainable, leaving him to waste away.

So necessity would soon draw these settlers together, pulling them in like gravity. The mutual benefits of such a group would make laws and government unnecessary, provided they treated each other fairly. But because human corruption exists everywhere except in heaven, it's inevitable that once they survive the initial hardships of migration—the very struggles that originally brought them together—their bonds of trust and loyalty will weaken. This breakdown shows why some form of government is needed to make up for the loss of that goodwill.

A convenient tree can serve as a meeting place, where the entire colony gathers under its branches to discuss public affairs. At first, their laws will likely be little more than rules enforced by public disapproval. In this initial assembly, every man holds a seat by natural right.

But as the colony grows, public affairs will multiply. As members spread out, it will become too inconvenient for everyone to meet every time, just as they did at first when the population was small, homes were close together, and public concerns were few and minor.

This is why it makes sense to entrust lawmaking to a select group chosen from the broader community. They can be assumed to share the same interests as their voters, and to act as the full assembly would if all its members were present.

If the colony continues to grow, it will become necessary to increase the number of representatives. To ensure that every part of the colony has its interests represented, it will work best to divide the territory into manageable districts, each sending the appropriate number of delegates.

To keep elected officials from developing interests separate from the voters, sound judgment requires frequent elections. The representatives will then return to the general population within a

few months, and their loyalty to the public will be maintained simply by knowing that betraying that trust would only harm themselves.

Because this frequent turnover keeps them connected to every part of the community, they will naturally support one another. The strength of government and the well-being of the people depend on this system — not on the empty title of king.

Here, then, is the origin of government: a system that becomes necessary because moral virtue alone cannot govern the world. In short, the purpose of government is to secure freedom and safety. No matter how impressive the display or how misleading the rhetoric, no matter how much bias skews our choices or self-interest clouds our judgment, nature and reason make it clear that this is right.

[Remarks on the English Constitution]

I base my view of government on a natural principle that no human design can override: the simpler something is, the less likely it is to break down, and the easier it is to fix when it does. With that in mind, I will discuss the English constitution, which receives wide praise. I'll admit it was impressive given the dark, tyrannical era it emerged from. When despotism dominated the world, even a small step away from it seemed like a heroic rescue. But its flaws, its tendency toward political instability, and its failure to keep its promises are easy to demonstrate.

Absolute governments (though a disgrace to human nature) offer one advantage: they are simple. If people suffer under them, they know exactly where the problem lies and how to fix it, instead of getting confused by a long list of possible causes and remedies. But the English constitution is so complicated that the country can suffer for years without anyone ever figuring out where the real problem is. Some blame one part, others blame another, and every political advisor recommends a different fix.

1. On the Origin and Design of Government

I know it's hard to shake off local biases or long-standing prejudices. But if we take the time to examine the building blocks of the English constitution, we'll find they are nothing more than the leftovers of two ancient tyrannies, mixed with a few newer republican ideas.

1. The remnants of monarchical tyranny, embodied in the king.
2. The remnants of aristocratic tyranny, embodied in the peers⁶.
3. The new republican element, found in the Commons⁷, whose virtue safeguards England's freedom.

Since the first two are hereditary, they operate independently of the public. In constitutional terms, they do nothing to protect the state's freedom.

Claiming that the English constitution balances three mutually checking powers is farcical. Either the claim is empty, or its parts directly contradict each other.

Saying the Commons acts as a check on the king rests on two assumptions:

1. That the king cannot be trusted without limits, which implies that a drive for absolute power is inherent in monarchy.
2. That the Commons, appointed specifically for that purpose, are either wiser or more reliable than the crown.

Yet the same system that gives the Commons the power to check the king by withholding funds also gives the king the power to check the Commons by vetoing their other bills. This again assumes the king is wiser than the very people the system has already declared wiser than him. That is entirely absurd.

6. The peers: members of the British hereditary nobility — dukes, marquesses, earls, viscounts, and barons — who hold their titles by birth and sit in the House of Lords, the upper chamber of Parliament.

7. The House of Commons: the elected lower house of the British Parliament, representing the common people, as distinct from the House of Lords (the peers).

The structure of monarchy is deeply flawed: it isolates a ruler from all sources of information, then expects him to handle situations that demand sound judgment.

A king's position cuts him off from the world, but his duties require him to understand it thoroughly. Because these conflicting realities constantly pull in opposite directions, they prove the entire system is fundamentally broken and pointless.

Some writers explain the English constitution like this: the king represents one side, the people another; the peers stand for the monarch, and the commons for the people. But this description reads like a house divided against itself. On closer inspection, though, the phrasing is hollow and confusing. Whenever we try to pin exact language to something that either doesn't exist or is too abstract to define, we end up with empty phrases that sound neat but tell us nothing. This explanation also skips a more fundamental question: How did the king gain a power that the people distrust and feel they must constantly restrict? A reasonable public would never grant such authority, and no power that requires constant oversight could come from God. Yet the constitution's framework assumes this unchecked power actually exists.

But those safeguards fall short. The mechanisms either cannot or will not achieve their goal, making the whole system a *felo de se*⁸. Just as a heavier weight always overpowers a lighter one, and every wheel in a machine turns from a single driving force, we only need to identify which branch of government holds the most influence. That branch will rule. Even if the other branches, or parts of them, slow it down or restrain it, those efforts will be useless as long as they can't stop it completely. The dominant force will eventually get its way, and time will make up for any delay.

The crown's outsized role in the English constitution goes without saying, and its entire influence comes simply from handing

8. Latin for "suicide"; literally "felon of himself." Here Paine means the English constitutional system destroys itself by its own design.

1. On the Origin and Design of Government

out government posts and pensions⁹. Therefore, though we were wise enough to shut the door on absolute monarchy, we were foolish enough to leave the key in the crown's hands.

The English preference for their own system of government — king, lords, and commons — stems as much from national pride as from reason, if not more so. People are undoubtedly safer in England than in some other countries, but the king's will is just as much the law of the land in Britain as it is in France. The only difference is that, instead of being issued directly from the monarch, his will reaches the public through the more imposing machinery of parliamentary acts. After all, the fate of Charles I¹⁰ has only made kings more cunning — not more just.

Therefore, setting aside all national pride and attachment to traditional forms, the plain truth is that the crown is less oppressive in England than in Turkey¹¹ because of the character of the people, not the structure of the government.

Examining the structural flaws of the English government is essential now. We can't judge others fairly when clouded by bias, nor can we be fair to ourselves when blinded by stubborn prejudice. Just as a man involved with a prostitute is unqualified to judge a prospective wife, any favoritism toward a deeply flawed system will blind us to a better alternative.

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9. The crown distributed lucrative offices ("posts") and annual payments ("pensions") to members of Parliament and other influential figures to secure their loyalty and votes. This practice, widely criticized as corrupt, gave the monarch enormous influence over the legislature.
 10. Charles I (1600–1649), King of England, Scotland, and Ireland, was tried for high treason by a parliamentary court and executed in January 1649 during the English Civil War. Paine's point is that the memory of his execution taught later monarchs to manipulate Parliament rather than to rule more justly.
 11. Turkey: the Ottoman Empire, a vast monarchical state that Enlightenment writers frequently invoked as the epitome of arbitrary despotism, where the sultan's will was unconstrained by law or parliament.



2

Of Monarchy and Hereditary Succession

Since all people are created equal, any inequality must stem from later circumstances. We can largely explain the gap between rich and poor without resorting to heavy-handed terms like oppression and greed. Oppression is usually a byproduct of wealth, not its source. Greed might keep someone from falling into poverty, but it generally makes them too cautious to actually build a fortune.

Yet there is another, deeper division that defies both natural and religious explanation: the split between kings and subjects. Male and female are categories of nature; good and evil are matters of divine judgment. But how one group came to rise so far above the rest — treated as if they belonged to an entirely different species — is worth examining. We should ask whether this hierarchy brings happiness or misery to humanity.

According to the biblical timeline, the early ages of the world had no kings, and consequently no wars. It is royal pride that