

Center *for the Study of the* American Constitution

NO. 1: ADVICE TO AMERICANS FROM THOMAS PAINE AND GEORGE WASHINGTON, 1783

With the end of the War for Independence in 1783, two great American Revolutionary leaders announced their retirement from public service—Thomas Paine and George Washington. Washington had been appointed commander in chief of American military forces by the Second Continental Congress on June 15, 1775. He surrendered his commission to Congress on December 23, 1783. Paine had emigrated from England in November 1774 and published his electrifying pamphlet *Common Sense* in January 1776. Paine's first number of the "American Crisis" series, published on December 23, 1776, at one of the bleakest points in the American Revolution, began with the stirring words: "These are the times that try men's souls."

Paine intentionally had his "American Crisis" No. 13 printed on April 19, 1783—the eighth anniversary of the battles of Lexington and Concord. Washington sent his final circular letter to the state governors in June 1783. In it, as part of his legacy, he pledged never to serve in public office again. Both men believed that the new country could provide social happiness for Americans—the kind of happiness specified in the Declaration of Independence's "pursuit of happiness." America had unlimited potential, which could be achieved only if the Union was maintained and the states surrendered some of their powers to strengthen the central government under the Articles of Confederation. Paine and Washington stressed the idea of a national identity and encouraged Americans to think of themselves first and foremost as Americans and not as citizens of one of the states. Both addresses were widely reprinted in 1783 and continued to be quoted as the Constitutional Convention met in Philadelphia in May 1787, reminding Americans of the advice given four years earlier by these two great patriots. ■

THOMAS PAINE: "AMERICAN CRISIS" NO. 13, APRIL 19, 1783

"The times that tried men's souls," are over—and the greatest and compleatest revolution the world ever knew is gloriously and happily accomplished. . . . To see it in our power to make a world happy—to teach mankind the art of being so—to exhibit on the theater of the universe, a character hitherto unknown—and to have, as it were, a new creation entrusted to our hands, are honors that command reflection, and can neither be too highly estimated, nor too

gratefully received. . . . let us look back on the scenes we have passed, and learn from experience what is yet to be done.

Never, I say, had a country so many openings to happiness as this. Her setting out into life, like the rising of a fair morning, was unclouded and promising. Her cause was good. Her principles just and liberal. Her temper serene and firm. Her conduct regulated by the nicest steps of order, and every thing about her wore the mark of honor. . . .

The remembrance, then, of what is past, if it operates rightly, must inspire her with the most laudable of all ambition, that of adding

to the fair fame she began with. The world has seen her great in adversity; struggling, without a thought of yielding, beneath accumulated difficulties, bravely, nay proudly, encountering distress, and rising in resolution as the storm increased. All this is justly due to her, for her fortitude has merited the character.—Let, then, the world see that she can bear prosperity; and that her honest virtue in time of peace, is equal to the bravest virtue in time of war.

. . . In this situation, may she never forget, that a fair national reputation is of as much importance as independence. That it possesses a charm which wins upon the world, and makes even enemies civil. That it gives a dignity which is often superior to power, and commands reverence where pomp and splendor fail. . . .

But that which must more forcibly strike a thoughtful, penetrating mind, and which includes and renders easy all inferior concerns, is the **Union of the States**. On this, our great national character depends. It is this which must give us importance abroad and security at home. It is through this only that we are, or can be nationally known in the world; it is the flag of the United States which renders our ships and commerce safe on the seas, or in a foreign port. . . . All our treaties, whether of alliance, peace, or commerce, are formed under the sovereignty of the United States, and Europe knows us by no other name or title.

The division of the empire into states is for our own convenience, but abroad this distinction ceases. The affairs of each state are local. They can go no farther than to itself. And were the whole worth of even the richest of them expended in revenue, it would not be sufficient to support sovereignty against a foreign attack. In short, we have no other national sovereignty than as united states. It would even be fatal for us if we had—too expensive to be maintained, and impossible to be supported. Individuals, or individual states may call themselves what they please; but the world, and especially the world of enemies, is not to be held in awe by the whistling of a name. Sovereignty must have power to protect all the parts that compose and constitute it: and as **United States** we are equal to the

importance of the title, but otherwise we are not. Our union, well and wisely regulated and cemented, is the cheapest way of being great—the easiest way of being powerful, and the happiest invention in government which the circumstances of America can admit of.—Because it collects from each state, that, which, by being inadequate, can be of no use to it, and forms an aggregate that serves for all. . . .

It is with confederate states as with individuals in society; something must be yielded up to make the whole secure. In this view of things we gain by what we give, and draw an annual interest greater than the capital.—I ever feel myself hurt when I hear the union, that great palladium of our liberty and safety, the least irreverently spoken of. It is the most sacred thing in the constitution of America, and that which every man should be most proud and tender of. Our citizenship in the united states is our national character. Our citizenship in any particular state is only our local distinction. By the latter we are known at home, by the former to the world. Our great title is **Americans**—our inferior one varies with the place. . . . ■

GEORGE WASHINGTON: CIRCULAR LETTER TO THE STATE GOVERNORS, JUNE 1783

. . . The citizens of America, placed in the most enviable condition, as the sole lords and proprietors of a vast tract of continent, comprehending all the various soils and climates of the world, and abounding with all the necessaries and conveniences of life, are now, by the late satisfactory pacification, acknowledged to be possessed of absolute freedom and independency; they are from this period to be considered as the actors on a most conspicuous theatre, which seems to be peculiarly designated by Providence for the display of human greatness and felicity: Here they are not only surrounded with every thing that can contribute to the completion of private and domestic enjoyment, but Heaven has crowned all its other blessings by giving a surer opportunity for political happiness, than any other nation has ever been favored with. Nothing can illustrate these

observations more forcibly than a recollection of the happy conjuncture of times and circumstances, under which our Republic assumed its rank among the Nations. The foundation of our empire was not laid in the gloomy age of ignorance and superstition, but at an epocha when the rights of mankind were better understood and more clearly defined, than at any former period: Researches of the human mind after social happiness have been carried to a great extent: The treasures of knowledge acquired by the labours of philosophers, sages and legislators, through a long succession of years, are laid open for use, and their collected wisdom may be happily applied in the establishment of our forms of government: The free cultivation of letters: The unbounded extension of commerce: The progressive refinement of manners: The growing liberality of sentiment, and, above all, the pure and benign light of Revelation, have had a meliorating influence on mankind, and encreased the blessings of society. At this auspicious period the United States came into existence as a Nation, and if their citizens should not be completely free and happy, the fault will be entirely their own.

Such is our situation, and such are our prospects; but notwithstanding the cup of blessing is thus reached out to us, notwithstanding happiness is ours, if we have a disposition to seize the occasion and make it our own; yet it appears to me, there is an option still left to the United States of America, whether they will be respectable and prosperous, or contemptible and miserable as a nation: This is the time of their political probation; this is the moment, when the eyes of the whole world are turned upon them, this is the moment to establish or ruin their

national character forever; this is the favorable moment to give such a tone to the federal government, as will enable it to answer the ends of its institution; or this may be the ill-fated moment for relaxing the powers of the union, annihilating the cement of the confederation, and exposing us to become the sport of European politics, which may play one State against another, to prevent their growing importance, and to serve their own interested purposes. For, according to the system of policy the States shall adopt at this moment, they will stand or fall; and, by their conformation or lapse, it is yet to be decided, whether the revolution must ultimately be considered as a blessing or a curse; not to the present age alone, for with our fate will the destiny of unborn millions be involved. . . .

. . . Although it may not be necessary or proper for me in this place to enter into a particular disquisition of the principles of the Union, and to take up the great question which has been frequently agitated, whether it be expedient and requisite for the States to delegate a larger proportion of power to Congress, or not; yet it will be a part of my duty, and that of every true patriot to assert, without reserve, and to insist upon the following positions.—That unless the States will suffer Congress to exercise those prerogatives they are undoubtedly invested with by the constitution, every thing must very rapidly tend to anarchy and confusion. That it is indispensable to the happiness of the individual States, that there should be lodged, somewhere, a supreme power, to regulate and govern the general concerns of the confederated republic, without which the Union cannot be of long duration. . . .■



TEACHING TOOLS

Discussion Questions

- Both Paine and Washington believed that the world had been observing and would continue to observe the American experiment. To what extent did they view international opinion similarly or differently?
- Both Paine and Washington suggested that, as a result of the Revolution, Americans were no longer subjects, but were citizens. What are similarities and differences in how they explained this idea?
- In his letter, Washington wrote, “That unless the States will suffer Congress to exercise those prerogatives they are undoubtedly invested with by the constitution everything must very rapidly tend to anarchy and confusion.” How might this be a shocking statement to many Revolutionary Americans?
- Both documents contain the notion of American exceptionalism. According to Paine and Washington, what made the United States special?
- Both Paine and Washington referred to the social contract theory of government in encouraging the states to give up powers in order to strengthen the central government. To what extent do you agree or disagree with their views?
- To what extent were Paine’s and Washington’s views on national happiness similar? To what extent did they differ?
- What might be some factors that contributed to both Paine’s and Washington’s fear of disunion?
- To what extent do you agree or disagree with Paine’s and Washington’s descriptions of the American character?

Exercises

I. Cut and Paste: A Reading Comprehension and Analysis Lesson

Since Paine and Washington expressed many of the same ideas in these texts, you could have students look for sentences that are “interchangeable,” where cutting a line from one document and inserting it into the other does not significantly alter the meaning of either document.

1. Divide the class into groups of 3-5 students.
2. Assign each group to look at a specific paragraph in both texts. For example, one group would look at the first paragraph in each text. Another group would be assigned the second paragraph in each document, and so on.
3. You might also have students look for a specific idea found in both documents rather than have them look at matching paragraphs. The ideas below might serve as the basis of your groupings. Ideas found in both texts are:
 - a) Citizenship
 - b) American exceptionalism
 - c) The Revolutionary War

- d) A critical moment for the American people
- e) International views of America
- f) Commercial interests
- g) State vs. national interests
- h) National happiness

4. Each group is to find sentences in its assigned paragraph or use its assigned idea that could be exchanged with the other document without significantly altering the meaning of either document.

For example, in the first paragraph of Paine's essay, a group might cut and paste the line ***"to exhibit on the theatre of the universe, a character hitherto unknown"*** and insert it into Washington's letter where he writes, ***"designated by Providence for the display of human greatness and felicity."***

5. Have groups share their "cuts and pastes" explaining the rationale for their decisions.

II. T-Chart Exercise: A Lesson Analyzing Descriptions of the American Character

1. Divide the class into groups of 3-5 students. Have the groups do a brainstorming activity for 2-4 minutes that centers on how they think a person would describe America in 1783 (that is, after the American Revolution). Have each group report its ideas to the entire class. You might want to create a list of the findings from all groups.

2. You may want to lead a brief discussion focused on the following questions:

- a) Is it easy to describe the characteristics of an entire nation?
- b) Do you think that national characteristics vary from country to country?
- c) Can a nation's characteristics change? If so, what might cause them to change?
- d) How might a war influence a nation's character?

3. Tell the class that they will be reading the Paine and Washington documents and looking for descriptions of the American character from 1783. As students read each of the documents, a recorder should list all the words that students encounter in each document that describe America as a nation or Americans as a people. The recorder should make a simple T-chart like the one below.

Thomas Paine's "American Crisis" No. 13

George Washington's Circular Letter

4. After each group has discussed its findings, you may want to have the groups report their findings to the entire class.

5. Once the class reconvenes, have the students report their findings. The teacher (or a student) should record each group's findings on the large Venn diagram, distinguishing between group results in some way (e.g., different colors, all capitals vs. all lowercase, etc.).
6. Based on the results, ask the students a series of questions. For example:
 - a) Why do both groups agree that education should be the province of the states?
 - b) Why do both groups believe that the central government should operate a post office?
 - c) Why do the groups differ on the placement of the naturalization/citizenship authority?

Vocabulary

Paine's Essay

1. *serene*: calm, clear, tranquil
2. *laudable*: worthy of praise, commendable
3. *resolution*: determination
4. *fortitude*: strength, to bear misfortune or pain
5. *civil*: polite, courteous often in merely a formal way
6. *reverence*: a feeling of respect, love, or awe
7. *pomp*: brilliant display, splendor
8. *sovereignty*: supreme in power and authority
9. *revenue*: the income of a government
10. *aggregate*: an assemblage, gathered into a whole
11. *palladium*: something that protects or safeguards
12. *irreverently*: rudely, without appropriate respect

Washington's Letter

1. *enviable*: worth being jealous of, desirable
2. *pacification*: making peace
3. *conspicuous*: easily seen or perceived
4. *felicity*: happiness, joy
5. *conjuncture*: a combination of events especially creating a critical situation
6. *epocha*: beginning of a new period in history
7. *liberality*: absence of narrowness or prejudice in thinking
8. *meliorating*: making things better
9. *auspicious*: favorable, boding well for the future
10. *disposition*: an inclination or tendency
11. *confederation*: a close alliance of independent states
12. *conformation*: a good organization of parts
13. *disquisition*: a formal discussion of some subject often in writing
14. *requisite*: a requirement, a request
15. *prerogatives*: special powers due to one's position
16. *confederated republic*: a government made of several distinct but united parts

For Contemporary Biographical Descriptions

- Thomas Paine | <http://history.wisc.edu/csac/founders/paine.htm>
- George Washington | <http://history.wisc.edu/csac/founders/washington.htm>