

# Center *for the Study of the* American Constitution

## NO. 9: THOMAS PAINE (1737-1809)

Thomas Paine was the quintessential revolutionary. No other person captured so well the explosiveness of the last quarter of the eighteenth century. His three major writings—*Common Sense*, *Rights of Man*, and *Age of Reason*—were revolutionary and were all best-sellers.

Paine was a paradox. He turned a life of abysmal failure into one of phenomenal success, only to die pathetically lonely and neglected. He was a tolerant man of goodwill who lived every day as a rabid partisan. A pensive philosopher, Paine was ever the zealot driven to action. A gentle man of peace, he regularly wrote sedition and inspired men to take up arms in the cause of liberty. He came to be a symbol of rebellion and civil unrest, yet he was an ardent opponent of insurrection and a staunch advocate of law and order. He refused to profit financially from his talents as a writer, yet he felt betrayed when his country refused to reward him financially for his “selfless” services. A deeply religious man, Paine was condemned as an atheist and blasphemer. He advocated harmony but lived a dissolute, disheveled life. He fervently sought the peace, stability, and enjoyment of a quiet life but was continually immersed in scandal, conflict, and the vicissitudes of war. Though an eternal optimist, he was also a skeptic. He made friends easily and lost them with even greater facility. A fervent spokesman for limited government, he was a sincere proponent of social welfare programs for the poor, the infirm, and the aged. Paine was a citizen of three countries yet truly a man without a country—although to his own way of thinking, Paine was a citizen of the world.

Paine was born in 1737 in the old impoverished town of Thetford on the east coast of England. His father was a Quaker; his mother an Anglican. He attended only five years of grammar school until apprenticed to his father making stays for women’s corsets. In 1756 at the beginning of the Seven Years’ War, Paine signed on to the *Terrible*, a privateer captained by William Death. Fortunately, his father talked him out of the adventure; on its first engagement, the *Terrible* was sunk with the loss of ninety percent of its crew. The next year, however, Paine sailed on another privateer and earned enough prize money to live in London for six months and study science. There he met Benjamin Franklin.

Paine held several jobs—stay maker, teacher, excise tax collector, and grocer. He failed at each. His first wife died in childbirth; his second divorced him. He left for America arriving in Philadelphia in November 1774. With a letter of recommendation from Franklin, Paine soon became editor of the new *Pennsylvania Magazine* and immediately joined the fray attacking Britain’s anti-American imperial policy. In January 1776 he published *Common Sense*, a fifty-five page pamphlet that denounced monarchy and staunchly advocated immediate American independence—independence that Americans could achieve despite the prowess of Britain’s powerful army and navy. Throughout the war Paine wrote one series of essays after another to bolster America’s sagging spirits. Paine was responsible for changing “former habits of thinking” in abandoning the British Empire and rejecting monarchism for republicanism. Paine did more than anyone except for George Washington to sustain the morale of the American people through “good and ill fortune.”

Perhaps Paine’s most familiar opening line appeared in the first number of his “American Crisis” series, which was written in December 1776 to encourage the American people and General Washington’s decimated army. Read to Washington’s army on the banks of the Delaware River shortly before it crossed the ice-choked river and attacked Trenton on Christmas day, the urgency of the first paragraph still rings loud and clear.

These are the times that try men's souls. The summer soldier and the sunshine patriot will, in this crisis, shrink from the service of their country, but he that stands it now, deserves the love and thanks of man and woman. Tyranny, like hell, is not easily conquered, yet we have this consolation with us, that the harder the conflict, the more glorious the triumph.

When the war ended and independence was achieved, Paine had no profession to fall back on. "I am neither farmer, manufacturer, mechanic, merchant nor shopkeeper. I believe, however, I am of the first class. I am a *Farmer of thoughts*." By the spring of 1787 Paine had developed plans for an iron bridge that could span the wide rivers of America. In April 1787 he sailed for Europe to obtain the endorsement of the scientific societies in France and England. Soon he became immersed in the new revolution unfolding in France, where he was elected to the French National Convention even though he could not read, write, or speak French. There he wrote *Rights of Man* that called for the overthrow of the aristocratic government of Great Britain.

As a French citizen and legislator, Paine was a moderate. Opposing the execution of King Louis XVI in 1793, he was imprisoned by the Radicals for eleven months during the Reign of Terror. President George Washington and the new American government did nothing to gain Paine's release. Through the unofficial efforts of James Monroe, America's new minister to France, Paine was freed. Disillusioned, Paine published a scathing attack on President Washington for not acknowledging him as an American citizen. Paine's two-part *Age of Reason*, which attacked established religion, was also published at this time. These two publications made Paine an outcast when he returned to America in 1802. He lived his last seven years reclusively and intoxicated in New York alienated from most of his countrymen.

Thomas Paine was a complex man. Each of the fifty biographers since his death in 1809 has failed to unveil the full person. Because he will always be different things to different people, it is unlikely that we shall ever obtain a completely persuasive biography of this enigmatic man. Joel Barlow, one of Paine's closest friends, was perhaps right when he wrote that Paine's "own writings are his best life." It is these writings that can help identify the genius and the madness that was Thomas Paine. ■

## QUOTATIONS

### Thomas Paine and the *Pennsylvania Magazine*, 1775

[Robert] Aitken contracted with Paine to furnish, monthly, for this work [i.e., the *Pennsylvania Magazine*] a certain quantity of original matter; but he often found it difficult to prevail on Paine to comply with his engagement. On one of the occasions, when Paine had neglected to supply the materials for the Magazine, within a short time of the day of publication, Aitken went to his lodgings, and complained of his neglecting to fulfill his contract. Paine heard him patiently, and coolly answered, "You shall have them in time." Aitken expressed some doubts on the subject, and insisted on Paine's accompanying him and proceeding immediately to business, as the workmen were waiting for copy. He accordingly went home with Aitken, and was soon seated at the table with the necessary apparatus, which always included a glass, and a decanter of brandy. Aitken remarked, "he would never write without *that*." The first glass put him in a train of thinking; Aitken feared the second would disqualify him, or render him untractable; but it only illuminated his intellectual system; and when he had swallowed the third glass, he wrote with great rapidity, intelligence, and precision; and his ideas appeared to flow faster than he could commit them to paper. What he penned from the inspiration of the brandy, was perfectly fit for the press without any alteration, or correction.\*

\*"Aitken was a man of truth, and of an irreproachable character. This anecdote came from him some years before his death." Source: Isaiah Thomas, *The History of Printing in America*, 1810

### John Adams: *Autobiography*, 1776 (written in 1802)

Paine soon after the Appearance of my Pamphlet [*Thoughts on Government*] hurried away to my Lodgings and spent an Evening with me. His Business was to reprehend me for publishing my Pamphlet. Said he was afraid it would do hurt, and that it was repugnant to the plan he had proposed in his Common Sense. I told him it was true it was repugnant and for that reason, I had written it and consented to the publication of it: for I was as much afraid of his Work as

he was of mine. His plan was so democratical, without any restraint or even an Attempt at any Equilibrium or Counterpoise, that it must produce confusion and every Evil Work. I told him further, that his Reasoning from the Old Testament was ridiculous, and I could hardly think him sincere. At this he laughed, and said he had taken his Ideas in that part from Milton; and then expressed a Contempt of the Old Testament and indeed of the Bible at large, which surprised me. He saw that I did not relish this, and soon checked himself, with these Words “However I have some thoughts of publishing my Thoughts on Religion, but I believe it will be best to postpone it, to the latter part of Life.” This Conversation passed in good humor, without any harshness on either Side: but I perceived in him a conceit of himself, and a daring Impudence, which have been developed more and more to this day.

The third part of Common Sense which relates wholly to the Question of Independence, was clearly written and contained a tolerable Summary of the Arguments which I had been repeating again and again in Congress for nine months. But I am bold to say there is not a Fact nor a Reason stated in it, which had not been frequently urged in Congress. The Temper and Wishes of the People, supplied every thing at that time: and the Phrases, suitable for an Emigrant from New Gate, or one who had chiefly associated with such Company, such as “The Royal Brute of England,” “The Blood upon his Soul,” and a few others of equal delicacy, had as much Weight with the People as his Arguments. It has been a general Opinion, that this Pamphlet was of great Importance in the Revolution. I doubted it at the time and have doubted it to this day. It probably converted some to the Doctrine of Independence, and gave others an Excuse for declaring in favour of it. But these would all have followed Congress, with Zeal: and on the other hand it excited many writers against it, particularly plain Truth, who contributed very largely to fortify and inflame the Party against Independence, and finally lost us the Allens, Penns, and many other Persons of Weight in the Community.

Notwithstanding these doubts I felt myself obliged to Paine for the Pains he had taken and for his good Intentions to serve Us which I then had no doubt of. I saw he had a capacity and a ready Pen, and understanding he was poor and destitute, I thought We might put him into some Employment, where he might be useful and earn a Living. Congress appointed a Committee of foreign affairs not long after and they wanted a Clerk. I nominated Thomas Paine, supposing him a ready Writer and an industrious Man. Dr. Witherspoon the President of New Jersey College and then a Delegate from that State rose and objected to it, with an Earnestness that surprised me. The Dr. said he would give his reasons; he knew the Man and his Communications: When he first came over, he was on the other Side and had written pieces against the American Cause: that he had afterwards been employed by his Friend Robert Aitken, and finding the Tide of Popularity run rapidly, he had turned about: that he was very intemperate and could not write until he had quickened his Thoughts with large drafts of Rum and Water: that he was in short a bad Character and not fit to be placed in such a Situation.—General Roberdeau spoke in his favour: no one confirmed Witherspoon’s Account, though the truth of it has since been sufficiently established. Congress appointed him: but he was soon obnoxious by his Manners, and dismissed. . . .

At this day it would be ridiculous to ask any questions about Tom Paine’s Veracity, Integrity or any other Virtue.

#### **Thomas Paine to President of Congress Henry Laurens, 1778?**

I am neither farmer, manufacturer, mechanic, merchant nor shopkeeper. I believe, however, I am of the first class. I am a *Farmer of thoughts*.

#### **Gouverneur Morris: Speech in Congress, 9 January 1779**

[Paine was] a mere Adventurer from England, without Fortune, without Family or Connections, ignorant even of Grammar.

#### **Thomas Paine to Henry Laurens, Philadelphia, 14 September 1779**

I find myself so curiously Circumstanced that I have both too many friends and too few. . . . I know but one kind of life I am fit for, and that is a thinking one, and, of course, a writing one. But I have confined myself so much of late, taken so little exercise, and lived so very sparingly, that unless I alter my way of life, it will alter me. I think I have a right to ride a horse of my own but I cannot now even afford to hire one, which is a situation I never was in before, and I begin to know that a sedentary life cannot be supported without Jolting exercise.

**Marquis de Chastellux: *Travels in North-America, in the Years 1780, 1781, and 1782***

I know not how it happened, that since my arrival in Philadelphia, I had not seen Mr. Payne, that author so celebrated in America, and throughout Europe, by his excellent work, entitled, *Common Sense*, and several other political pamphlets. M. de la Fayette and I had asked the permission of an interview for the 14th in the morning, and we waited on him accordingly with Colonel [John] Laurens. I discovered, at his apartments, all the attributes of a man of letters; a room pretty much in disorder, dusty furniture, and a large table covered with books lying open, and manuscripts begun. His person was in a correspondent dress, nor did his physiognomy belie the spirit that reigns throughout his works. Our conversation was agreeable and animated, and such as to form a connection between us, for he has written to me since my departure, and seems desirous of maintaining a constant correspondence. His existence at Philadelphia is similar to that of those political writers in England, who have obtained nothing, and have neither credit enough in the state, nor sufficient political weight to obtain a part in the affairs of government. Their works are read with more curiosity than confidence, their projects being regarded rather as the play of imagination, than as well concerted plans, and sufficient in credit ever to produce any real effect: theirs is always considered as the work of an individual, and not that of a party; information may be drawn from them, but not consequences; accordingly we observe, that the influence of these authors is more felt in the satirical, than in the dogmatical style, as it is easier for them to decry other men's opinions than to establish their own. This is more the case with Mr. Payne than any body; for having formerly held a post in government, he has now no connection with it; and as his patriotism and his talents are unquestionable, it is natural to conclude that the vivacity of his imagination, and the independence of his character, render him more calculated for reasoning on affairs, than for conducting them.

**Sarah Bache to Benjamin Franklin, Philadelphia, 14 January 1781**

There never was a man less beloved in a place than Payne is in this, having at different times disputed with everybody. The most rational thing he could have done would have been to have died the instant he had finished his *Common Sense*, for he never again will have it in his power to leave the World with so much credit.

**Elkanah Watson: *Memoirs*, 1781**

About this period, the notorious Tom Paine arrived at Nantes, in the *Alliance* frigate, as Secretary of Colonel [John] Laurens, Minister Extraordinary from Congress, and took up his quarters at my boarding-place. He was coarse and uncouth in his manners, loathsome in his appearance, and a disgusting egotist; rejoicing most in talking of himself, and reading the effusions of his own mind. Yet I could not repress the deepest emotions of gratitude towards him, as the instrument of Providence in accelerating the declaration of our Independence. He certainly was a prominent agent, in preparing the public sentiment of America for that glorious event. The idea of Independence had not occupied the popular mind, and when guardedly approached on the topic, it shrunk from the conception, as fraught with doubt, with peril, and with suffering.

In 1776 I was present, at Providence, Rhode Island, in a social assembly of most of the prominent leaders of the State. I recollect that the subject of independence was cautiously introduced by an ardent Whig, and the thought seemed to excite the abhorrence of the whole circle.

A few weeks after, Paine's *Common Sense* appeared, and passed through the continent like an electric spark. It everywhere flashed conviction, and aroused a determined spirit, which resulted in the Declaration of Independence, upon the 4th of July ensuing. The name of Paine was precious to every Whig heart, and had resounded throughout Europe.

On his arrival being announced, the Mayor, and some of the most distinguished citizens of Nantes, called upon him to render their homage of respect. I often officiated as interpreter, although humbled and mortified at his filthy appearance, and awkward and unseemly address. Besides, as he had been roasted alive on his arrival at L'Orient, for the \*\*\*\* and well basted with brimstone, he was absolutely offensive, and perfumed the whole apartment. He was soon rid of his respectable visitors, who left the room with marks of astonishment and disgust. I took the liberty, on his asking for the loan of a clean shirt, of speaking to him frankly of his dirty appearance and brimstone odor, and prevailed upon him to stew for an hour, in a hot bath. This, however, was not done without much entreaty, and I did not succeed, until receiving a file of English newspapers, I promised, after he was in the bath, he should have the reading of them, and not

before. He at once consented, and accompanied me to the bath, where I instructed the keeper in French (which Paine did not understand) to gradually increase the heat of the water, until “le Monsieur etait bien bouilli.”\* He became so much absorbed in his reading that he was nearly par-boiled before leaving the bath, much to his improvement and my satisfaction.

\*Boiled through and through.

**Joseph Reed to Nathanael Greene, Philadelphia, c. December 1781**

Your old Friend Mr. Paine has proved himself the Mercenary his Enemies formerly called him having deserted his old Friends & Connections. He is now in the actual Pay of the Men & a supporter of the measures a few Years ago he labored so much to demolish. I am told he pleads Necessity. Many a poor Dog has gone to the Gallows with the same Plea.

**Thomas Paine, Philadelphia *Freeman's Journal*, 1 May 1782**

I have ever kept a clear head and an upright heart, and am not afraid of being replied to. I never took up a matter without fully believing it to be right, and never yet failed in proving it so.

**Thomas Paine, *The Crisis*, 1783**

It was the cause of America that made me an author.

**Gouverneur Morris: *Diary*, 26 January 1790**

Although he has an excellent Pen to write he has but an indifferent Head to think.

**Benjamin Rush to Jeremy Belknap, Philadelphia, 6 June 1791**

Have you read Paine's and Priestley's answers to Burke's pamphlet? They are both masterly performances, although they possess different species of merit. Paine destroys error by successive flashes of lightning. Priestley wears it away by successive strokes of electricity.

**Etienne Dumont: *Recollections of Mirabeau and of the First Two Legislative Assemblies of France*, 1791**

I could easily excuse, in an American, his prejudice against England but his egregious conceit and presumptuous self-sufficiency quite disgusted me. He was drunk with vanity. If you believed him, it was he who had done everything in America. He was an absolute caricature of the vainest of Frenchmen. He fancied that his book upon the Rights of Man ought to be substituted for every other book in the world; and he told us roundly that, if it were in his power to annihilate every library in existence, he would do so without hesitation in order to eradicate the errors they contained and commence with the Rights of Man, a new era of ideas and principles. He knew all his own writings by heart, but he knew nothing else. . . . Yet Paine was a man of talent, full of imagination, gifted with popular eloquence, and wielded, not without skill, the weapon of irony.

**Thomas Paine, *Rights of Man*, II, 1792**

Independence is my happiness, and I view things as they are, without regard to place or person; my country is the world, and my religion is to do good.

**John Adams to Abigail Adams, Philadelphia, 2 March 1793**

[William Stephens] Smith says that my Books are upon the Table of every Member of the Committee for framing a Constitution of Government for France except Tom Paine, and he is so conceited as to disdain to have any Thing to do with Books.

**Thomas Paine, *Age of Reason*, I, 1794**

I believe in one God, and no more; and I hope for happiness beyond this life.

**John Adams to Abigail Adams, Philadelphia, 28 December 1794**

The Clergy of New England have trumpeted Paine and Robespierre till they begin to tremble for the Consequences of their own Imprudence.

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**Abigail Adams to John Adams, Quincy, 15 January 1796**

So poor Tom Paine is gone to see whether there is any State besides the present. Heaven be praised that he is gone there, instead of coming to America. “If plagues and Earthquakes break not heaven’s design Why then a Paine or Jacobine?” He was an instrument of much mischief.

**John Adams to Abigail Adams, Philadelphia, 8 December 1796**

They [i.e., the Jeffersonians] kept back Paine’s Letter\* Several Weeks, presuming no doubt that it would not promote their Election. It appeared for the first, this morning. I think, of all Paine’s Productions it is the weakest and at the same time the most malicious. The Man appears to me to be mad—not drunk. He has the Vanity of the Lunatick who believed himself to be Jupiter the Father of Gods and Men.

\*Paine’s letter attacking President Washington for not doing more to get Paine released from prison in France.

**Eli Whitney to Mr. Stebbins, Washington, D.C., November 1802**

You have doubtless heard of the arrival of the notorious Tom Paine in this country—Being informed, previous to my arrival here, that he was in this neighborhood I had some curiosity to see him—I stopped at the public house where I am now writing to spend one day (it being in a central situation & convenient to the Public Offices where I do business)—I walked out for an hour & returned to dinner—on entering the room—to my great surprise I found that T. Paine was there & a lodger in the house & in less than five minutes we were seated opposite each other at the table—

I was not disappointed in my expectation of his appearance—I found him the same filthy old sot that he has ever been represented. . . . I should judge from his appearance that he is nearly 70 years of age. . . . He is about five feet 10 inches high—his hair three-fourth white—black eyes—a large bulbous nose—a large mouth drawn down at the corners with flabby lips—with more than half decayed, horrid looking teeth—his complexion of a brick color—his face & nose covered with carbuncles & spots of a darker hue than the general color of his skin—his dress rather mean & his whole appearance very slovenly—his hands so convulsed that while his expansive lips almost encompassed a wine glass, he could hardly get the contents of it into his head without spilling it. . . . In short he is a mere loathsome carcass, which has withstood the ravages & rackings of brutal intemperance for an uncommon length of time & from which (were it exposed on the barren heath of Africa) the Hyena & Jackals would turn away with disgust.

He observed that he had dined with Mr. Jefferson yesterday & the Day before—& I make no doubt he is a “bosom friend” of the President. . . . Though some of the democrats will swallow common carrion with a good relish, I think most of them will loath the putrid rattle snake which has died from the venom of his own bite.

**William Dickson to Andrew Jackson, Washington, D.C., 10 December 1802**

The Author of Rights of Man—Common Sense &c is here. But that energy of mind and forcible language of which he was formerly possessed is gone. He is now in the sixty-sixth year of his age, but the hardships sustained in the French Prisons have made him much older—he receives due attention from the Republicans.

**Manasseh Cutler to Joseph Torrey, Washington, D.C., 3 January 1803**

In answer to your inquiries respecting Paine, I hear very little said about him here. You see by his fourth letter that his “useful labors” are to be suspended during the session. I have not heard of his being at the President’s since the commencement of the session, and it is believed that Mr. Jefferson sensibly feels the severe, though just, remarks which have been made on his inviting him to this country. You see by the Message, that courting popularity is his darling object, but we have convincing proof that his caressing of Paine has excited his fears. . . . Paine’s venom against the character of the great Washington was occasioned by his not interfering on his behalf when he was confined in France, and any affront from Mr. Jefferson would induce the same kind of treatment. I cannot believe it will be in the power of this degraded wretch to do much mischief. It is certain the more sensible Democrats here view him with contempt, and there are very few so abandoned as openly to associate with him. He lives at Lovell’s hotel, who has many lodgers. The members who are there are not willing to acknowledge they have any society with him. He dines at the public table, and, as a show, is as profitable to Lovell as an *Ourang Outang*, for many strangers who come to the city feel a curiosity to see the creature. They go to Lovell’s and call for the show—even some members of Congress have done it. I have not yet seen him, nor shall I go out of my way for the sight. He has not, I believe, been in the Hall.

**John Adams to Benjamin Waterhouse, 29 October 1805**

I am willing you should call this the Age of Frivolity . . . and would not object if you had named it the Age of Folly, Vice, Frenzy, Brutality, Daemons, Buonaparte, Tom Paine, or the Burning Brand from the Bottomless Pit, or anything but the Age of Reason. I know not whether any man in the world has had more influence on its inhabitants or affairs for the last thirty years than Tom Paine. There can be no severer Satyr on the Age. For such a Mongrel between Pigg and Puppy, begotten by a wild Boar on a Bitch Wolf, never before in any Age of the World was suffered by the Poltroonery of Mankind, to run through such a Career of Mischief. Call it then the Age of Paine.

**Thomas Paine to John Inskeep, Mayor of the City of Philadelphia, February 1806**

My motive and object in all my political works . . . have been to rescue man from tyranny and false systems and false principles of government and enable him to be free, and establish government for himself. . . . And my motive and object in all my publications on religious subjects . . . have been to bring man to a right reason that God has given him; to impress on him the great principles of divine morality, justice, mercy, and a benevolent disposition to all men and to all creatures; and to excite in him a spirit of trust, confidence and consolation in his Creator, unshackled by the fable and fiction of books, by whatever invented name they may be called.

**Benjamin Rush: Commonplace Book, 8 June 1809**

Died at New York Thomas Paine, author of "Common Sense," "Rights of Man," "Age of Reason," and many other political and deistical publications. I knew him well soon after his arrival in America in 1773 [i.e., 1774], at which time he was unfriendly to the claims of America. He wrote "Common Sense" at my request. I gave it its name. He possessed a wonderful talent of writing to the tempers and feelings of the public. His compositions, though full of splendid and original imagery, were always adapted to the common capacities. He was intemperate and otherwise debauched in private life. His vanity appeared in everything he did or said. He once said he was at a loss to know whether he was made for the times or the times made for him. His "Age of Reason" probably perverted more persons from the Christian faith than any book that ever was written for the same purpose. Its extensive mischief was owing to the popular, perspicuous, and witty style in which it was written, and to its constant appeals to the feelings and tempers of his readers.

**Benjamin Rush: Commonplace Book, 1809**

T. Payne *thought* only. Thinking leads to principles. Facts—"fac totum" men. Like stones in a field, useless 'till collected and arranged in a building.

**Thomas Jefferson to Francis Eppes, Monticello, 19 January 1821**

You ask my opinion of Lord Bolingbroke and Thomas Paine. They were alike in making bitter enemies of the priests and pharisees of their day. Both were honest men; both advocates for human liberty. Paine wrote for a country which permitted him to push his reasoning to whatever length it would go. . . . These two persons differed remarkably in the style of their writing, each leaving a model of what is most perfect in both extremes of the simple and the sublime. No writer has exceeded Paine in ease and familiarity of style, in perspicuity of expression, happiness of elucidation, and in simple and unassuming language. In this he may be compared with Dr. Franklin; and indeed his Common Sense was, for awhile, believed to have been written by Dr. Franklin, and published under the borrowed name of Paine, who had come over with him from England.

**Thomas Jefferson to John Cartwright, Monticello, 5 June 1824**

Paine . . . thought more than he read. ■

