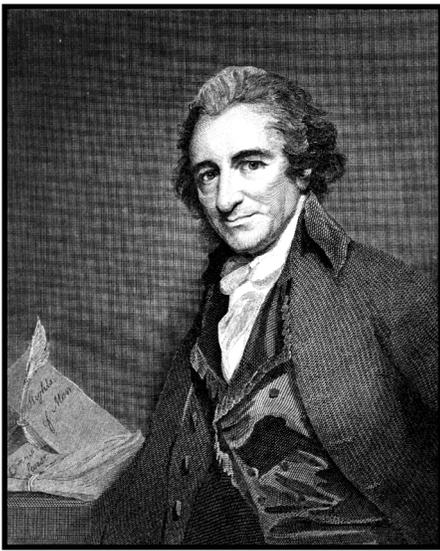


BROADSIDE

A Journal of the Wars for Independence for Students

THOMAS PAINE: 1737-1809



Thomas Paine, c. 1793
(Library of Congress)

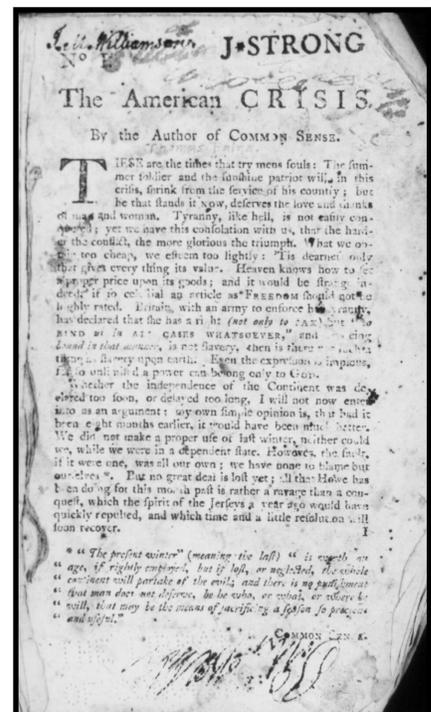
*In an age known for eloquent writing, some of the most famous verbiage to emerge from the American Revolution did not exclusively belong to the well-known at the time, such as Thomas Jefferson or Benjamin Franklin, but rather from the ordinary looking pamphleteer, activist, and political theorist, Thomas Paine. The words, “**These are the times that try men’s souls,**” from the opening stanza in his 1776 pamphlet *The American Crisis* helped to fuel the waning fervor of American patriots during what historians consider the “Ten Crucial Days” of the American Revolution – George Washington’s stunning victories at Trenton and Princeton at the end of 1776 and the beginning of 1777. Like its predecessor before it, *Common Sense*, Paine’s writing reflected the maxim of good writing; be clear, be concise, and be effective.*

“The harder the conflict, the more glorious the triumph.”

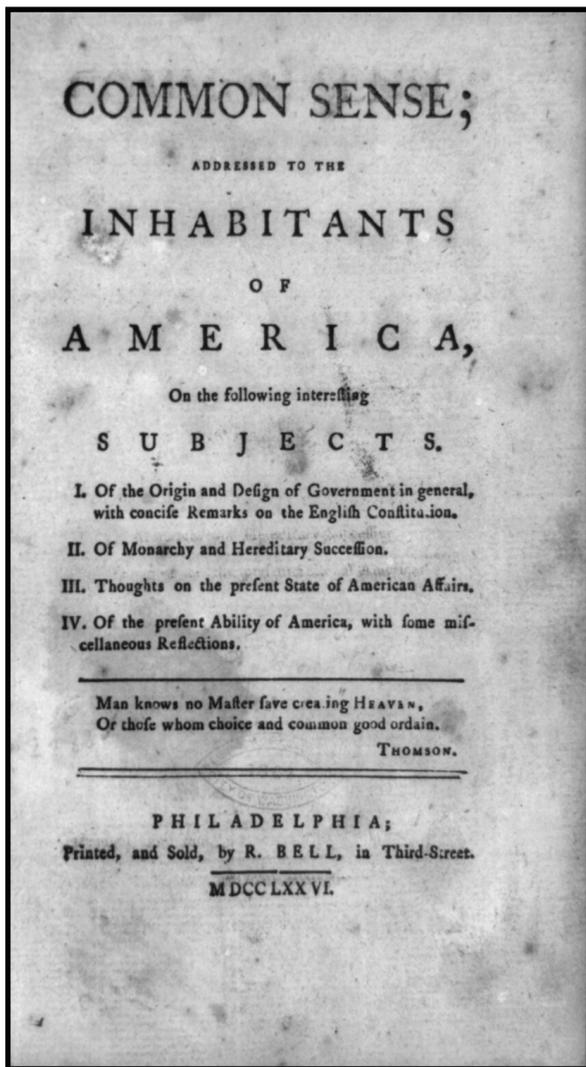
Paine was born in England in 1737 to a family of very modest means. His father was a stay maker, who worked on roping for merchant ships. Thomas worked as an apprentice for his father, but found no joy in the profession. He worked at other odd jobs but failed to find success there as well. As Thomas grew up he looked at the world around him in aristocratic Britain and developed a deep-seated disdain for England’s privileged classes and ruling elites. He expressed his attitudes in writing and in a chance meeting of his with Benjamin Franklin in London in 1774 he decided to emigrate to Philadelphia.

Arriving in Philadelphia Paine tried his luck at journalism and here he found his passion and an outlet for his anger. Within less than a year he was famous; *Common Sense*, launching his literary career and work as a radical. For a short while he joined Washington’s Continental Army after the New York Campaign and it was during this stint that he endured the privations of Washington’s rag-tag forces. As Washington’s battered army retreated across New Jersey men either deserted or let their enlistments run out. There was a manpower issue within Washington’s ranks. So once more Paine took up the pen and wrote his stirring *The American Crisis*. Legend and folklore has him writing *The American Crisis* using a drum as a desk. In fact, there is a statue of Paine in New Jersey that perpetuates this myth. Once again, Paine’s work inspired and provided Americans, even those not bearing arms against Great Britain with a renewed sense of patriotic ardor.

After the American Revolution Paine returned to Europe where he was caught up in the fervor of revolutionary France. In 1791, he published *The Rights of Man* and in 1794 *The Age of Reason*, written in part during his imprisonment in France, where he had been arrested amidst all the tumult of that conflict. He returned to America in 1802 and dies seven years later a pauper, but not forgotten to the dustbin of history. He ranks amongst those we call our Founders.



The American Crisis Pamphlet (Library of Congress)



Common Sense Pamphlet (Library of Congress)

“I offer nothing more than simple facts, plain arguments, and common sense.”

The pamphlet, Common Sense, was published in early 1776 and became an instant bestseller in the British colonies as they waged early war against their mother country, Great Britain. It was posted in taverns, read at town meetings from Boston to Savannah, read at church services and did more to ignite American fervor for independence than any other document. True, the Declaration of Independence made the statement, but Paine’s writings were for the common man and his clear prose and simple language could be understood by ordinary people. Independence announced in July 1776 could not be declared without Paine’s Common Sense. He eloquently argued that ordinary people could govern themselves and did not need a monarch to lead them. When it was published George Washington, the Commander-in-Chief of the nascent Continental Army had it read to his troops. John Adams remarked, “Without the pen of Paine, Washington’s sword would have been wielded in vain.”

“Until an independence is declared the continent will feel itself like a man who continues putting off some unpleasant business from day to day, yet knows it must be done, hates to set about it, wishes it over, and is continually haunted with the thoughts of its necessity.”

Activity

1. As a class, participate in a dramatic reading of Thomas Paine’s *Common Sense*, or *The American Crisis*. Afterwards, discuss how colonists may have reacted to hearing either of these texts.
2. Look at a newspaper article or an online article about a local news item. How do Americans participate in government today? How is it similar or different from how they participated in government at the time of the Revolution?