



# The Pamphlet Read Round the World: The 250th Anniversary of Thomas Paine's *Common Sense*

By Paul Meany

First published on January 10, 1776, Thomas Paine's *Common Sense* pushed hesitant colonists toward independence, and its message echoed around the world for the next two centuries.

✦ In a January 24, 1776, letter updating George Washington about recruitment efforts in New England, Major General Charles Lee asked the commander in chief of the Continental Army if he had read *Common Sense*, a pamphlet published anonymously two weeks earlier in Philadelphia.

“I never saw such a masterly irresistible performance,” Lee wrote. “In short I own myself convinc’d by the arguments of the necessity of separation.”

Lee’s endorsement of the pamphlet was just one of many letters Washington soon received about *Common Sense*, whose author made a colorful but concise case for declaring independence from Great Britain and establishing a constitutional republic, the chief aim of which should be “securing freedom and property to all men, and above all things the free exercise of religion, according to the dictates of conscience.”

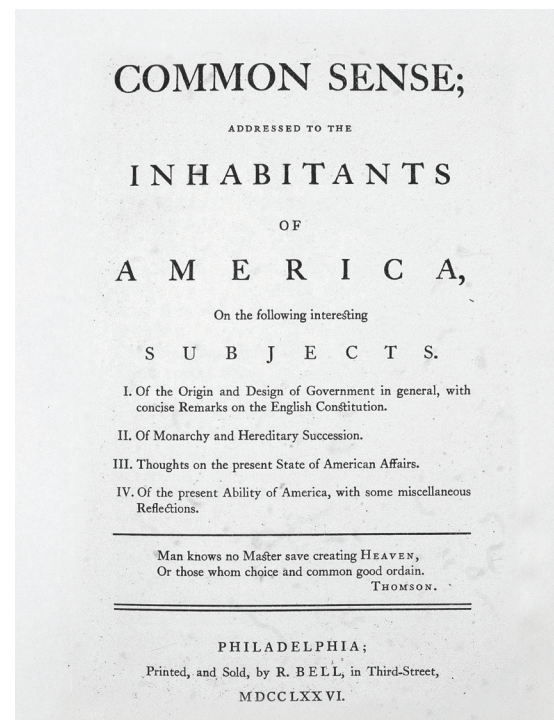
By March 1776, when the author was revealed to be a recent English immigrant named Thomas Paine, George Washington and thousands of other Americans had read and considered Paine’s call for independence.

“By private letters which I have lately received from Virginia, I find *Common Sense* is working a powerful change there in the minds of many men,” Washington wrote in a letter on April 1, 1776.

Three months later, the tide had sufficiently turned to the cause of separation that the United States declared independence on July fourth. Paine’s succinct arguments, or “unanswerable reason” as Washington and others put it,

combined with his evocative language—King George as the “sullen-tempered Pharaoh of England” and monarchy as a system that lays “the world in blood and ashes”—played a decisive role in pushing a hesitant people toward independence.

Paine quickly became one of the most popular authors of the Revolutionary War era. He went on to work as an aide to Washington while writing a series of essays, *The American Crisis*, which opened with the famous rallying cry, “These are the times



*Common Sense* was first published in Philadelphia on January 10, 1776, and quickly circulated throughout the colonies. (Photo by Joe Griffin/Hulton Archive/Getty Images)

that try men’s souls,” and ended with the reflection, “It was the cause of America that made me an author.”

But Paine was never a theorist of America alone; his instincts always tended toward a global message. *Common Sense* tore down the mystique of monarchy and treated the limited representative government as the right of free people everywhere, and liberty as the “concern of every man to whom nature hath given the power of feeling”:

“The cause of America is in a great measure the cause of all mankind. Many circumstances hath, and will arise, which are not local, but universal, and through which the principles of all lovers of mankind are affected.”

As the Constitution was being drafted in the soon-to-be United States, Paine traveled to Europe and defended the French Revolution in *Rights of Man* (1791–1792), advancing a universal vision of political liberty that rejected monarchy and insisted that governments derive their legitimacy from the free choice of the governed.

In the 19th century, Paine’s work was circulated worldwide through inexpensive editions, translations, and paraphrases. Reformers and revolutionaries in Ireland, Latin America, and India read his work directly or through intermediaries who had absorbed his political worldview. Although he held no office and commanded no armies, Paine shaped revolutionary politics with his writing, becoming a shared reference point for people who lived under imperial rule.

### Latin America | “Those Who Wish to Reap the Blessings of Freedom”

The 19th-century political situation in Spanish America made fertile ground for Paine’s idea that ordinary people possess the moral authority to design their own governments. For generations, many positions in the colonial bureaucracy had been held by criollos, people of pure Spanish descent born in Spanish America. As the Spanish crown sought to tighten control of its colonies, these offices were increasingly filled by peninsulares, Spanish-born people who were viewed as being loyal to Madrid.

The marginalization of criollos raised the issue of political capacity and whether the people of the Americas governed themselves or lived under the rule of European-born officials. Reformers sought legal and philosophical authorities to support their claim that they possessed the right and ability to shape their own governments. They turned naturally to documents such as the Virginia Declaration of Rights, the French Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen, and *Common Sense*. Paine was particularly popular because he treated monarchy not as an inherited fact of life, but a human invention: “The distinction of men into kings and subjects is a great sin in the world. Nature disapproves it.”

The spread of Paine’s ideas in Latin America depended on translators who saw his writing as an opportunity to reshape the political culture of their societies, including Vicente Rocafuerte of Ecuador,

Manuel García de Sena of Venezuela, and Anselmo Nateiu, an Indigenous Peruvian.

Rocafuerte was an aristocrat born in Guayaquil, Ecuador, in 1783. His life carried him from Mexico to Havana, to the United States and Europe, and back to South America. Rocafuerte recognized that *Common Sense* possessed a universal quality. It provided a direct argument for liberty that resonated with societies still struggling to throw off imperial rule:

“The present time, likewise, is that peculiar time, which never happens to a nation but once, viz. the time of forming itself into a government. Most nations have let slip the opportunity, and by that means have been compelled to receive laws from their conquerors, instead of making laws for themselves.”

Manuel García de Sena served as a diplomat for the Venezuelan government in Philadelphia at a time when Spanish America was seeking new constitutional models. García de Sena produced an influential Spanish adaptation of *Common Sense* in 1811. Scholars note that his translation was incomplete—and even inaccurate in places—yet it captured Paine’s essential message. *Common Sense* became a guide for democratic reform in 18th-century Venezuela and set a precedent for political thinkers in the region. Even a paraphrased Paine could provide a conceptual framework for rejecting monarchy.

In Peru, Anselmo Nateiu, an Indigenous leader, approached Paine’s text from the

perspective of someone whose community had lived under severe Spanish rule. For Nateiu, the translation, which was published in 1821, needed to be localized to his people’s worldview. He altered the text significantly for his Indigenous readers, illustrating the extraordinary flexibility of Paine’s writing.

The power of these translators was not in achieving fidelity to the English original, but in their ability to equip Latin American readers with the arguments they needed at a moment when the entire political order was under strain.

Paine’s influence in Latin America runs so deep that it is still being felt today. Argentine President Javier Milei, a libertarian elected two years ago, quoted Paine at the conclusion of a September 2024 speech at the United Nations:

“The Argentine Republic will abandon the position of historical neutrality that characterized us and will be at the forefront of the struggle in defense of freedom. Because as Thomas Paine said: ‘Those who wish to reap the blessings of freedom must, as men, endure the fatigue of defending it.’”

#### Ireland | The “Koran of Belfast”

By the time Paine died in 1806, Ireland had long lived under a colonial structure upheld by British rule that blended military control, religious discrimination, and economic subordination. When news of the American rebellion reached Ireland, it struck many observers as the familiar story of a peripheral people resisting colonial empire.

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Irish political societies of the late 18th and early 19th centuries read Paine eagerly. The Irish revolutionary Theobald Wolfe Tone, in his diary, cited Paine’s *Rights of Man* as being the “Koran of Belfast.” The British Whig Horace Walpole commented, “It is now too publicly known to be disguised any longer, Ireland has much the air of americanising.” *Common Sense* circulated among members of the Irish Volunteer movement in the 1770s and 1780s, and later among the United Irishmen movement in the 1790s.

The American Revolution also provided an example of constitutional self-creation. Irish reformers noted that the colonists

had designed their own institutions and explained them openly to the world. Irish radicals applied this principle to their own political system. In *Rights of Man*, Paine argued that governments must justify themselves to the governed:

“All power exercised over a nation, must have some beginning. It must either be delegated or assumed. There are no other sources. All delegated power is trust, and all assumed power is usurpation. Time does not alter the nature and quality of either.”

This century-long struggle culminated in the Proclamation of the Irish Republic in 1916, which declared the right of the Irish people to the ownership of Ireland. Inspired by the American Declaration of Independence, in 1919, the Irish Declaration of Independence asserted that all lawful authority in Ireland flowed from the people alone. These documents echoed the moral logic that Paine and the American revolutionaries advocated: that government exists only by the free choice of the governed.

#### Paine Reaches India

The example of the American Revolution reached India by the mid-19th century. There, reformers including Jyotirao Phule challenged deeply rooted inequalities and British imperial authority.

Born in Pune to a family of agricultural laborers, Phule rejected the authority of the caste system and insisted that equality was the natural condition of human beings. But

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it was not until Phule read Paine’s *Rights of Man* in 1848 at the age of 21 that he began to act on his convictions.

His writings, *Gulamgiri (Slavery)* and *Shetkaryacha Asud (The Cultivator’s Whipcord)*, exposed the cruelty of caste oppression and defended the dignity of the individual. Phule and his wife, Savitribai, who became the first female teacher in modern India, founded schools for girls and for children of oppressed castes.

Phule was honored with the title

Mahatma (from Sanskrit “mahātman,” meaning “great-souled”), a title that would later be bestowed on Gandhi, who would draw parallels between the civil disobedience of the Boston Tea Party and the Indian Salt March in 1930.

#### Exporting the Logic of Liberty

While scholars often focus on Paine’s towering influence in Revolutionary France, where his ideas initially fueled libertarian aspirations, the French Revolution’s trajectory quickly veered into a more authoritarian phase under Maximilien Robespierre. Paine experienced these complexities firsthand, culminating in his debate with Edmund Burke over the legitimacy of revolution as a method of political change.

While Paine had passionately defended the French Revolution, his own imprisonment during the Reign of Terror in 1793 forced him to reevaluate that enthusiasm. The stark reality of Robespierre’s terror made him confront how an initially pure fight for liberty had devolved into a new form of oppression.

Yet, beyond France, Paine’s legacy took a different, often more incremental form. Irish reformers drew on his arguments to push against religious sectarianism, Indian reformers leveraged his ideas to challenge caste and colonial domination, and Latin American reformers found in his writings a blueprint for republican institutions. In these cases, Paine’s influence didn’t culminate in a reign of terror, but rather in gradual shifts toward a more free society.



After the American Revolution, Thomas Paine traveled to Europe and published *The Rights of Man* in 1791. (Photo by Michael Nicholson/Corbis via Getty Images)

In each case, Paine’s writings provided a common vocabulary and logic that revolutionaries could adapt to challenge oppressive governments and injustice. The global influence of the American Revolution rests as much on its ideas that were transmitted by luminaries such as Paine as it does on its institutions. The most radical idea Paine embodied was that ordinary people have the right to debate their own government and to criticize authority. This was a message that echoed *Cato’s Letter no. 38*, “The Right and Capacity of the People to Judge of Government”:

“Every ploughman knows a good government from a bad one, from the effects of it: he knows whether the fruits of his labour be his own, and whether he enjoy them in peace and security: And if he do not know the principles of government, it is for want of thinking and enquiry, for they lie open to common sense.” ✦

#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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