

Common Sense by Thomas Paine

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Over 150,000 copies of *Common Sense* were sold in America and Europe. Roughly 20% of the population in the U.S. heard or read text. George Washington had it read to his troops. It swayed public opinion, and in a short time, it made anything less than independence feel like a betrayal.

Excerpt 1

In the following pages I offer nothing more than simple facts, plain arguments, and common sense: and have no other preliminaries to settle with the reader than that he will divest [rid] himself of prejudice and prepossession, and suffer [permit] his reason and his feelings to determine for themselves: that he will put on, or rather that he will not put off, the true character of a man, and generously enlarge his views beyond the present day.

...

The sun never shined on a cause of greater worth. 'Tis not the affair of a city, a country, a province, or a kingdom, but of a continent – of at least one eighth part of the habitable globe. 'Tis not the concern of a day, a year, or an age; posterity are virtually involved in the contest and will be more or less affected, even to the end of time, by the proceedings now. Now is the seed time of continental [colonies'] union, faith and honor. The least fracture now will be like a name engraved with the point of a pin on the tender rind of a young oak; the wound will enlarge with the tree, and posterity read it in full grown characters.

...

I have heard it asserted by some that as America hath flourished under her former connection with Great Britain, that the same connection is necessary towards her future happiness, and will always have the same effect. Nothing can be more fallacious than this kind of argument. We may as well assert that because a child has thrived upon milk, that it is never to have meat, or that the first twenty years of our lives is to become a precedent for the next twenty. But even this is admitting more than is true; for I answer roundly that America would have flourished as much, and probably much more, had no European power had anything to do with her.

Excerpt 2

Men of passive tempers [temperaments] look somewhat lightly over the offenses of Britain and, still hoping for the best, are apt to call out, "Come, come, we shall be friends again for all this." But examine the passions and feelings of mankind. Bring the doctrine of reconciliation to the touchstone of nature and then tell me whether you can hereafter love, honor, and faithfully serve the power that hath carried fire and sword into your land? If you cannot do all these, then are you only deceiving yourselves and by your

delay bringing ruin upon posterity? Your future connection with Britain, whom you can neither love nor honor, will be forced and unnatural, and being formed only on the plan of present convenience, will in a little time fall into a relapse more wretched than the first. But if you say you can still pass the violations over [ignore or underrate them], then I ask, Hath your house been burnt? Hath your property been destroyed before your face? Are your wife and children destitute of [without] a bed to lie on or bread to live on? Have you lost a parent or a child by their hands and yourself the ruined and wretched survivor? If you have not, then are you not a judge of those who have. But if you have, and can still shake hands with the murderers, then are you unworthy the name of husband, father, friend, or lover, and, whatever may be your rank or title in life, you have the heart of a coward and the spirit of a sycophant.

Excerpt 3

A government of our own is our natural right, and when a man seriously reflects on the precariousness of human affairs, he will become convinced that it is infinitely wiser and safer to form a constitution of our own in a cool deliberate manner, while we have it in our power, than to trust such an interesting event to time and chance. If we omit it now, some Massanello* may hereafter arise who, laying hold of popular disquietudes [grievances], may collect together the desperate and the discontented, and by assuming to themselves the powers of government, finally sweep away the liberties of the continent like a deluge. Should the government of America return again into the hands of Britain, the tottering situation of things will be a temptation for some desperate adventurer to try his fortune; and in such a case, what relief can Britain give? Ere [before] she could hear the news, the fatal business might be done, and ourselves suffering like the wretched Britons under the oppression of the Conqueror [William the Conqueror in 1066]. Ye that oppose independence now, ye know not what ye do. Ye are opening a door to eternal tyranny by keeping vacant the seat of government. . . . O ye that love mankind! Ye that dare oppose not only the tyranny but the tyrant, stand forth! Every spot of the old world is overrun with oppression. Freedom hath been hunted round the globe. Asia and Africa have long expelled her. —Europe regards her like a stranger, and England hath given her warning to depart. O! receive the fugitive, and prepare in time an asylum for mankind.

* Thomas Anello, otherwise Massanello, a fisherman of Naples, who after spiriting up his countrymen in the public marketplace against the oppression of the Spaniards, to whom the place was then subject, prompted them to revolt, and in the space of a day become King. [footnote in Paine]