

## Thomas Paine's Independence

Thomas Paine, the son of an English Quaker,(Sharp) published *Common Sense* anonymously in 1776 in order to sprout the idea of American Independence from the British (Sharp). He argued that liberation was quintessential to America's full economic development as a nation and that the prolongation of colonial occupation would make it harder to accomplish. By the mid eighteenth century, Britain had held firm reigns over the American economy and liberties by parliamentary ordinances such as the Stamp Act, Townshend Act, Tea Act and the Coercive Acts. These laws escalated tensions between the colonists and the British, fueling discontent among Americans, thus weaving an atmosphere of resistance by 1774. The Revolutionary War was a result of this dissatisfaction amplified by the growing concerns of the exploitation of American economy. Although it began as a war of revolution, it gradually transformed into one of independence, encouraged by the ideas presented in Paine's *Common Sense*. His tone of urgency fused with his simple language, "sound logic and unanswerable reasoning"(Sharp) provoked the movement toward Independence in 1776.

Paine, in his argument, identified that not only was it in America's best interest to separate from Britain in order to maximize her potential as a nation, but also that the longer independence was delayed, the harder it would become to attain it. He argued that Britain was exploiting American economy, thus consuming her wealth. By the mid 1770s, Americans had been through an assortment of experiences that made them receptive of the arguments laid out in his pamphlet. These ranged from rigid economic reforms such as the Townshend Act, The Stamp Act and the Tea Act to the Coercive Acts of 1774 and augmented much resentment among Americans, especially from the resistance leaders, pushing them on the brink of revolution.

Throughout *Common Sense*, Paine asserted that America would not thrive commercially if it continued to linger in a state of foreign dependency, "cramped and fettered by legislative powers." (Sharp) He emphasized that even though America's power was unparalleled with that of other nations, it was hardly comparable to the capability it would reach under liberation. In his argument, he compared Britain and America to France and Spain, contending that their interdependence would ultimately topple the economy. He exemplified the case of a powerful financial system in two independent states, France and Spain, thus providing support for his theory. He also attested that Britain was simply colonizing America as a monetary benefit, as opposed to protecting her out of altruistic purposes. Furthermore, he vindicated his claim of commercial exploitation by demonstrating the unjust extension of Canadian borders arguing that the back lands, which some states had been unfairly deprived of, were organically valued at five pounds sterling per hundred acres; but now amounted to twenty-five million Pennsylvania currency. (Sharp)

Paine's second argument stated that prolongation would make independence a difficult feat to accomplish. He insisted that if they waged a war for independence in 1776, when they had the military ability and experience to do so, they would achieve liberation because their military had just undergone the Seven Years War, which ended with the Treaty of Paris in 1763. However, if they waited a few more years, there was a probability that they would be ruptured of the same capability thus making independence an impossible stroke to accomplish. Furthermore, he advocated that

waging a war of independence was a “single simple clear line”(Sharp) where as reconciliation was “exceedingly perplexed and complicated” (Sharp)thus making the former a default preference. He also emphasized the impracticality of reconciliation-arguing that it would spiral into a web of complexities because America’s condition in 1776 was “truly alarming.” (Sharp) He further contended that America was inadvertently in a state of independence, combating for dependence and that prolongation encouraged Britain to fully conquer her.

By the mid eighteenth century, Americans had experienced financial drain in the form of various government reforms. These included the Stamp Act, the Tea Act, the Townshend Act and the Coercive Acts. The Stamp Act of 1775, introduced by George Grenville, levied tax stamps on most printed materials, thus affecting nearly every colonist, especially merchants and members of the colonial elite. In addition, it also required that tax stamps be purchased with scarce sterling coins. Americans viewed the law as an oppressive design stimulating the destruction of their economic liberty. Similarly, the Townshend Act of 1767 extended the Navigation Acts by enforcing tax on trade goods such as paper, glass and tea. It specifically applied to items imported into colonies from Britain, not to those from foreign countries, thus violating the mercantilist theory, which aimed at minimizing imports that cost the nation money and maximizing exports that generated income. In addition, the revenues were used to pay colonial officials, which meant that assemblies could no longer deter the cooperation of officials by withholding their salary. The Townshend Act was met with much anger and disapproval from merchants because it put their profits in jeopardy, thus conforming to Paine’s theory of economic drain. Parliament passed the Tea Act in May 1773, which primarily aimed to save the East India Company from bankruptcy. According to the Tea Act, solely the East India Company’s designated agents could sell legal tea in America. Resistance leaders interpreted this law as a device to make them admit Parliaments right to tax them, because the cheaper tea was still to be taxed under the Townshend Act. Another sector of Americans viewed it as an attempt of an East India Company monopoly in colonial trade. The movement against the Tea Act comprised an eclectic mix of Americans including blacksmith, doctors, farmers and so forth and was a key factor in shaping their perception of Paine’s arguments in *Common Sense*. (Norton)

The Coercive Acts of 1774 were the last dose of reforms that pushed the Americans toward a revolutionary war. Parliament adopted a set of four laws that were later known as the Intolerable Acts of the mid eighteenth century. The first law closed part of Boston until the tea was paid for, thus hindering all but coastal trade in food and firewood. Later that spring Parliament passed the Massachusetts Government Act revising the province’s existing charter and substituting the appointed council for an elected one, complimented by an increase in the governor’s powers and the prohibition of most town meetings. The third act, the Justice Act, stated that a person accused of committing murder in the course of suppressing a riot would be tried outside the colony at the location of the incident. Finally, the Quartering Act allowed military officers to lease privately owned buildings. In addition, Parliament also passed the Quebec Act, which allowed more religious freedom for Catholics in Quebec, thus alarming Protestant colonists. As a result of these laws, resistance leaders feared deliberate oppression by the British. The stipulations threatened the security of the ports in New York and Philadelphia, the royal charters of the other colonies, the occupation of America by

military forces and the inevitable spread of the favored Catholic Church all over the country. (Norton) Thus, the oppression embroidered by these Acts and experiences pushed Americans into revolution and cultivated their commitment toward resistance, ultimately provoking a strong, positive response to Paine's *Common Sense*.

While the experiences Americans faced pre- 1776 played a vital role in their positive response toward *Common Sense*, the crisp language, urgent tone and systematic content backed by evidence made it a popular uproar in the 1770s. Paine stated his arguments in an orderly fashion, making them concise and coherent, thus enabling Americans of nearly every occupation capable of comprehending them. He combined these with a tone of persistence, exemplified in sentences such as "The Rubicon is passed", (Sharp) thus effectively conveying the seriousness of the situation. Besides that, his discourse was structured by evidence at nearly every step. For instance, when he asserted the claim of economic stagnation, he strengthened it by exemplifying the case of Spanish and French economy. Moreover, he ignited the nationalist excitement of the "birth of a new nation" (Sharp) whose diversity and prosperity would be comparable to that of Europe's. By the same token, he offered a rational method of waging a war of Independence, i.e. one that began with legislation, so as to cultivate a finely tuned nation after liberation. These factors made *Common Sense* well favored in 1776, making it a significant tool of instigating Independence.

Thus, economic oppression in the form of various government reforms pushed Americans into a state of resistance. In *Common Sense*, Paine critically examined sections of these reforms to conclude that Independence was not only imminent for economic growth but also for practical reasons (for instance, it was simpler than reconciliation). His methodical arguments combined with the simplicity in language, made *Common Sense* a popular beacon of nationalism and ultimately pulled the trigger for the American War of Independence in 1776.