



Paine, Thomas

Thomas Paine (1737–1809) was one of the most interesting political figures of his generation. By means of his extraordinary writings, which advocated independence from Great Britain in terms both eloquent and incendiary, he helped cultivate the soil that produced the American Revolution.

Thomas Paine was born in the English village of Thetford, in Norfolk, on January 29, 1737. His father was a Quaker, and he grew up in a close-knit agricultural community. He attended Thetford Grammar School until the age of thirteen and then left school to begin an apprenticeship with his father as a staymaker.

America and the Fight for Independence

After leaving his staymaking career and working as an excise officer, Paine published his first political work, *The Case of the Officers of Excise*, in 1772. In October 1774, with letters of recommendation from Benjamin Franklin, whom he met in London, Paine left London for America; he arrived in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, on November 30.

In America, Paine became a journalist and editor, and in 1776 he published an anonymous pamphlet, *Common Sense*, a robust defense of complete American independence from England. Paine wrote with a fiery passion that inspired others to take up the cause for the Revolutionary War. It was in *Common Sense* that Paine criticized the English monarchy and called for a representative government with frequent elections and a written constitution. In excess of 100,000 of these pamphlets were printed and read by people everywhere.

The opening essay of The American Crisis was written on December 23, 1776, and its first words are famous for the inspiration that they provided the colonists during their long struggle with the British.

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 by 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. What we obtain too cheap, we esteem too lightly: it is dearness only that gives every thing its value. Heaven knows how to put a proper price upon its goods; and it would be strange indeed if so celestial an article as FREEDOM should not be highly rated. Britain, with an army to enforce her tyranny, has declared that she has a right (not only to TAX) but "to BIND us in ALL CASES WHATSOEVER," and if being

bound in that manner, is not slavery, then is there not such a thing as slavery upon earth. Even the expression is impious; for so unlimited a power can belong only to God.

THOMAS PAINE,
THE AMERICAN CRISIS

During the Revolutionary War, Paine wrote a collection of articles called *The American Crisis* (1776–1777) that dealt with the desire for America's independence and self-governance. The first of his series of essays—published on December 23, 1776—so impressed the commander in chief of the American forces, George Washington, that he had the essay read to his troops at Valley Forge.

Europe and the Later Years

In 1787 Paine returned to Europe, where he defended the underpinnings of the French Revolution with his latest work, *Rights of Man*, which was published in 1791. His defense of the Revolution earned him honorary French citizenship; however, he was imprisoned in December 1793 for opposing the execution of King Louis XVI of France. Upon his release in November 1794, Paine completed *The Age of Reason* (1794–1796), a critique of organized religion that had been inspired by inconsistencies he found between the Bible and his own beliefs as a deist. Although many of the leading men of the United States were deists, including many (perhaps most) of the Founders, it was a controversial position to maintain in public—especially for men with political ambitions—and so most deists took some pains to keep their dissenting religious views private.

PAINE THE INVENTOR

One of the lesser-known facets of Thomas Paine was his passion for science and his aptitude as an inventor. For instance, in Europe he received a patent for the single-span iron bridge. He also developed a smokeless candle, investigated the cause of yellow fever, and worked on early designs of the steam engine. During the course of his scientific investigations, he came to believe that reason could be used to investigate all human questions. This attitude became the foundation for his later work as a political thinker.

Later, as his last significant works, Paine published a controversial pamphlet, *Letter to George Washington* (1796), in which he criticized the president in very sharp terms; and *Agrarian Justice* (1797), which expressed his concerns on the institution of land ownership. In 1802 Paine, missing his adopted land of America, was given an invitation from President Thomas Jefferson to return. He did so even though he was no longer championed as a hero among the common people and instead faced significant criticism for his views on religion ("I do not believe in the creed professed by the Jewish church, by the Roman church, by the Greek church, by the Turkish church, by the Protestant church, nor by any church that I know of"). Nor was he helped by his condemnation of Washington, whom Paine had accused of betraying his own principles

and those of the Revolution by surrendering the United States to the control of landed aristocrats—the sort of people the Revolution was fought to rid the colonies of.

Paine died, largely unmourned, at the age of seventy-two in New York City on June 8, 1809. It was another century before he began to recover the esteem he had had in the years leading up to the Revolution.

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See also: [FRANKLIN, BENJAMIN](#); [JEFFERSON, THOMAS](#); [REVOLUTIONARY WAR](#); [WASHINGTON, GEORGE](#).

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