

from one, are remote, and, at all to be dreaded. But the consequence of wanting ideas formed from the present view of things, is certain and inevitable ruin. For, if I was called upon to declare upon oath whether the militia have been most serviceable or hurtful upon the whole, I should subscribe to the latter.

X The Formal Break with Britain

I. Paine Talks Common Sense (1776)

Despite the shooting at Lexington, Concord, and Bunker Hill; despite the British burning of Falmouth (Maine) and Norfolk (Virginia); despite the king's hiring of German (Hessian) mercenaries, the American colonials professed to be fighting merely for reconciliation. But killing Redcoats with one hand and waving the olive branch with the other seemed ridiculous to Thomas Paine, a thirty-nine-year-old agitator from England who had arrived in Philadelphia about a year earlier. Of humble birth, impoverished, largely self-educated, and early apprenticed to a corset maker, he was a born rebel who had failed at various undertakings. But he rocketed to fame with a forty-seven-page pamphlet published in January 1776 under the title Common Sense. Selling the incredible total of 120,000 copies in three months, it sharply accelerated the drift toward independence. Paine urged an immediate break not only to secure foreign assistance but also to fulfill America's moral mandate from the world. Were his views on mercantilism, isolationism, and reconciliation reasonable? Did his arguments appeal more to passion or to logic?

In the following pages I offer nothing more than simple facts, plain arguments, and common sense. . . .

I have heard it asserted by some that, as America has flourished under her former connection with Great Britain, 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, it is never to have meat, or that the first twenty years of our lives is to become precedent for the next twenty. But even this is admitting more than is true. To answer roundly that America would have flourished as much, and probably more, had no European power taken any notice of her. The commerce by which she hath enriched herself are the necessaries of life, and will always have a market while eating is the custom of Europe.

Thomas Paine, *Common Sense* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1894), pp. 84-101, passim.

But she [England] has protected us, say some. That she hath engrossed [monopolized] us is true, and defended the continent at our expense, as well as her own, is admitted; and she would have defended Turkey from the same motive, viz. for the sake of trade and dominion. . . .

But Britain is the parent country, say some. Then the more shame upon her conduct. Even brutes do not devour their young, nor savages make war upon their families; wherefore the assertion, if true, turns to her reproach. But it happens not to be true, or only partly so. . . . Europe, and not England, is the parent country of America. This new world hath been the asylum for the persecuted lovers of civil and religious liberty from every part of Europe. Hither have they fled, not from the tender embraces of the mother, but from the cruelty of the monster; and it is so far true of England that the same tyranny which drove the first emigrants from home pursues their descendants still. . . .

. . . Any submission to, or dependence on, Great Britain tends directly to involve this continent in European wars and quarrels, and set us at variance with nations who would otherwise seek our friendship, and against whom we have neither anger nor complaint. As Europe is our market for trade, we ought to form no partial [preferential] connection with any part of it. It is the true interest of America to steer clear of European contentions, which she never can do while, by her dependence on Britain, she is made the makeweight in the scale of British politics. . . .

Everything that is right or reasonable pleads for separation. The blood of the slain, the weeping voice of nature, cries, 'tis time to part. Even the distance at which the Almighty hath placed England and America is a strong and natural proof that the authority of the one over the other was never the design of Heaven. . . .

But if you say, you can still pass the violations over, then I ask, Hath your house been burnt? Hath your property been destroyed before your face? Are your wife and children destitute of 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. . . .

Every quiet method for peace hath been ineffectual. Our prayers have been rejected with disdain. . . . Wherefore, since nothing but blows will do, for God's sake let us come to a final separation. . . .

Small islands, not capable of protecting themselves, are the proper objects for government to take under their care. But there is something absurd in supposing a continent to be perpetually governed by an island. In no instance hath nature made the satellite larger than its primary planet; and as England and America, with respect to each other, reverse the common order of nature, it is evident that they belong to different systems. England to Europe: America to itself. . . .

No man was a warmer wisher for a reconciliation than myself before the fatal nineteenth of April, 1775 [Lexington]. But the moment the event of that day was made known, I rejected the hardened, sullen-tempered Pharaoh of England [George III] forever; and disdain the wretch that, with the pretended title of Father of his People, can unfeelingly hear of their slaughter, and composedly sleep with their blood upon his soul. . . .

And in order to show that reconciliation now is a dangerous doctrine, I affirm that it would be policy in the King at this time to repeal the acts, for the sake of reinstating himself in the government of the provinces; in order that *he may accomplish by craft and subtlety in the long run what he cannot do by force and violence in the short one.* Reconciliation and ruin are nearly related. . . .

You that tell us of harmony and reconciliation, can you restore to us the time that is past? Can you give to prostitution its former innocence? Neither can you reconcile Britain and America. . . . There are injuries which nature cannot forgive; she would cease to be nature if she did. As well can the lover forgive the ravisher of his mistress as the continent forgive the murders of Britain. The Almighty hath implanted in us these unextinguishable feelings for good and wise purposes. . . . They distinguish us from the herd of common animals. . . .

O! you that love mankind! You 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.