

COMMON SENSE

THOMAS PAINE (1737-1809)

from *The U.S. Constitution: A Reader*, pp. 99-100

Published anonymously in January 1776, by an Englishman who had come to Philadelphia two years before, Common Sense became the most published work of the founding era. Printed over half a million times in a nation of three million people, it made a passionate case for liberty and against monarchy. Unpopular in later life for his attacks on Christianity, Thomas Paine will always be remembered for this pamphlet—a pamphlet often said to have launched the American Revolution.

JANUARY 10, 1776

ON THE ORIGIN AND DESIGN OF GOVERNMENT IN GENERAL, WITH CONCISE REMARKS ON THE ENGLISH CONSTITUTION

Some writers have so confounded society with government, as to leave little or no distinction between them; whereas they are not only different, but have different origins. Society is produced by our wants and government by our wickedness; the former promotes our happiness *positively* by uniting our affections, the latter *negatively* by restraining our vices. The one encourages intercourse, the other creates distinctions. The first is a patron, the last a punisher.

Society in every state is a blessing, but government, even in its best state, is but a necessary evil; in its worst state an intolerable one; for when we suffer, or are exposed to the same miseries *by a government*, which we might expect in a country *without government*, our calamity is heightened by reflecting that we furnish the means by which we suffer. Government, like dress, is the badge of lost innocence; the palaces of kings are built upon the ruins of the bowers of paradise. For were the impulses of conscience clear, uniform and irresistibly obeyed, man would need no other law-giver; but that not being the case, he finds it necessary to surrender up a part of his property to furnish means for the protection of the rest; and this he is induced to do by the same prudence which in every other case advises him, out of two evils to choose the least. Wherefore, security being the true design and end of government, it unanswerably follows that whatever form thereof appears most likely to ensure it to us, with the least expense and greatest benefit, is preferable to all others....

Thomas Paine, "Common Sense," in William M. Van der Weyde, ed., *The Life and Works of Thomas Paine*, "Patriot's Edition," Vol. 2 (New Rochelle, NY: Thomas Paine National Historical Association, 1925), 97–110, 114–22. Thomas Paine National Historical Association, New Rochelle, NY. www.thomaspaine.org.