

Common sense today: Salute Paine as well as Jefferson for independence



AS AMERICANS celebrate the 225th anniversary of the United States, Thomas Jefferson's Declaration of Independence

will, once again, command center stage. It will be quoted and read in its entirety at small-town gatherings, picnics and dedication ceremonies across the nation.

But one truth that is not so self-evident to the American people is that it was the words of another Thomas — Thomas Paine — that served to mobilize the masses for revolution and inspired Jefferson's Declaration.

Paine, the 39-year-old author of "Common Sense" — the 47-page pamphlet that served as a lightning rod for the cause of American independence — was more instrumental than Jefferson in mobilizing public support for the Revolution.

OPINION

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A self-educated Englishman known for his failures as a corset-maker, tax collector and husband, Paine immigrated to the American Colonies in 1774. Settling in Philadelphia, he took a job as editor of the *Pennsylvania Magazine*, where he wrote inflammatory essays against slavery, the inferior political and social status of women, and, of course, England's rule.

While Jefferson sat through the proceedings of the Second Continental Congress, Paine was out circulating among the highest and lowest orders of society. He worked hard to determine the political temper of the Colonies, reading newspapers and frequent-

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ing the taverns and coffeehouses of Philadelphia, buttonholing anyone with an opinion.

By autumn 1775, Paine's writings had captured the attention of Benjamin Franklin, who enlisted his support to test public opinion before making a definitive commitment to independence. Paine obliged Franklin by writing "Common Sense," which appeared on Jan. 1, 1776. Using exciting and irreverent imagery — "simple facts, plain arguments and common sense" — Paine launched a frontal attack on the British monarchy.

If the institution were truly useful, he asked his readers, why would nature ridicule it "by giving mankind an ass for a lion (the symbol of the British monarchy) on the throne?" Depicting King George III as a tyrant, as a co-conspirator with Parliament in an attempt to destroy the natural rights of the American Colonists, Paine likened the monarch to a "father-king" who relished his children, the Americans, as his main meal. "Americans should not feel any obligation to a crowned ruffian who sanctions war against them," he concluded.

Of course, Jefferson later made the same point in the Declaration, but with much greater respect for George III. Charging the king with "repeated injuries and usurpations" against the Colonies, Jefferson went on to list 27 specific grievances against him.

Jefferson concluded that a "Prince whose character is marked by every act which may define a Tyrant, is unfit to be the ruler of a free people." The author of the Declaration was careful to distinguish between the king's behavior and a personal attack.

Assuming the role of victim for the colonies, Jefferson also solemnly declared: "That these United Colonies are, and of Right ought to be, Free and Independent States; that they are absolved from all Allegiance to the British Crown; and that all political connection between them and the State of Great Britain, is and ought to be totally dissolved."

Jefferson's careful, calculated and felicitous language was designed to appeal to the political elite of the Colonies as well as of Europe, who might be persuaded to aid the American cause.

Paine's audience was less refined. They were the common people who eventually took up the musket and fought for American independence. He appealed not only to their reason but to their emotions as well. Paine exhorted his readers to "cease negotiating for a repeal of Parliamentary acts and separate from England." By declaring its independence, America would ensure a strong, lasting commerce, the happiness of its people and protection from a corrupt Europe.

Like a preacher urging his congregation to embark on a divinely inspired mission, Paine reminded his readers of the American blood already shed at Lexington and Concord with the words: "O! Ye that love mankind! The blood of the slain, the weeping voice of nature cries 'Tis time to part!"

The brilliance of Paine's work was that it expressed the ideas of revolution in language that the masses could understand. "Common Sense" aroused public opinion in America in an unprecedented way. It quickly became a best seller, with 120,000 copies sold in the first year after publication. It found its way into bookstores, private libraries and taverns in both Europe and America. "Common Sense" also instigated

hundreds of responses, pro and con, in the form of pamphlets, broadsides and newspaper editorials.

Everyone was talking about the pamphlet except Thomas Jefferson. The Virginia delegate certainly read Paine's pamphlet but made no known public comment about it, though it is clear to historians that "Common Sense" anticipated the Declaration in its attack on monarchy and its elevation of the Colonists' grievances from a dispute over English freedoms to a struggle of universal dimensions.

Paine's actions mirrored his beliefs. In July 1776 he joined the Continental Army and worked to maintain its morale by writing a series of 13 essays, later published as "The American Crisis."

Jefferson, on the other hand, believing that his national service had been completed with the writing of the Declaration, returned home to his family in Virginia. He repeatedly refused to serve in the Army.

Today, "Common Sense" may not be as highly regarded as the Declaration of Independence, but it is still a powerful expression of the American mind and a testament to the will of the common people — an audience to which Jefferson, for all his brilliance as a writer, simply could not relate.

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OPINION

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A self-educated lighterman known for his talents as a censor-master tax collector and husband, Paine immigrated to the American colonies in 1774. Settling in Philadelphia, he took a job as editor of the Pennsylvania Magazine, where he wrote editorially on many social issues, the mirror of political and social issues of the time, and of course, England's.

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