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Heavy Lies the Crown: The Role of Common Sense in Shifting Colonial Blame from Parliament to King in 1776

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“In the early ages of the world, according to the scripture chronology, there were no kings, the consequence of which was there were no wars; it is the pride of kings which throws mankind into confusion.” These words, crafted by Thomas Paine during a cold New England winter in 1776 and read aloud in taverns up and down the Atlantic seaboard, are considered one of the first great pieces of American literature. Their effects, however, were far more profound than merely serving as standard reading material in the average history classroom. Instead, *Common Sense* played a significant role in uniting colonists against the shackles of tyranny in a season of ambivalence for many British subjects unsure of their commitment to the American independence cause.

From its widespread popularity in major colonial cities to its ability to transcend class lines with emotionally charged language and imagery, Thomas Paine’s *Common Sense* had secured its place in history within months of its initial publication. Using both biblical and secular arguments to undermine the institution of monarchy, *Common Sense* shifted American dialogue from its deeply rooted dissatisfaction with the Parliament, which up until 1776 was viewed as the source of colonial subjugation, to a critically revolutionary condemnation of the Crown. This change gained immense traction in the colonies as people began to view the King himself as the primary aggressor in a long line of American grievances.

For the first time in colonial memory, in large part due to Paine’s writing, colonists were able to analyze the subjugation they experienced regarding policy and trade enactments over the decade leading up to 1776. As a result, inherent respect for the Crown began to dissolve as many realized the King across the ocean was neither collectively nor divinely ordained. By looking at newspapers written before the publishing of *Common Sense* in 1776 and those articles written shortly thereafter, as well as at the accusatory language aimed at the King found in the

Declaration of Independence, it becomes evident that *Common Sense* was extremely influential in shifting the blame as the colonists quickly recognized the true perpetrator behind colonial oppression: the Crown.

Before *Common Sense* gained international renown, most colonial frustration was aimed at the policies passed by Parliament in an effort to help mitigate Britain's debt acquired after the Seven Years War.¹ As evidenced by many of the opinions written in newspapers at the time, much of the distrust of Parliament stemmed directly from the taxes placed on the colonies, which were viewed as unnecessarily pervasive. In his analysis of taxation policy in the mid eighteenth century, Keane states, "During the 1760s, as the Declaratory Act of 1766 confirmed, Parliament began explicitly to insist on its right to extend its sovereign powers into every nook and cranny of colonial life."² Many colonial newspapers expressed their discontent, and newspaper sources in the more populous New England area were rife with such claims. A disgruntled group in Boston known as "The Mohawks," outraged by the Tea Tax, wrote, "the fetters which have been forged for us by the parliament of Great-Britain are hourly expected to arrive," and they claimed, "we do therefore declare, that we are determined not to be enslaved, by any power on earth."³

Not only were the Parliamentary taxes an inconvenience for colonists, but as shown in this article, they were a symbol of the widespread belief that the taxes were part of a larger plan of Parliament to enslave the colonies. Certainly the concept of slavery had very different connotations depending on who was using the term, but for many whites in the northern and middle colonies during the Revolutionary era, slavery was viewed as any attempt to deprive a man of his property and his franchise. A writer in Philadelphia echoes this sentiment, stating that

¹ Alan Taylor, *American Revolutions: A Continental History, 1750-1804* (New York: W.W Norton & Company, 2016), 36.

² John Keane, *Tom Paine: A Political Life* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 1995), 89.

³ The Mohawks, *Boston Post-Boy* (Boston, MA), Dec. 6, 1773.

“the Stamp and Tea Laws were both designed to raise a revenue, and to establish *parliamentary despotism* in America.”⁴ Many Americans were anxious that Parliament was going to use its rampant authority to subjugate the colonies completely, and anger was usually directed at the governing body alone.

It was not just the common people that feared Parliamentary enslavement. John Adams, in his private diary, wrote regarding the dumping of tea in the Boston Harbor:

To let it be landed, would be giving up the Principle of Taxation by Parliamentary Authority, against which the Continent have struggled for 10 years, it was loosing all our labour for 10 years and subjecting ourselves and our Posterity forever to Egyptian Taskmasters—to Burthens [*sic*], Indignities, to Ignominy, Reproach and Contempt, to Desolation and Oppression, to Poverty and Servitude.⁵

There is no explicit mention of King George or a hint of subtextual frustration at the Crown. Indeed, Adams contemplates Britain’s reaction to hearing the news of the massive losses incurred by Patriot action and asks, “...what Measures will the Ministry take, in Consequence of this? Will they resent it? Will they dare to resent it? Will they punish Us?”⁶ The fear of response and retribution was focused on the potential reaction of Parliament, which was viewed by North American colonists as being entirely the despotic aggressor.

This dichotomy between distrust of the Parliament and love for the king permeated most social groups in the early 1770s, including those of Congressional delegates. Beeman writes, “...they [the delegates] like most of their fellow colonists, found themselves torn by mixed emotions—outraged at British invasions of American liberty and love for their mother country

⁴ Scaevola, “By Uniting We Stand—By Dividing We Fall,” *Boston Gazette* (Boston, MA), Oct. 25, 1773.

⁵ Richard D. Brown, *Major Problems in the Era of the American Revolution, 1760-1791: Documents and Essays* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1999), 140.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 140.

and king.”⁷ This devotion to the Crown did not dissipate despite the rise in tension between British soldiers and colonial subjects after the dumping of East Indian tea in Boston Harbor incurred strict Parliamentary reprimand in 1773. Again, Beeman states, “...perhaps the only thing that bound American colonists together in 1774 was their common identity as subjects of the British Crown and their loyalty, indeed, their love of the British monarch.”⁸ Despite the burden of taxes, colonists still clung to their identity as loyal subjects of King George.

To state that Thomas Paine’s *Common Sense* was enjoyed in the colonies would be a disservice to its timeless acclaim. With a historically unprecedented number of printings in its first year of publication, with many more excerpts featured in colonial newspapers or read aloud in taverns, *Common Sense* was an “international bestseller in its time.”⁹ Though certainly serving as an influence for Paine’s writing, the specific transgressions of Parliament are rarely featured in his pamphlet; instead he shifts the focus to the impracticality and biblical condemnation of monarchical government. Paine offers two perspectives on monarchy: religious and secular. Both views worked together to undermine the institution and are especially important in serving as a catalyst for the shift in colonial anger from Parliament to the Crown in 1776.

Paine uses the biblical tales of Gideon and Samuel to form his religious critique, and though his mother and father subscribed to the Anglican and Quaker faiths respectively, the author himself was not particularly religious. However, the examples serving as his biblical references would have been understood by all who read them during the eighteenth century.¹⁰

⁷ Richard R. Beeman, *Our Lives, Our Fortunes and Our Sacred Honor: The Forging of American Independence, 1774-1776* (New York: Basic Books, 2013), 4.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 3.

⁹ Thomas P. Slaughter, *Common Sense and Related Writings by Thomas Paine* (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin’s, 2001), 30.

¹⁰ Slaughter, *Common Sense and Related Writings by Thomas Paine*, 4.

Paine relays the story of the Israelites, who, after being oppressed by the Midianites, are led against them by Gideon in battle. Though the numbers are not in their favor, they are victorious. When Gideon's people ask him to rule over them, thinking it was he who single-handedly made their victory possible instead of the Lord, Paine states that Gideon "doth not decline the honor, but denieth their right to give it."¹¹

Another biblical example Paine uses to denounce monarchy from a scriptural perspective is the story of Samuel. Occurring more than one hundred years after Gideon's time, the account sees the Jews once again requesting to be ruled by an earthly king.¹² Samuel tells the people about the corruptible nature of all kings, stating that such rulers would take sons and daughters for their armies and kitchens while also demanding acquisition of property, but still the Jews want a human ruler.¹³ The people are finally convinced of God's power when He destroys their harvests with torrential rain and thunder, and only then is His sufficient power recognized.¹⁴ Paine relies heavily on this example of the Jews' repentance and claims "that the Almighty hath here entered his protest against monarchical government is true, or the scripture is false."¹⁵ Because monarchy was so widely regarded as a biblically supported institution, it was important that Paine offer an opposite biblical perspective, and this clearly had an effect on his readers. To obey and worship a king, states Paine, is "the most prosperous invention the Devil ever set on

¹¹ Ibid., 80.

¹² Ibid., 80.

¹³ Ibid., 81.

¹⁴ Ibid., 82.

¹⁵ Ibid., 82.

foot for the promotion of idolatry.”¹⁶ For the devoted and pious colonists in the 1770s, to be called an idolater was one of the most condemning sentences that could be passed.

Paine’s added secular perspective contributed significant weight to his arguments about the impracticality of monarchy. Chief among these arguments is the idea that hereditary succession is one of the worst evils that accompany the institution of Great Britain’s government.¹⁷ Paine states that a man who might be suitable to rule is not guaranteed to have an heir that will be equally suited for the throne. He states that all men are born equal, and as such, there is nothing that should set one particular bloodline in perpetual preference over other men.¹⁸ The nature of hereditary succession creates a situation where common people who would choose to bestow public honors on a king of their choosing have no right to determine that his heirs will be the best rulers for following generations.¹⁹

Additionally, Paine critically analyzes the origins of kings and uses this as a platform to denounce monarchy. He claims that, if the “dark covering of antiquity” is removed, it is most probable that the line of kings ruling Europe descended from “the principle ruffian of some restless gang, whose savage manners or preeminence in subtility [*sic*] obtained him the title of chief among plunderers.”²⁰ In an era where kings were likened as second only to God, this bold claim most certainly would have worked to shake colonists and British nobles alike. Paine continues to disturb the accepted complacency with the monarchy by stating, “what at first was submitted to as a convenience, was afterwards claimed as a right.”²¹ Though at one time viewed as a simple choice of survival between either mob rule or a somewhat orderly transfer of political

¹⁶ Slaughter, *Common Sense and Related Writings by Thomas Paine*, 79.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 83.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 82.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 82.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 83.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 83.

power, hereditarily successive monarchy was deemed the lesser of two evils. With these secular arguments for the rejection of monarchy, Paine pressures his readers to consider that the time to overthrow the centuries-old notion of kingly rule is upon the colonies.

This shift in perception of the previously untarnished image of the King happens quickly after the widespread popularity of *Common Sense*. While it was relatively typical for political leaders to approach the governing British bodies, both the Crown and Parliament, to demand a rescinding of policies negatively impacting colonists, Paine encouraged his readers to reject the Crown directly.²² Before his publication, so popular was the idea of reconciliation with the British empire that five of the thirteen colonies supported it during the Second Continental Congress in 1775, despite the many documented cases of armed hostilities in the colonies.²³ However, by the unmatched popularity of *Common Sense* immediately after publication, it is evident that Paine's ideas served as the motivation many needed to commit to the Patriot cause. Though it cannot be proved that *Common Sense* was the sole catalyst behind this historic event, just six months after its publication, during a reconvention of delegates in the summer of 1776, twelve of the thirteen colonies voted in favor of immediate independence from Great Britain.²⁴

Certainly, it must be stated again that finding explicit evidence of a direct link between *Common Sense* and the change in colonial opinion regarding the King is nearly impossible; however, analysis of newspaper trends at the time serve as proof that there was a significant relationship between Paine's polemic and changing attitudes towards the British monarch. The lines between the aggressive acts of Parliament and the role of the King began to be called into question, as is eloquently rhymed in this colonial poem: "tell me what difference there can be,

²² Jerome Dean Mahaffey, "Converting Tories to Whigs: Religion and Imagined Authorship in Thomas Paine's *Common Sense*," *Southern Communication Journal* 75, no. 5 (2010): 488.

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ *Ibid.*

‘twixt tyrant King and Ministry—the universal groan, that wing’d [*sic*] with curses cleaves the sky and shakes our monarch’s throne?’²⁵ A writer in Philadelphia, whose article was reprinted by a press in Massachusetts, held back nothing in his rail against the Empire, asserting, “... how is England fallen, when their King is a butcher, his ministers knaves, and their nobles negro thieves!”²⁶ Churches also took seriously Paine’s rejection of the divinely ordained monarchy; a newspaper in Connecticut discusses a sermon concisely labeled, “On Liberty of Conscience: Or, No King but Christ in His Church.”²⁷ It is remarkable that an institution so revered throughout centuries of history seemed to quickly crumble under the critical written thoughts of a lowly eighteenth-century author and a handful of strategically located printing presses.

While some colonists felt motivated to reject reconciliation with the British Crown due to Paine’s conclusion that monarchical institutions were not divinely ordained or biblically supported, others gravitated towards his more secular focus. An author in New York’s *Constitutional Gazette*, just a few months before the Declaration of Independence, addresses his article to “all the sound heads and honest hearts in America.”²⁸ He lists out multiple grievances against the King, including breaking charters, hiring foreign troops to burn colonial dwellings and provisions, and encouraging slave insurrections in the colonies to further the Crown’s imperial cause.²⁹ He continues, “... is such a King a legal sovereign, or a TYRANT? [*sic*] Does he not by such conduct forfeit the allegiance of his subjects? If not, by what means may it or can it possibly be forfeited?”³⁰

²⁵ *Constitutional Gazette* (New York, NY), Feb. 2, 1776.

²⁶ “Philadelphia, Jan. 17,” *Essex Journal* (Newbury, MA), Feb. 2, 1776.

²⁷ “Now in the Press, and Speedily Will be Published,” *Connecticut Courant and Hartford Weekly Intelligencer* (Hartford, CT), March 25, 1776.

²⁸ *Constitutional Gazette* (New York, NY), March 30, 1776.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ *Constitutional Gazette* (New York, NY), March 30, 1776.

Others claimed that the King directly, not solely the Parliament, was working with other European powers to quell colonial uprising through trade restrictions. An anonymous Philadelphian, in language that would have widely been recognized as treasonous within the colonies mere months before, writes, “the whining King of Great Britain has supplicated all the powers of Europe to forbid their subjects supplying the cowardly Americans with powder or arms.”³¹ This is a marked shift from opinions that Parliament was the governmental aggressor in an institution where the beloved King George could do no wrong, to blatantly and deliberately hold the King directly responsible for any British action that transpired against the colonies. Mahaffey claims, “rhetoric tipped the scales in the national debate, convincing many undecided colonists and converting a healthy portion of *reconciliationists* into rebels.”³² Perhaps it was a culmination of factors that led to the colonial public opening up to Paine’s thoughts on independence, but it is compelling that the colloquial dialogue surrounding the British government changed so rapidly after the publication of *Common Sense*.

Finally, perhaps serving as one of the most convincing pieces of evidence that *Common Sense* was effectively able to sway colonial anger from the Parliament to the Crown, is the Declaration of Independence itself. Composed just under six months after the publication of *Common Sense*, the document was crafted with a list of grievances meant to embody the voice of all colonists who felt betrayed by their mother country. Penned by Thomas Jefferson during July of 1776, the Declaration boldly states, “the history of the present king of Great Britain, is a history of repeated injuries and usurpations, all having in direct object the establishment of an

³¹ “Philadelphia, January 31,” *Connecticut Journal* (New Haven, CT), Feb. 2, 1776.

³² Mahaffey, “Converting Tories to Whigs,” 488.

absolute tyranny of these states.”³³ In a dramatic change in rhetoric from even one year prior to its creation, the Declaration begins each accusation with “he,” referring to King George himself, and holds him solely accountable for the hardships endured by Americans.

In conclusion, while it is highly likely that many factors encouraged a shift in colonial thought regarding the British Parliament and the Crown in the years leading up to 1776, Thomas Paine’s *Common Sense* served as one of the main catalysts for this change. Analysis of newspapers published between 1773 and 1775 find American anger directed specifically at Parliament, which was viewed as responsible for the invasive taxation policies that impacted the lives of most colonists. However, Paine’s cohesive arguments strategically dismantled monarchy as an institution from both a biblical and secular perspective. One historian claims that *Common Sense* “mines a fantasy of generality,” and perhaps it is exactly this generality that lends itself to such a positive reception by an oppressed and increasingly agitated public.³⁴ The popularity of Paine’s polemic, coupled with the new “anti-King” rhetoric of post-pamphlet newspapers, as well as the accusatory language targeting King George in the Declaration of Independence, serve as compelling testaments to the role *Common Sense* played in shifting the perspectives of this era.

³³ Pauline Maier, *American Scripture: Making the Declaration of Independence* (New York, NY: Vintage Books, 1998), 237.

³⁴ Trish Loughran, “Disseminating Common Sense: Thomas Paine and the Problem of the Early National Bestseller,” *American Literature* 78, no. 1 (2006): 21.

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