



Thomas Paine Monument, Morristown, NJ, Georg Lober

The Winter Soldier

He who dares not offend cannot be honest.
Thomas Paine

ABSENT THOMAS PAINE, THERE might have been no American Revolution.

Published anonymously, Paine's incendiary pamphlet, *Common Sense*, hit the cobblestone streets of colonial Philadelphia in January 1776, and sold 120,000 copies its first three months. By the end of the Revolution, fully one fifth of the non-slave, non-native population of the country of 2.5 million owned a copy, making it proportionally the largest selling American title of all time—before or since.

Paine is revered today as 'The Father of the American Revolution' for his crucial part in its inception, but few Americans know the whole story, which reveals a much less flattering—indeed, one might say truly shameful—chapter in the nation's history.

After suffering several business failures and the death of his wife and child in childbirth, the 37-year old Englishman emigrated to the colonies in 1774 with the help of Benjamin Franklin. Barely surviving the voyage after typhoid fever swept through his ship, upon recovering Paine found work in Philadelphia writing (and later editing) a fledgling colonial periodical, *The Pennsylvania Magazine*.

Unsatisfied merely penning eloquent arguments in support of the abolition of slavery, workers' and women's rights and greater citizen involvement in politics, Paine wrote *Common Sense* shortly after the Revolution began. The 47-page pamphlet was itself revolutionary, advocating what amounted to a complete break from history in its attack on the British monarchy and its clarion call for independence from England.

Paine scorned what he called the ‘summer soldier and the sunshine patriot,’ who gave lip service to revolutionary ideals but lacked the courage to prevail through ‘times that try men’s souls.’ (These inspirational words are from Paine’s *The American Crisis*. Read by General Washington to his starving, dispirited troops before battle, they helped inspire a major turning point in the war.)

On the other hand, Paine’s subsequent revelations about rampant profiteering and land speculation during the Revolution by wealthy financiers like Robert Morris and future presidents Washington, Jefferson and Madison did little to endear him to the nation’s emerging postwar aristocracy.

Denounced as unpatriotic for daring to criticize the ‘Fathers of the Revolution,’ a disgraced Paine returned to England in 1787 and soon became active in support of the budding revolutionary movement in France.

Paine’s voluminous tract *Rights of Man* (1791), a radical defense of democracy and individual freedom, sold nearly a million copies. Two years later an equally sensational sequel proposed a representative government and social programs designed to remedy the numbing poverty of commoners through progressive taxation.

Taken for granted today, these kinds of reforms were subversive in Paine’s time, and his subsequent arrest for sedition—along with the resulting mobs and burnings in effigy—forced him to flee to France.

Welcomed in Paris, Paine helped draft a new French constitution, but once again soon found himself on the wrong side of the political aisle, in part for favoring clemency for Louis XVI in recognition of the king’s help to America during the Revolutionary War. Declared a traitor during the year-long Reign of Terror, he faced likely execution.

Defiant even in despair, Paine wrote *The Age of Reason*, a freethinking assault on organized religion. (Unjustly denounced as an atheist, Paine, like Jefferson, was a Deist, and advocated freedom of religion and the practice of the ‘moral virtues.’ Ironically, *The Age of Reason* was in fact Paine’s response to the French government’s brutal suppression of religious practice.) Published in 1794 while Paine lay deathly ill in prison, *The Age of Reason* outsold every book in English history, excepting only the Bible.

Paine escaped the guillotine only through a fortuitous mistake: A chalk mark signifying his death sentence was placed on the wrong side of his cell door the night before a planned mass execution, the door having been left open to allow the delirious prisoner some air.

Released later that year, Paine remained in France until 1802, returning to the U.S. only at the invitation of President Jefferson. Back in America, the unrepentant Paine became an outspoken critic of his former friend George Washington, both for Washington’s failure to come to his aid in prison, as well as for his refusal to credit France for the crucial part it had played in the Revolution.

Scorned by the religiously devout for *The Age of Reason* and by the political establishment for his championship of individual liberty, abandoned by the country he helped give birth to, a bitter and broken Paine took to drink to medicate the lasting trauma of his banishment and imprisonment.

Paine died in poverty at the age of 72, never receiving a penny in royalties for writing some of the most influential and inspiring tracts of the 18th century. Only six mourners attended his nondescript funeral.

Paine’s tragic parting words were, “I would give worlds, if I had them, that *The Age of Reason* had never been published.” ■