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Opinion

THE MOST ELUSIVE FOUNDER, WHOSE PAMPHLET FIRED UP A REVOLUTION

By Jeffrey Rosen

Jeffrey Rosen is CEO emeritus of the National Constitution Center and the author of "The Pursuit of Liberty: How Hamilton vs. Jefferson Ignited the Lasting Battle Over Power in America."

“Common Sense,” the pamphlet that helped spark the American Revolution, turns 250 this month. But despite its author’s centrality in the Revolutionary pantheon, Thomas Paine has always been the most elusive founder. Abraham Lincoln reportedly said, “I never tire of reading Paine” and praised him as one of the greatest founders because equality, to him, was a “great fundamental principle.” By contrast, others dismissed Paine as a radical extremist. John Adams said Paine “has a better hand at pulling down than building,” dismissing

his polemics for producing “confusion and every evil work.” In Theodore Roosevelt’s eyes, Paine was a “filthy little atheist.”

In fact, neither the attempts to whitewash or exaggerate Paine’s radicalism do justice to his principled devotion to liberty, equality and reason. He was an abolitionist who was among the first to denounce slavery as a violation of Christian ethics and to equate Britain’s tyrannical attempts to enslave White Americans with White Americans’ enslavement of African Americans. And Paine’s 1794 treatise “The Age of Reason” was an argument not in favor of atheism but against it, grounded in Paine’s conviction that faith could be reconciled with reason.

As Edward J. Larson notes in his book “Declaring Independence: Why 1776 Matters,” in March 1775, Paine met a future signer of the Declaration of Independence, Benjamin Rush, with whom he shared common cause regarding the abolition of slavery. Years later, Rush recalled “I called upon Mr. Paine, and suggested to him the propriety of preparing our citizens for a perpetual separation of our country from Great Britain, by means of a work of such length that would obviate all the objections to it. He seized the idea with avidity.”

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In other words, Rush asked Paine to write the revolutionary pamphlet after they had a meeting of minds. Rush also suggested a publisher, as well as the title “Common Sense.” And throughout the pamphlet, Paine insists that hereditary monarchy leads inevitably to slavery. “It is easy to

see that when republican virtue fails, slavery ensues,” Paine wrote. “We may be as effectually enslaved by the want of laws in America, as by submitting to laws made for us in England.”

Paine portrays hereditary monarchs as “exceedingly ridiculous” and said the first king was “nothing better than the principal ruffian of some restless Gang.” Anticipating the Declaration of Independence, he declared: “A government of our own is our natural right.” Anticipating the Constitution, he continued: “It is infinitely wiser and safer, to form a constitution of our own in a cool deliberate manner, while we have it in our power, than to trust such an interesting event to time and chance.” And he concluded with a ringing declaration that everyone could understand: “The cause of America is in a great measure the cause of all mankind.”

“Common Sense” saw immediate success, with sales estimates ranging from more than a hundred thousand copies in the first months to half a million copies all told. Paine described his publishing phenomenon as “the greatest sale that any performance ever had since the use of letters.” As a result, “Common Sense” helped turn the tide of public opinion from reconciliation to revolution, “working a powerful change,” as George Washington put it in a letter, “in the Minds of many Men.”

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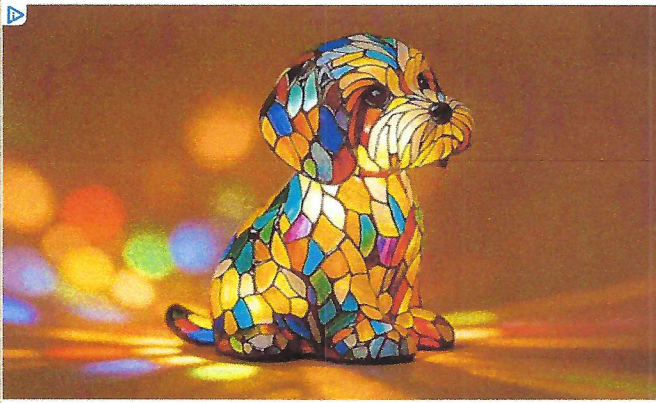
“Common Sense” was Paine’s warmup act. After he heard the Declaration of Independence read aloud in Philadelphia, Paine enlisted in the Pennsylvania militia. After witnessing a series of defeats for the

Continental Army throughout 1776, Paine left military service to write what many consider to be one of the most inspirational pamphlets in American history. The title was “The American Crisis,” and Paine’s first line is inscribed in the American mind: “THESE are the times that try men’s souls. The summer soldier and the sunshine patriot will, in this crisis, shrink from the service of his country; but he that stands it NOW, deserves the love and thanks of man and woman.”

Like “Common Sense,” the impact of this pamphlet was immediate and transformative. The phrases “summer soldiers” and “sunshine patriots” went, as we would say today, viral.

Paine then turned his gaze from the New World to the Old. While in London in 1787, he published “Rights of Man,” a response to Edmund Burke’s “Reflections on the Revolution in France.” Convicted of sedition in Britain, Paine fled to France in 1792 in the middle of their revolution. He was granted honorary French citizenship, along with Alexander Hamilton and George Washington, and elected to the National Assembly. Allied with the more moderate Girondins against the radical Jacobins, he tried to thwart the illiberal extremism of the Reign of Terror. Although he was a rabid critic of monarchy, Paine argued against the execution of King Louis XVI.

At the end of December 1793, the Jacobins arrested Paine and imprisoned him. Gouverneur Morris, the American minister to France, refused to intervene on the grounds that Paine was now a French citizen. After recuperating from a series of serious illnesses, Paine was added to the list for the guillotine. Only a lucky break at the last moment spared his head; a few days later, Robespierre fell.



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Paine stayed in France for more than nine years and had one final plea for reason over passion. At the end of 1793, he published the first installment of “The Age of Reason,” an argument against organized religion and a defense of the separation of church and state. By October 1795, as the French Revolution turned violent, Paine, in part two of “The Age of Reason,” had concluded that “The intolerant spirit of Church persecutions had transferred itself into politics.”

Appalled both by the sectarian violence of the first phase of the French Revolution and by the abolition of the priesthood during the Reign of Terror, Paine argued instead for a Deism based on the conviction that faith is compatible with reason. Paine summed up his vision of true theology, saying “I believe in the equality of man” and rejected established religions of any kind. “All national institutions of churches, whether Jewish, Christian, or Turkish, appear to me no other than human inventions, set up to terrify and enslave mankind, and monopolize power and profit.”

Paine had completed part one of “The Age of Reason” hours before he was arrested and sent to French prison. Lacking access to the Bible, he was forced to rely on his prodigious memory for citations. In parts two and three of the treatise, published in 1795 and 1807, Paine examined the Bible line by line and offered a textual analysis of “the falsehoods, falsifications, contradictions, and absurdities, which are to be met with in almost every page of the Old and New Testament.” There was no reason to believe the literal truth of the Bible, Paine argued, because its authors repeatedly misquoted passages from the Old Testament or

quoted them out of context. Paine then enumerated the selective quotations so relentlessly that Thomas Jefferson advised him not to publish.

For example, he identifies a series of Old Testament passages that he concluded had been mistranslated to suggest that they prophesied the birth of Jesus. “It may not be improper here to observe, that the word translated a virgin in Isaiah, does not signify a virgin in Hebrew, but merely a young woman,” Paine wrote. Modern scholars, including Robert Alter, have reached similar conclusions.

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“The Age of Reason” was widely read, but Paine’s scathing attack on the literal truth of the Bible made him more enemies. Revolutionary colleagues, including his abolitionist ally Rush, excoriated Paine’s attacks on organized religion and painted him as a heretic. According to Rush, “‘The Age of Reason’ probably perverted more persons from the Christian faith than any book that ever was written for the same purpose.”

Paine finally returned to the United States in October 1802 with the help of Jefferson, who was then president, but he had lost many of his remaining allies after harshly criticizing Washington, whom he blamed for failing to secure his release from French imprisonment. Paine died in Greenwich Village in New York City on June 8, 1809. Only six mourners attended his funeral.

The life of Thomas Paine provides powerful lessons for Americans who

are grappling with the legacy of the Founding on its 250th anniversary. Paine didn't rest on his laurels after writing "Common Sense" but continued until the end, arguing for reason over passion, at home and abroad. His legacy is an inspiration to believe in oneself, fight for one's beliefs and defend the American idea against forces of illiberalism in the never-ending project of creating a more perfect Union.

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