

THE NATION'S BEGINNINGS

Link to Literature

Thomas Paine (1737–1809) was a political thinker and writer from England who moved to the American colonies at the encouragement of his friend, Benjamin Franklin. While in America, Paine published several articles and pamphlets, many of them anonymously. His most famous pamphlet was *Common Sense*, in which he stated that monarchy was unnatural and that American colonists should break from Great Britain and build a new government based on reason, not tradition. Published anonymously nine months after the beginning of the American Revolution, *Common Sense* sold more than a half-million copies. ♦ *As you read the following excerpts from Common Sense, think about the political ideas that circulated during the Enlightenment. Then, on a separate sheet of paper, answer the questions below.*

Thomas Paine's Common Sense

"As much [has] been said of the advantages of [settling differences with Great Britain], . . . it is but right, that we should examine the [other] side of the argument, and inquire into some of the many . . . injuries which these colonies [endure], and always will [endure], by being connected with, and dependent on Great Britain. To examine the connection and dependence, on the principles of nature and common sense, to see what we have to [expect], if separated, and what we are to expect, if dependent.

"I have heard it [stated] by some, that as America [has] flourished under her former connection with Great Britain, that the same connection is necessary towards her future happiness . . . Nothing can be more [deceptive] than



Thomas Paine,
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this kind of argument. We may well assert, that because a child has thrived upon milk, that it is never meant to have meat . . . America would have flourished as much, and probably much more, had no European power had anything to do with her.

"But Britain is the parent country, say some. Then the more shame upon her conduct. Even brutes do not [eat] their young . . .

"It is [vile] to reason . . . that this continent can . . . remain subject to any external power. . . . The utmost stretch of human wisdom cannot, at this time [understand] a plan short of separation . . ."

Source: *Common Sense*, by Thomas Paine. Available online at <http://libertyonline.hypermall.com/Paine/CS-Frame.html>.

Questions to Think About

1. According to Paine, on what principles should people examine the dependence of the colonies on Great Britain?
2. To what does Paine compare the argument that, because America has flourished under British rule, it should continue to be ruled by Great Britain?
3. **Draw Conclusions** Many Enlightenment thinkers believed that all problems could be solved by the use of human reason. In what ways do Paine's arguments for American separation from Great Britain reflect this idea?