

Common Sense

Thomas Paine was born in Great Britain. He emigrated to the American colonies in 1774. It was Benjamin Franklin that convinced him to leave England and move to America. He settled just north of New York City and today his house is a museum open to the public year-round.

In 1776, he wrote his 50-page pamphlet *Common Sense* that was one of the main reasons as to why the people of America wanted their independence from Britain. The following is an excerpt from *Common Sense* where Paine explains why the colonists should declare their independence from the harsh British rule and create their own nation.

As you read this passage, focus on the arguments presented by Paine to the colonists as to why they should declare their own independence. Once you had finished reading the excerpt, answer the questions that follow in the space provided.

There are three words that are used by Paine that may need a definition. They are:

Fallacious – misleading

Jesuitically: intrigue, with a sinister (threatening) design

Papistical: Implying a condescending (arrogant) attitude

“Volumes have been written on the subject of the struggle between England and America. Men of all ranks have embarked in the controversy, from Different motives, and with various designs: but all have been ineffectual, and the period of debate is closed....

I have heard it asserted by some, that as America hath flourished under her former connection with Great Britain, the same connection is necessary towards her future happiness, and will always have the same effect. Nothing can be more fallacious than this kind of argument. We may as well assert that because a child has thriven upon milk, that it is never to have meat, or that the first twenty years of our lives is to become a precedent for the next twenty. But even this is admitting more than is true; for I answer roundly, that America would have flourished as much, and probably much more, had no European power taken any notice of her....

Alas! We have long been led away by ancient prejudices, and made large sacrifices to superstition. We have boasted the protection of Great Britain without considering that her motive was *interest*, not *attachment*; and that she did not protect us from *our enemies* on *our account*, but from her enemies on her own account, from those who had no quarrel with us on any *other account*, but who will always be our enemies on the *same account*....

But Britain is the parent country, say some. Then the more shame upon her conduct. Even brutes do not devour their young, nor savages make war upon their families; wherefore, the assertion, if true, turns to her reproach; but it happens not to be true, or only partly so, and the phrase parent or mother country hath been jesuitically adopted by the king and his parasites, with a low papistical design of gaining unfair bias on the credulous weakness of our minds. Europe, and not England, is the parent country of America. This new work hath been the asylum for the persecuted lovers of civil and religious liberty from every part of Europe. Hither have they fled, not from the tender embraces of a mother, but from the cruelty of the monster; and it is so far true of England, that the same tyranny which drove the first emigrants from home, pursues their descendants still....

I challenge the warmest advocate for reconciliation to show a single advantage that this continent can reap, by being connected with Great Britain. I repeat the challenge, not a single advantage is derived....

But the injuries and disadvantages we sustain by that connection are without number; and our duty to mankind at large, as well as to ourselves, instructs us to renounce the alliance: because any submission to, or dependence on, Great Britain, tends directly to involve this continent in European wars and quarrels, and sets us at variance with nations who would otherwise seek our friendship, and against whom we have neither anger nor complaint. As Europe is our market for trade, we ought to form no partial connection with any part of it....

As to government matters, it is not in the power of Britain to do this continent justice: the business of it will soon be too weighty and intricate to be managed with any tolerable degree of convenience, by a power so distant from us, and so very ignorant of us; for if they cannot conquer us, they cannot govern us. To be always running three or four thousand miles with a tale or a petition, waiting four or five months for an answer, which, when obtained, requires five or six more to explain it in, will in a few years be looked upon as folly and childishness. There was a time when it was proper, and there is a proper time for it to cease.

Small islands not capable of protecting themselves are the proper objects for kingdoms to take under their care; but there is something very absurd in supposing a continent to be perpetually governed by an island. In no instance hath nature made the satellite larger than its primary planet; and as England and America, with respect to each other, reverse the common order of nature, it is evident that they belong to different systems. England to Europe: America to itself....”

Source: Common Sense, *The Rights of Man, and other Essential Writings of Thomas Paine*. New York: New American Library, 1969.

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Name: _____

1. According to Paine, why has Great Britain protected the colonies?

2. Why does the distance between Great Britain and America hinder their relationship?

3. What is Paine's view about alliances with other nations within Europe? Use specific wording from the excerpt in your answer.

4. How does Paine use astronomy as an argument for the separation of the two nations?

5. In your opinion, what made Tomas Paine's excerpt so appealing to the colonists that they chose to take his advice and declare their independence from Great Britain?
