

June 2024:

*Common Sense* by Thomas Paine

Published in January of 1776, *Common Sense* was the first written work to openly seek independence from Great Britain.

*Common Sense* was well received. Paine was probably the most popular author of the Revolutionary period. The plain language that Paine used was readily understood by the common people of America.

But, what does it say to us today? The language no longer seems so plain.

How does it fit the context of our reading program? After 5 months, we have reviewed the American experience from 1620 to 1750. And, we have reviewed the founding documents from the Declaration of Independence to the *Federalist Papers*. It took a dozen years of debate and compromise to move from Declaration to Ratification of the Constitution.

Can you see this twisted path shaped by the simple truths that Thomas Paine put forth in January of 1776, when he challenged the authority of the British government and the monarchy?

Paine begins by distinguishing between government and society. Paine concludes that society is everything constructive and good that people join together to accomplish: "Society in every State is a blessing..."

Government, on the other hand, is an institution whose sole purpose is to protect us from our own vices. Government has its origins in the evil of man: "...government even in its best state is but a necessary evil; in its worst state an intolerable one..."

For Paine, government's sole purpose is to protect life, liberty and property, and that a government should be judged solely on the basis of the extent to which it accomplishes this goal.

Moreover, for Paine, the natural state of man is to live without government. In this, Paine stands firmly on the platform of the Great Enlightenment and political thinkers like John Locke. The Declaration of Independence cannot be far behind.

And Paine sets the tone and calls for a raising of the bar: "The cause of America is in a great measure the cause of all mankind."

After specifically rebuking the British monarchy and Parliament, Paine goes on to praise the republican form of government. Power is derived from the bottom up, not the top down. This is a slow process but such is the case of a government of the people, by the people, and for the people conceived in the Age of Reason.