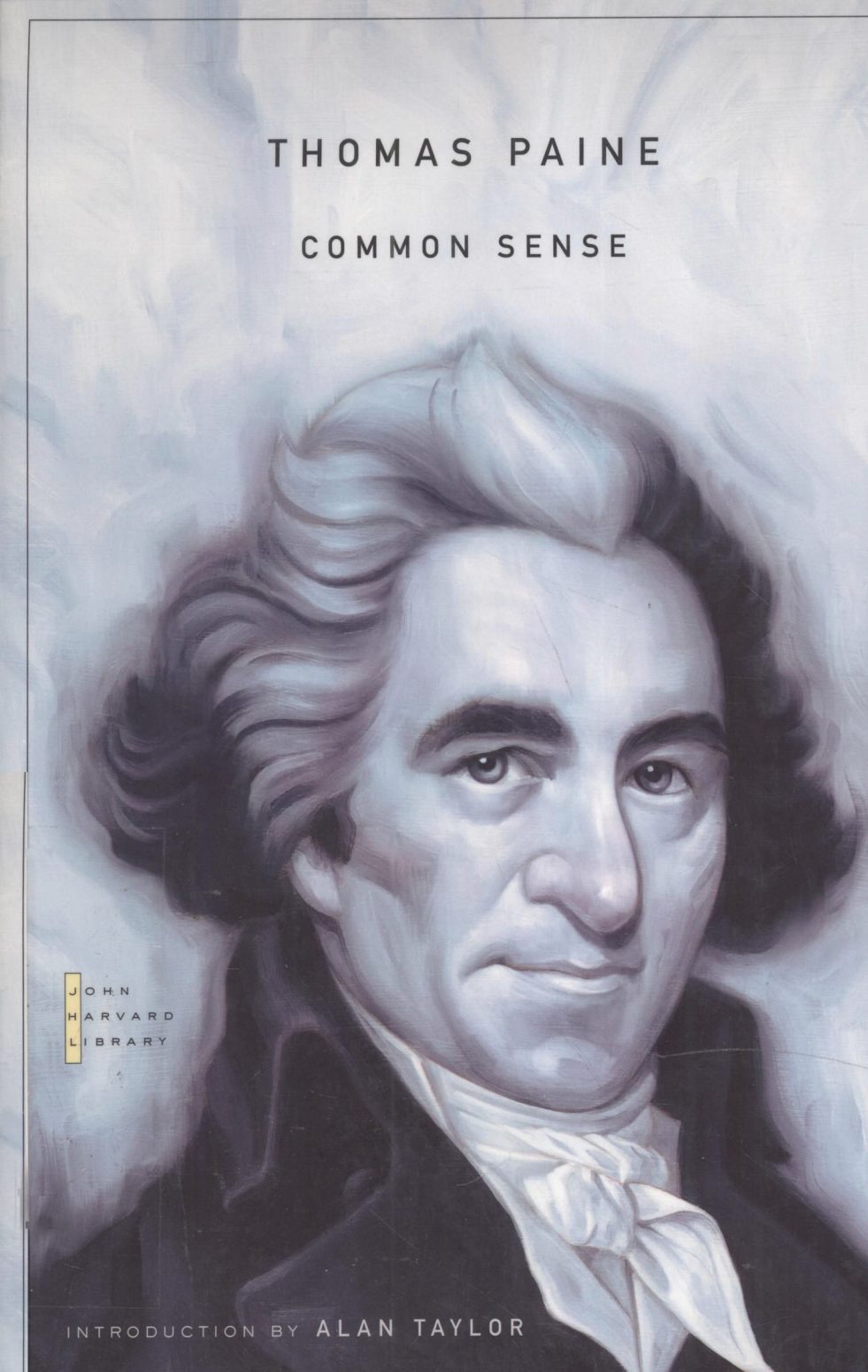
THOMAS PAINE

COMMON SENSE



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INTRODUCTION BY ALAN TAYLOR

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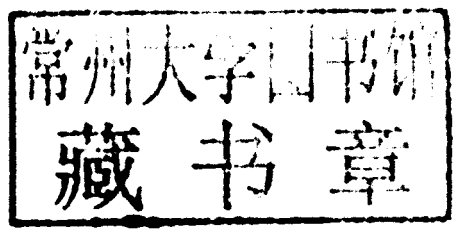

THE BELKNAP PRESS OF HARVARD UNIVERSITY PRESS
Cambridge, Massachusetts, and London, England 2010

Printed in the United States of America

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Paine, Thomas, 1737–1809.
Common sense / Thomas Paine ; introduction by Alan Taylor.
p. cm. — (The John Harvard Library)
Includes bibliographical references.
ISBN 978-0-674-05116-4 (pbk.)
1. United States—Politics and government—1775–1783.
2. Political science—United States—History—18th century.
3. Monarchy. I. Title.
E211.P1455 2010
973.3—dc22 2010017364

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Introduction

ALTHOUGH WAR BETWEEN British troops and American Patriots began in April 1775, the Continental Congress dared not declare independence for fear of the divisions among the colonists. A strong American minority opposed any military resistance to British rule. These Loyalists had a healthy respect for the British military prowess, a deep appreciation of the commercial benefits of the empire, and a dread that a revolution would dissolve law and order. They detected impending anarchy in the Patriot mobs that used violence to intimidate the Loyalists. In addition, the Patriots were divided into moderate and radical camps. Like the Loyalists, the moderate Patriots dreaded the British military might, valued the stability and prosperity that the empire had so long provided, and feared mob violence. Unlike the Loyalists, however, the moderate Patriots hoped to tame the popular fervor by leading it. While willing to resist the British forces, the moderates still hoped for a reconciliation with British rule. If Par-

liament would withdraw its troops and cancel its colonial taxes, the moderates were ready to restore their royal governors and once again submit to British regulation of their foreign trade. But radical Patriots sought a dramatic break with Britain by declaring independence and by adopting a republic that would dispense with a king and an aristocracy.

Americans had long believed that the British mixed constitution of king, lords, and commons provided the most stable and freest government possible for human beings. Colonists found confirmation in the military success and commercial prosperity of the British Empire, which had triumphed over the French and the Spanish in the Seven Years' War of the late 1750s and early 1760s. Beginning in 1764, Parliament sought to pay for the expanded military by imposing new taxes on the colonies without seeking approval from their elected assemblies. By resisting the new taxes, the colonists sought to preserve their privileged place within a prospering empire. Only when war erupted in 1775 did some Patriots begin privately to consider independence, and most Americans still dreaded any public discussion of separation from Britain. On December 6, 1775, the delegates of the Continental Congress renewed their allegiance to the king, limiting their opposition to abuses by Parliament. Thomas Paine later noted that the colonists' "attachment to Britain was obstinate, and it was at that time a kind of treason to speak against it . . . and their single object was reconciliation."[1]

In late 1775 in Philadelphia, prominent radicals sought a writer who could swing public support in their favor. Led by Dr. Benjamin Rush of Philadelphia, they recruited Paine, an immigrant who had arrived the year before from England. Hard-drinking, self-educated, and restlessly ambitious, Paine had accomplished little in the previous thirty-seven years of his checkered life. Born in the English country town of Thetford in Norfolk County in 1737, Paine was the son of

a Quaker corset-maker. Young Paine learned and followed that same low-paying artisanal trade, interrupted by a brief wartime stint as a privateer. Seeking better pay and higher status, in 1762 he secured an appointment as an excise tax collector. Disappointed in the income, he turned to writing and published his first pamphlet, *The Case of the Officers of Excise,* in 1772 in London, but his plea for higher salaries failed to move Parliament. Worse still, in 1774 the government dismissed Paine for neglecting his duties. That year his marriage to Elizabeth Ollive, a shopkeeper's daughter, also crumbled. Separating, they sold their paltry household possessions at auction to pay their debts. At rock bottom personally, Paine emigrated to the American colonies in desperate search for a new start. Frustrated by his experiences with the class hierarchy of Britain, Paine longed to find a land that would favor ingenuity rather than the privileges of birth.

In November 1774, he arrived in Philadelphia, the leading seaport in British America even though its population barely topped 30,000. This commercial city thrived by exporting the wheat and flour produced by the hinterland farms. Instead of titled aristocrats, the city's elite consisted of merchants, lawyers, and land speculators. Although he was impressed by the prosperity, Paine found the colonies in an uproar over the "Coercive Acts" imposed by Parliament to compel obedience to its taxes and to its troops. Alienated from Britain by his own experiences, Paine quickly threw in with the Patriot resistance. Thanks to a letter of introductions from Benjamin Franklin, another former tradesman, Paine became the executive editor of the *Pennsylvania Magazine* in January 1775. By embracing the Patriot cause, Paine more than doubled the magazine's subscriptions during the spring and summer.

His forceful writing won the admiration of Dr. Rush, who encouraged Paine to publish a pamphlet against reconciling with British rule. But Rush also urged Paine to write indirectly, avoiding two

words "by every means as necessary to his own safety and that of the public—*independence* and *republicanism.*" Of course, Rush underestimated the headstrong Paine's political zeal and eagerness for confrontation. An Englishman with a record of failure would try to persuade Americans to gamble their lives and properties on independence and republicanism.[2]

In early December, Paine completed his manuscript and submitted it to his friends Rush, David Rittenhouse, and Benjamin Franklin, who all approved. On January 10, 1776, in Philadelphia, Paine published *Common Sense,* which became the most powerful and pivotal pamphlet in American history. A Scottish-born printer, Robert Bell, published the first one thousand copies. Although the edition sold out within two weeks, Paine felt cheated in the proceeds, so he turned to another Philadelphia firm, that of William and Thomas Bradford, who produced another six thousand copies. Paine then dedicated his profits to buying mittens for the Patriot soldiers, but those profits largely vanished, because the colonies lacked a copyright law, and almost every Patriot press in the colonies quickly reprinted *Common Sense.* Paine later estimated that American presses sold at least 150,000 copies, a phenomenal total for a public of only three million people, a fifth of them illiterate slaves. Many more colonists read long excerpts from *Common Sense* in their local newspapers, and the illiterate heard it read aloud in taverns and streets. Except for the Bible, no written work had ever been so widely read and discussed in America. Initially, *Common Sense* appeared anonymously, but by March many Americans knew that Thomas Paine was the author.

In *Common Sense,* a writer found his moment to change the world. Unlike previous political pamphleteers who wrote in a learned and legalistic style, Paine directly addressed common voters with limited education. Thomas Jefferson marveled, "No writer has exceeded Paine in ease and familiarity of style, in perspicuity of expression, happi-

ness of elucidation, and in simple and unassuming language."[3] Seeking a broad audience, Paine wrote in clear, direct, and concise terms, and he employed vivid but common metaphors and analogies. Paine later explained, "As it is my design to make those that can scarcely read understand, I shall therefore avoid every literary ornament and put it in language as plain as the alphabet."[4] Rather than dwell on the words of arcane political philosophers, Paine quoted only from the Bible—the primary text known and revered by his intended readers. For Paine, style was also substance, for he sought to recruit and to constitute a new readership: a broad and engaged public for a republican revolution. Appealing to readers of common learning and sense, Paine insisted that they should no longer defer to guidance by their supposed betters: "Notwithstanding the mystery with which the science of government has been enveloped, for the purpose of enslaving, plundering and imposing upon mankind, it is of all things the least mysterious and the most easy to be understood."[5] Aptly titled, *Common Sense* sought to speak both to and for the common people of America and the world.

Common Sense pushed for immediate American independence, a union of the thirteen resisting states, and republican governments for the states in that union. All three concepts represented a dramatic break with past experience and received wisdom. No colonies in the Americas had yet broken free from their mother empire; the British American colonies had a track record of bickering and prejudices that augured poorly for a union; and almost all past republics had been small, contentious, and short-lived. Conventional thinking insisted that American colonies needed a European protector in a dangerous world, that any union of the thirteen colonies would quickly collapse into a civil war, and that a republic would dissolve into a violent anarchy without a king and an aristocracy to check and balance the volatility of the common people. In a stroke of daring genius,

Paine argued that the Americans could triumph by *combining* the three gambles: independence, union, and republic. Seeking one alone would certainly fail, but the *combination* would prove irresistible. If none of his particular ideas were original, the package was.

Above all, Paine sought to create a republic. He later explained that independence would have been hollow if the American "government had been formed on the *corrupt models of the old world.* It was the opportunity of *beginning the world anew* . . . of bringing forward a *new system* of government in which the rights of *all* men should be preserved that gave *value* to independence." An avid student of natural science, Paine insisted that common people could and should remake their governments to escape from exploitation by the wealthy and wellborn.[6]

To vindicate a republic, Paine needed to destroy the American reverence for the mixed constitution and for the reigning king, George III. Blaming Parliament for the taxes, the Patriots had long looked to the monarch as a potential ally, for he represented the revered union of the empire. To free Americans from that tradition, Paine denounced king and aristocrats as vicious frauds who duped and exploited working people. By dispensing with such parasites, common folk could, at last, live free and prosper. Paine declared, "all men being originally equals, no one by birth could have a right to set up his own family in perpetual preference to all others." He concluded, "of more worth is one honest man to society, and in the sight of God, than all the crowned ruffians that ever lived." And George III was "the Royal Brute" responsible for killing Americans and "with their blood on his soul." By discrediting the sovereign king, Paine made independence thinkable—as he relocated sovereignty from a royal family to the collective people of a republic. Parliament receded in importance as the king became the great villain in a republican crusade for an independent union.[7]

Paine also had to shatter the American respect for the power of the British Army and the Royal Navy, and he needed to bolster the shaky confidence of Americans in their own military abilities. In early 1776, Loyalists and moderate Patriots feared that prolonged fighting would destroy scores of towns and thousands of lives in a futile struggle against an irresistible empire. Countering those doubts, Paine insisted that, if united, the Americans could not lose a war for independence and a republic. Blessed by a righteous cause, they would fight with a virtuous resolve that would overwhelm the corrupt mercenaries of a royal tyrant. "'Tis not in numbers but in unity that our great strength lies, yet our present numbers are sufficient to repel the force of all the world," Paine declared.[8]

Finally, Paine cast the American struggle in utopian and universal terms. By winning republican self-government, the Patriots could achieve an ideal society of perpetual peace, soaring prosperity, and an egalitarian distribution of property and of political rights. America offered the world's last, best hope for liberty and equality:

> Every spot of the world is overrun with oppression. Freedom hath been hunted round the globe. Asia and Africa have long expelled her. Europe regards her like a stranger, and England hath given her warning to depart. O! Receive the fugitive, and prepare in time an asylum for mankind.

By proving that a republic could thrive, Americans would inspire common people throughout the world to free themselves from their kings and aristocrats. He concluded, "The cause of America is in a great measure the cause of all mankind . . . The birth-day of a new world is at hand."[9]

Today Americans take this soaring rhetoric for granted, but it was new and radical for colonists who had long felt self-conscious about their parochial and provincial status. Paine relocated them from the

colonial margins of a sophisticated empire to the center of a new and coming world of utopian potential. He invested their cause with the global and millennial meaning essential to motivate the immense sacrifices needed to win a revolutionary war against a mighty empire. Far less could be expected of people engaged in a pedestrian drive to remain within the empire but without taxation by Parliament. "The sun never shined on a cause of greater worth," Paine concluded.[10]

Common Sense outraged and alarmed Loyalists. Traveling through Virginia, Nicholas Cresswell wrote in his diary: "A pamphlet called 'Commonsense' makes a great noise. One of the vilest things that ever was published to the world. Full of false representations, lies, calumny and treason whose principles are to subvert all Kingly Governments and erect an Independent Republic."[11] Troubled by the pamphlet's popularity, Loyalists hastily responded with their own pamphlets, principally *Plain Truth* by James Chalmers of Maryland, who defended the mixed constitution as "the pride and envy of mankind."[12]

Common Sense's emotional tone and popular appeal also alarmed some moderate Patriots. Elias Boudinot of New Jersey denounced Paine as a "Crack Brain Zealot for Democracy." Gouverneur Morris of New York disliked Paine as "a mere adventurer . . . without fortune, without family or connexions, ignorant even of grammar." Elitists worried that Paine would whip up a popular fervor for revolution that would undermine the traditional authority of men with prestigious family connections. Wealthy gentlemen like Boudinot and Morris led Congress and its Continental Army, but the revolution also relied on thousands of common men as rank-and-file soldiers, junior officers, state legislators, and local committeemen. That reliance troubled the gentry, who worried that the common people might demand sweeping changes in the distribution of property and power.[13]

But Paine enabled many Americans to overcome their fears of revolution and independence. In vivid and forceful prose, Paine gave fo-

cus to previously inchoate longings for conviction. After reading the pamphlet, Joseph Hawley, a Patriot leader, aptly remarked, "Every sentiment has sunk into my well-prepared heart." In Connecticut, a Patriot marveled to Paine, "You have declared the sentiments of millions . . . We were blind, but on reading these enlightening words the scales have fallen from our eyes." The Patriot general Charles Lee wrote to his superior, General Washington, "Have you seen the pamphlet *Common Sense?* I never saw such a masterly irresistible performance."[14]

Timing favored *Common Sense,* for the British outraged many moderates by escalating the war, burning Falmouth in Maine and Norfolk in Virginia. With hopes for reconciliation fading, George Washington predicted that "a few more of such flaming arguments as were exhibited at Falmouth and Norfolk, added to the sound doctrine and unanswerable reasoning contained in the pamphlet *Common Sense,*" would soon induce Congress to choose independence. In the America of early 1776, Paine found the ideal conjunction of place and time and audience for his radical ideas and polemical abilities.[15]

By the spring of 1776, Patriots noted a decisive swing in public opinion. Although about a fifth of the people remained Loyalists committed to the union of the empire, a clear majority expected Congress to declare independence. In early June, Richard Henry Lee of Virginia introduced a resolution in favor of independence and union. To draft a declaration, Congress chose a committee which included Benjamin Franklin of Pennsylvania, John Adams of Massachusetts, and Thomas Jefferson of Virginia. The most gifted writer of the three, Jefferson produced the fundamental draft which owed much to *Common Sense,* particularly the focus on human equality and on damning the king to justify independence. The declaration ignited mobs who systematically destroyed symbols of monarchy, tearing down and burning the royal arms posted on public buildings and tavern signs.

Patriots wrecked New York City's great equestrian statue of George III and melted its parts to make bullets to shoot at the British troops.

But winning independence proved far trickier than destroying royal symbols. In July 1776, Paine joined General Washington's army as the aide first to General Daniel Roberdeau and later to General Nathanael Greene. Routed by the British, the Patriot army retreated in disarray across New Jersey to Pennsylvania in late 1776. While Loyalists exulted, many Patriots despaired. To bolster their morale, Paine wrote the first of his *American Crisis* essays in December:

> 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. Tyranny, like hell, is not easily conquered; yet we have this consolation with us, that the harder the conflict, the more glorious the triumph.[16]

Once again, Paine donated his royalties to the military cause of revolution. Paine's words helped Washington to rally enough volunteers to mount a desperate Christmas Night counterattack which captured Trenton, New Jersey, routing the garrison of British-employed Hessian mercenaries. Between 1777 and 1783, Paine would issue twelve sequels to the *American Crisis* to rally public support for the war effort.

Meanwhile, on the home front, the Patriots struggled to craft constitutions for their thirteen states and for a unifying confederation of those states. That constitutional process reignited tension between the moderate and the radical Patriots, who fought over the proper form of a republic. Paine and other radicals sought simple state constitutions, easily understood and worked by common people directly to express their desires. They preferred a unicameral legislature, annual elections, term limits for legislators, low or no property requirements to vote or to hold office, and no governor to check the legisla-

ture. While Paine served in the Continental Army, his political allies drafted and secured just such a democratic constitution for Pennsylvania, which he vigorously defended in published essays.

The moderate Patriots preferred complex state constitutions that restrained the democratic potential of common voters. While conceding the need for a popular role in elections, the moderates distrusted common people as easily misled by selfish demagogues. By conducting a tyranny of the majority, such demagogues would (the moderates predicted) prey upon the property of the wealthy minority. To hem in democracy and demagogues, the moderates wanted to require substantial property to vote and to hold office. They also sought to check and balance a popular assembly with an elitist state senate and a powerful governor. Although a radical for independence, John Adams was a moderate in his constitutional views. In 1776, he derided Paine's plan of government, presented in *Common Sense,* as "so democratical without any restraint or even an attempt at any equilibrium or counterpoise, that it must produce confusion and every evil work." Ultimately, the moderates prevailed in Pennsylvania, remaking the state constitution in 1790 to provide for a governor and a bicameral legislature.[17]

Meanwhile, in 1783 the British made peace and recognized the United States of America as a sovereign nation. But the new nation suffered from the weak confederation government established in 1781. Although most radicals favored a decentralized confederation where most political power remained with the states, Paine promoted a new federal constitution with a stronger national government, which became fruition in 1788.

A year before, Paine had embarked for Britain to seek investors to build his innovative design for a wrought-iron bridge. Like other eighteenth-century radicals, Paine combined an interest in politics, science, and technology. By discovering the principles of order in na-

ture, these men hoped to craft new machines and new constitutions: both meant to improve the conditions of common people by rescuing them from the related burdens of poverty, ignorance, and tradition. A devout believer in progress, Paine insisted that the world stood on the brink of a new age of greater prosperity, equality, liberty, and knowledge.

Unable to find investors for his bridge, Paine instead became embroiled in another republican revolution, which erupted in France in 1789. Embracing that cause, Paine published in 1791–1792 the two-volume *Rights of Man,* which again ridiculed the monarchy and aristocracy of the British Constitution. Promoting a republican meritocracy for Britain, he concluded, "It is an age of revolutions, in which every thing may be looked for."[18] Once again, Paine caused a sensation, selling thousands of copies and inspiring a widespread reform movement led by merchants, shopkeepers, and artisans. To suppress that movement, the British government banned *Rights of Man* and indicted Paine for sedition.

Fleeing to France, Paine won election to the National Convention and joined the vote to abolish the French monarchy. But in this revolution, he favored the relatively moderate Girondin faction, which opposed the execution of the king and the queen. During the summer of 1793, the Girondins lost power to the more radical Jacobins, who arrested and executed thousands of their rivals and foes. In December 1793, the Jacobins arrested Paine and cast him into Luxembourg Prison. After narrowly dodging execution, Paine won his release in November 1794.

He remained in France for another seven years, which he dedicated to an ambitious program of controversial publications. In 1794–1795, he published, in two installments, *The Age of Reason,* which he had begun while in prison. Championing the rationality of science, this new work denounced organized religion and biblical miracles

as frauds perpetuated by priests and aristocrats to dupe and to exploit the common people. Rejecting all church creeds, Paine declared, "I believe in one God, and no more . . . I believe in the equality of man; and I believe that religious duties consist of doing justice, loving mercy, and endeavouring to make our fellow-creatures happy."[19] His anti-biblical stance broke with his reverential use of the scriptures to support his argument in *Common Sense* nearly twenty years before. He followed up, in 1795, with *Agrarian Justice,* which urged a redistribution of wealth by taxes to fund a welfare state that could educate the poor and support the elderly. And in 1795 and 1796, he sent to America for publication two blistering open letters to the American president, George Washington, the champion of the Federalist party. Paine blasted his former friend as a treacherous hypocrite who had failed to push for Paine's immediate release from prison in France.

In 1801, Paine's political friend Thomas Jefferson won election to the American presidency; a year later Paine returned to America to a mixed reception. Jefferson and his fellow Republicans initially welcomed Paine and celebrated his role in the revolution. But Paine had made many new enemies, particularly among the Federalist party, with his attacks on organized Christianity and the beloved Washington. One Federalist newspaper called him a "lying, drunken, brutal infidel," and another denounced "the loathsome Thomas Paine, a drunken atheist."[20] Feisty as ever, Paine poked back by publishing essays to mock Federalists and to ridicule scriptural religion. Those publications embarrassed mainstream Republicans, including Jefferson, who increasingly kept their distance. Drinking more heavily, Paine bitterly complained that Americans were ingrates who had forgotten his immense services to their independence and freedom.

Consigned to obscurity and poverty, he died on June 8, 1809, in New York City. Only six mourners attended his funeral. Ten years later, William Cobbett, an English radical, crossed the Atlantic to un-