

In 1776, Thomas Paine made the best case for fighting kings – and for being skeptical

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Published: October 9, 2025 8:42am EDT



Were these protesters in Washington, D.C., on Aug. 16, 2025, inspired by Thomas Paine?

Alex Brandon/AP

In one of his stand-up sets, comedian David Cross rejects all political commentary that tries to answer the question, “What would America’s Founding Fathers think if they were alive today?”

For Cross, it is pointless to speculate about the present-day views of men who could not have imagined cotton candy, let alone the machine that makes it.

“What’s a machine? What’s a machine???” he screams in their collective voice, recoiling from the sorcery of the state fair.

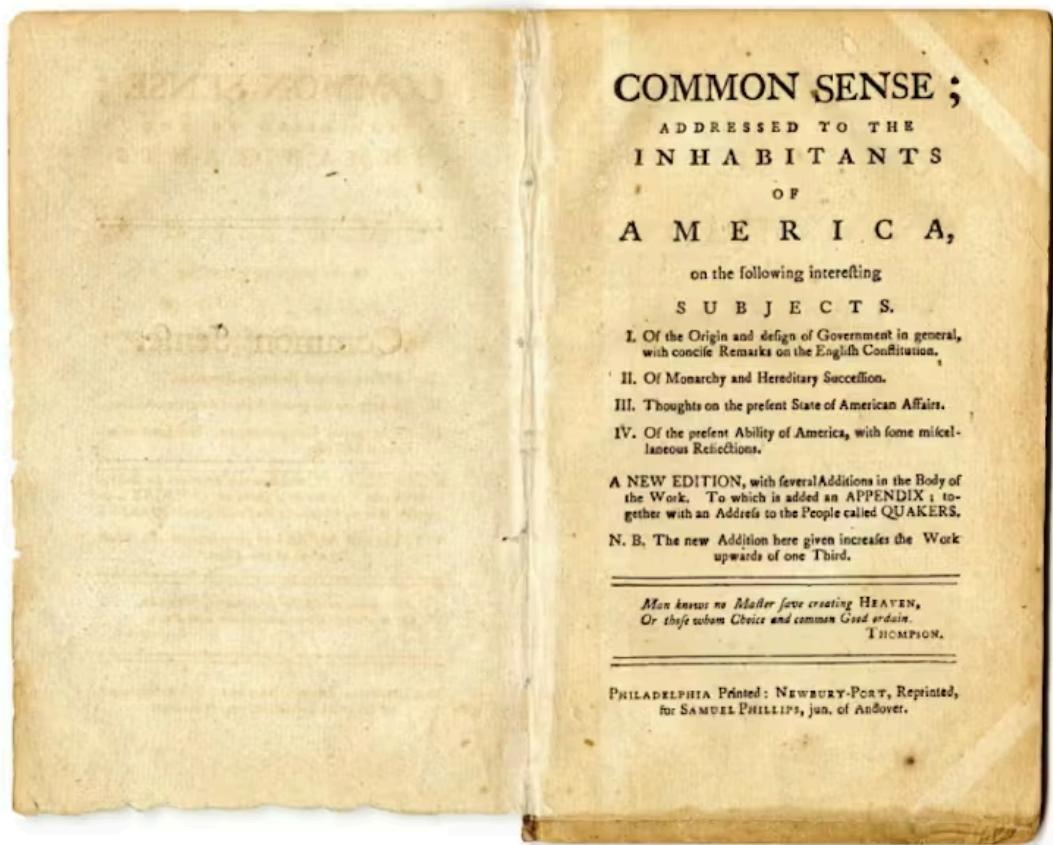
The first time I saw this bit, something odd happened. Having just read the 1776 political pamphlet “Common Sense,” I could hear its author, one of America’s founders, laughing louder than anybody.

That would be Thomas Paine, the man credited with turning the American Revolution from a complicated Colonial fracas into a titanic struggle for the soul of liberty itself.

If Cross is skeptical that anything 250 years old still holds up, Paine, were he alive today, could probably name one thing: skepticism. Ways of thinking and being do not grow out of the ground; we make them ourselves, then hand them down as best we can. Paine would smile to see his favorite heirloom, the skeptical worldview, still intact.

Saying “no” – especially to those in power – is an underrated American pastime, and Paine was its Babe Ruth. If you plan on joining No Kings rallies and have yet to find a slogan for your sign, Paine’s got you covered: “In America, the law is king!” “No King! No Tyranny!” “Monarchy hath poisoned the republic.”

I could go on. Because he did.



Published in 1776, Thomas Paine's pamphlet 'Common Sense' inveighed against monarchy and hereditary privilege and in favor of independence for the Colonies.

Smithsonian National Museum of American History

Birth of a revolutionary

Where did all this anti-monarchical fire come from? Originally, from a small town in Norfolk, England, in 1737. Turning from his father's trade of corset-making, Paine tried his hand at business, met and impressed Benjamin Franklin in London, sailed to America, and there found his true metier as a pamphleteer and radical.

Using simple yet incandescent prose, Paine renounced, repudiated and ridiculed at a clip seldom witnessed in print before or since. Hereditary privilege, colonialism, the supernatural: no, no, no.

But what Paine made his name lambasting – what he knocked out of the park with almost steroidal force – were kings. All of them, from the figures of ancient legend and Scripture to those who warmed England's throne during his lifetime.

“Common Sense,” his first major work, was an urgent wake-up call to every light-sleeping lover of liberty within earshot. In that pamphlet, Paine labels kingship “the most prosperous invention the Devil ever set on foot for the promotion of idolatry.” He never minced words; he wanted the right people to choke on them.



Thomas Paine quotes in Lexington, Mass., not far from where the American Revolution began.

Photo: Joel Abrams, CC BY

‘Simple facts, plain arguments’

Exactly what was Paine’s problem with kings?

The same problem you’ll have, “Common Sense” promises, when you examine the evidence.

This is partly the secret of Paine’s rhetorical power: It’s hard to imagine any wordsmith demanding more vigorously that you not take his word for it.

Paine was a student of history, and history is chock-full of receipts. It shows that abuses of kingly power extend back to the “early ages of monarchy,” when some “principal ruffian” first took power, and “it was very easy, after the lapse of a few generations, to trump up some superstitious tale, conveniently timed … to cram hereditary right down the throats of the vulgar.”

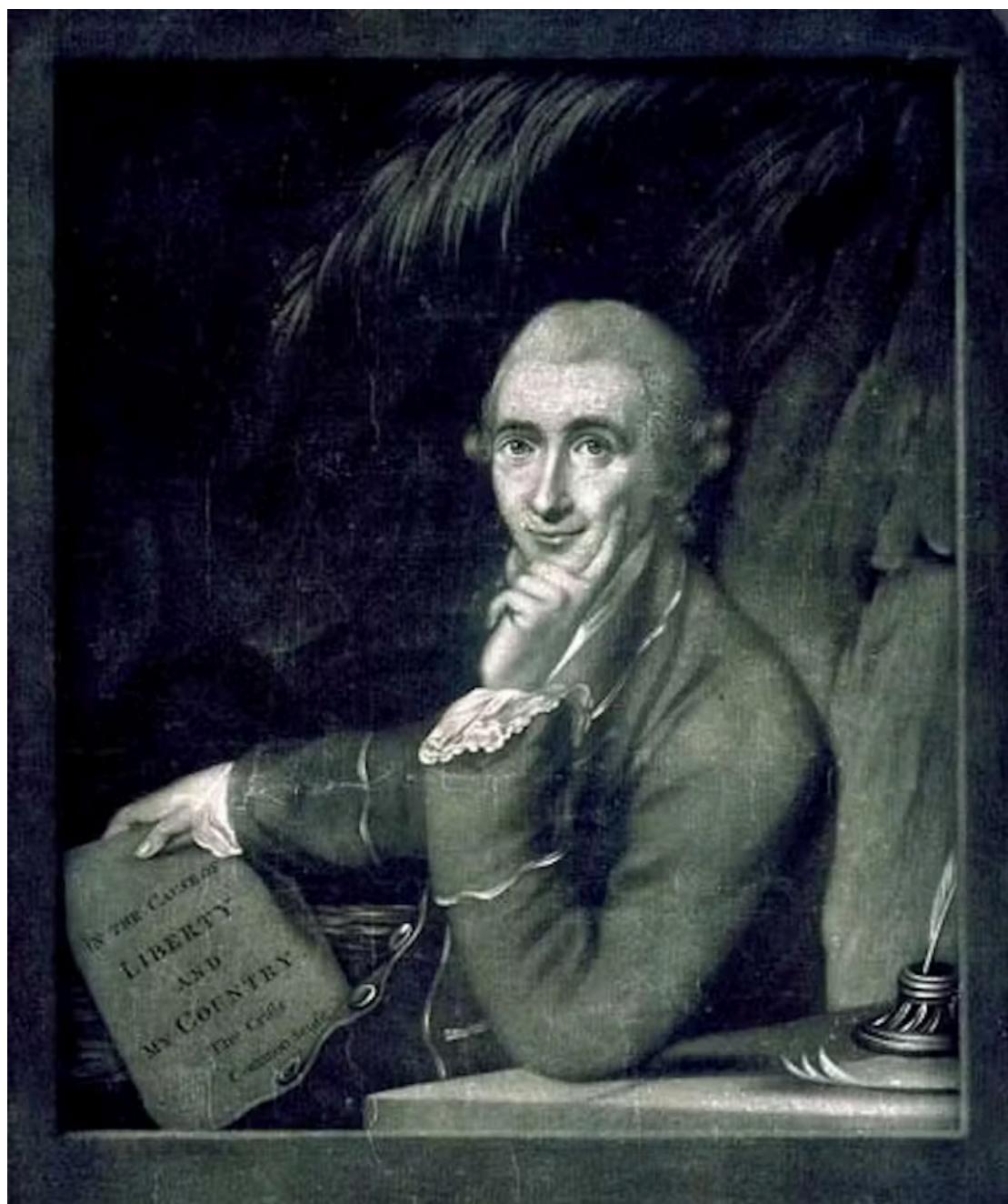
Since that time, says Paine, even those fortunate enough to live under benevolent rule have seldom been more than one generation away from yet another dreadful monarch.

“One of the strongest NATURAL proofs of the folly of hereditary right in kings, is, that nature disapproves it, otherwise she would not so frequently turn it into ridicule by giving mankind an ASS FOR A LION.” What a tweet this would have made, caps and all.

Bring the Paine

The only thing Paine liked less than monarchical rule was its enablers, anyone who relinquished their freedom willingly to an aspiring tyrant.

This is not only wrong, Paine insists, but against nature, since all of us are created equal.



C. W. Peale Pinxit, Philadelphia

James Watson Fecit

EDWARD PAYNE ESQ.^R

FROM AN ORIGINAL PORTRAIT IN THE POSSESSION OF

HENRY LAURENS ESQ.^R

Published according to Act of Parliament Jan^r 1. 1785.

A somewhat puckish-looking Thomas Paine – with the wrong first name and a different spelling of his last one.

National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution

But even that's not the worst part. Those who sacrifice their own freedom on the altar of monarchy also sacrifice that of future generations. Their "unwise, unjust, unnatural compact might (perhaps) in the next succession put them under the government of a rogue or a fool." Ouch.

"Most wise men," Paine adds, "in their private sentiments, have ever treated hereditary right with contempt; yet it is one of those evils, which when once established is not easily removed; many submit from fear, others from superstition, and the more powerful part shares with the king the plunder of the rest."

Federal worker firings, court settlements, a government shutdown. Paine would loathe how right the U.S. is proving him.

Besides criticizing both tradition and manipulative elites for their role in abetting monarchs, Paine's writing gestures toward a more widely accessible sense of false freedom that comes with getting what you want from whoever happens to wear the crown.

This kind of pleasure obscures a painful reality: that the tyrant can strike as well as stroke.

The problem of unchecked power is not nearly counterbalanced by any number of indulgences the wielder of that power deigns to bestow. Freedom, Paine insists, is not transactional; whatever price you name, you're getting fleeced.

Or, to put it his way: "O ye that love mankind! Ye that dare oppose, not only the tyranny, but the tyrant, stand forth!"

Matthew Redmond does not work for, consult, own shares in or receive funding from any company or organization that would benefit from this article, and has disclosed no relevant affiliations beyond their academic appointment.

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