Kelly Finke / Francis Bernard
In times of apprehensive confusion such as these, when neighbors prepare to turn against one another over taxes and tariffs, inflammatory essays such as Paine's "The American Crisis, Number I" are more dangerous to the welfare of the people than any more palpable plague. Wild ideas, like disease, invade the innocent and poison their minds with radical notions. In this feverish state, men blindly accept spoon-fed slander from hypocritical fanatics and turn against those with uninfected minds. Using words as antidote for words, I hope to wake the foggy senses to the truth of their convictions and break the fever of rebellion with the neglected truth: that adhering to the groundless ravings of radical men will give us nothing but blood on our hands.
Upon hearing the claims of "The American Crisis, Number I", any clear-minded man would immediately discern the unfounded hypocrisy used to construct the shaky rationale of Paine's argument. In his very first sentence, while calling for British colonists to renounce their allegiance to their government, Paine ironically condemns the "sunshine patriot [who] shrink[s] from the service of [his] country" (Paine). Paine heroically demands "FREEDOM" (Paine), but not for the countless slaves that feed these colonies. Instead, he entitles selfish men to oppose the government's inherent duty "to BIND" (Paine) its citizens by law. He calls this responsibility of any government "impious" (Paine) for taking power from God, but then proceeds to imply that "God Almighty" (Paine) supports his own ramblings. With this notion, Paine plays the victim in a war he has concocted but claims to have "so earnestly and so repeatedly sought to avoid" (Paine). Indeed, I have seen a mob of rebels invade an innocent man's house and attempt to murder him for doing his job, yet the herald of these insurgents has the audacity to call our King "a common murderer, a highwayman, or a housebreaker" (Paine). Under scrutiny, Paine's emphatic declarations are nothing more than poetic deceptions targeted at the malleable minds of the common people.
The most hypocritical of Paine's deceptions, however, is his condemnation of those who, untainted by his ideals, remain loyal to our King. Our levelheaded desire to avoid war he calls "folly" (Paine), and our devotion to the law and our government he calls "baseness" (Paine). These rebels, though intending to start a war to avoid paying a few pennies more in taxes, call our support of our country "servile, slavish, self-interested fear" (Paine). It is not fear that keeps me from war; I do not lack "heart" (Paine) or "brave[ry]" (Paine). What I lack is reason or desire to put the lives of my family and countrymen at risk. I am not, as Paine suggests, under the impression "that a separation must . . . take place" (Paine). Our prosperous economy does not face hardship; indeed, American merchants have long controlled "over 75 percent of the transatlantic trade" (Henretta). If the already thriving colonies would overcome their unsustainable greed for more trade, less tax, and immunity from law, then there would be no need for "wars, without ceasing" (Paine). Our nation asks from us no more than we owe, for the debt we pay off now "secured [our] victory" (Hullar) against invasive enemies in the French and Indian War. Thus, these raving arguments for freedom from "foreign dominion" (Paine) disguise only a desire to shirk our duty to the country that has supervised and protected us. So call me a coward, revolutionaries, if avoiding selfish, unnecessary war makes a man a coward, but you can be titled far worse: reckless, traitorous, selfish fools. Ultimately, an eloquent man can blur any truth, but a man who stays true to his principles cannot become deluded.
The infectious word of this eloquent man should not, however, have the power to drive its crazed audience to war and, with it, inevitable destruction. As Paine says himself, the idea of revolution is nothing more than "a panic" (Paine) spreading though the country, a fire that will burn bright for a moment but die out quickly. If the sparks of wild words do catch, the ignited uprising would lack the vital military and naval fuel to burn on. A proud man's incendiary assurance of "hope and virtue" (Paine) provides little warmth to tired, homesick troops "in the depth of winter" (Paine) when their loyalist brothers sleep peacefully in warm beds. As for the esteemed "man that can smile in trouble" (Paine), one must question whether such joy comes from a strong heart or from a soft mind. Indeed it seems the mark of a fool to be grinning in the face of "the finest [army and navy] in the world" (Hullar) with only a mob of disloyal, untrained vigilantes at his back. The "thoughtless wretch" (Paine) is not the loyal citizen who wisely chooses peace over death, but the rebel who sees the British forces, "backed by a long-standing and powerful government [and] considerable financial resources" (Hullar), and still thinks it a "great credit" (Paine) to be able to "[sustain] an orderly retreat" (Paine). It is one thing to hear radical words and "grow brave by reflection" (Paine), but I would rather watch a child "curse [his father] for cowardice" (Paine) than mourn him for recklessness. Ultimately, in the reality of war, men wield guns, not prose, and a flickering spirit of rebellion has little edge against the world's greatest military superpower.
In the end, if reason cannot remedy this outbreak of rebellion, sheer force will soon quell its flame. In the thriving society of these prosperous colonies, there is only one pitfall: that which disguises itself as a cure. Concerns over taxation are inconsequential in comparison to to the potential aftermath of war. However, the equivocation of radicals blurs this truth and convinces the common man to "pursue his principles unto death" (Paine). The only hope of peace now is to fight fire with fire, words with words, for if prudent rebuttal cannot reverse these poetic convictions, their only resolution will be though bloodshed. In such precarious times as these, a pen holds mighty power, but, if the balance topples over into war, brave words will become pitiful under the dominion of the sword.