

THE FORGOTTEN FOUNDER

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I learned about the Knight Essay Contest from a Boy Scout magazine which directed me to the following website:

<https://www.sar.org/education/youth-contests-awards/george-s-stella-m-knight-essay-contest#>

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The Thirteen Colonies were blessed with amazing orators and writers at the time of their secession from the British Empire and the formation of a new nation, the United States of America. Whether it was Thomas Jefferson's Declaration of Independence or Alexander Hamilton's *Federalist Papers*, the works of these great minds and pens inspired Americans to stand up for their freedoms and to dare to create a new form of government. But, one man garners less credit than others, despite his enormous contributions. This man is seen by many as the spark of the common person's understanding of how the British government was a tyranny, and why revolution was a necessity. When the darkest days of the revolution had come, and the Continental Army was under imminent danger of collapse, he wrote the stirring words which saved the army and democracy. He enabled the average man to understand the purpose of the conflict and strive for the wonders of liberty by connecting with the struggles they faced. This man, Thomas Paine, is one of the most influential men in American history and yet, while most know his name, very few truly realize his impact. From his sensible writings, which have led some to grant him the title of "Father of the American Revolution" (Kostyal Ch. 2), to his moving words in times of peril, Thomas Paine has rightfully earned the title of a founding father, an American hero, and a great man.

Thomas Paine is perhaps best known for his essay, *Common Sense*, written in 1776 during the great debate on taxes, the British monarchy, and revolution. Speaking out against not only the British monarchy but government itself, Paine said, "Government, even in its best state, is but a necessary evil; in its worst state an intolerable one". With these words, he dared to question the conventional wisdom of governmental supremacy and the superiority of the

state. Paine advocated for a republican form of government, one which would ensure representation for the people and prevent the corruption and tyranny evident from the British monarchy. “Why is the constitution of England sickly” Paine stated, “but because monarchy hath poisoned the [English] Republic”. It was this language that awakened the fervor of the colonists, breaking the smothering shield of ignorance and ambivalence by plainly stating that the British Republic they were told existed did not, and that the guaranteed rights they were promised as citizens were subject to change. In his simple writing, by stating understandable and, not coincidentally, common sense ideas, Paine was able to put on paper the importance of the struggle that had begun in Boston and which many hoped (and others feared) would spread. While many in early 1776 believed the protests in Boston to be acts by rioters and saw themselves as legitimately British, Paine’s pamphlet showed the inherent corruptness of monarchies and the need for a new form of government. By reaching millions of Americans quickly and by lighting a fire in the common man, Paine was able to convince those who would be needed most in the forthcoming war, creating a sense of a united American purpose: freedom from tyranny (Paine and Fast 11). While attacked by some as radical and treasonous, none can deny the amazing impact a common sense pamphlet can have on American history, nor the significance of the man who authored it.

Contrary to many people’s perceptions, the American Revolution was a dark time of fear and strife, where victory was never certain and the hardships suffered were innumerable. In the early days of the war, following American victories at Concord and Dorchester Heights, the Continental Army began to suffer defeat after defeat, threatening the cause of liberty across the colonies. After losing New York City at the Battle of Long Island, and subsequently being pushed out of the surrounding forts and towns, Washington and his flailing army were forced to

camp in Pennsylvania and endure a bitter winter (Andrlik 170). With the morale of the troops nonexistent and their enlistments set to expire at the end of the year, Washington was faced with the threat of the dissolution of his army and the end of the revolution. In this time of peril and need, he turned to Thomas Paine, who was serving as an assistant to General Greene in Washington's army (McCullough 201). Paine began writing *The American Crisis*, where he sought again to convey in common language the mood of the revolution and why the suffering soldier of the beleaguered Continental Army should re-enlist and continue the struggle. "These are the times that try men's souls," Paine wrote, "[and] he that stands it now, deserves the love and thanks of man and woman". These immortal words capture the essence of the time period: the world is dark and the future is uncertain, but we must stand together. Paine continues, "Tyranny, like hell, is not easily conquered; yet we have this consolation with us, that the harder the conflict, the more glorious the triumph". Speaking not just to the soldiers to whom he read the essay but also the thousands of readers of newspapers across the colonies, Paine reminded the Colonists of the larger goal and purpose: to rid themselves of British oppression and to gain the rights of men which they so desperately desired. It was this inspirational message, along with the Battles of Trenton and Princeton, which rescued the Continental Army, restored the American morale, and revitalized the cause of liberty to fight another day (McCullough 200).

Perhaps what enabled Paine to best connect with average man through his works was the fact that he was just that, average. Paine was born in England, where he received little formal education and struggled to find and maintain employment (Biography.com Editors). After meeting Benjamin Franklin, he traveled to America and began to work in the newspaper business, just as the fire of the American Revolution was sparking. Through his writing of *Common Sense*, Paine was able to convey why the cause of liberty was important, and how the

British Monarchy was corrupt. He spoke to the common man, with whom he related, and sought to explain why events in Boston or England might matter to them. Throughout the Revolution, Paine held a number of jobs, raising money for soldiers and serving in government, but none were more impactful than his writings on *The American Crisis* (Biography.com Editors). By reminding people of why they were fighting, and helping them see the light at the end of the tunnel, he helped save the Continental Army and the dream of liberty. Thomas Paine, the little known Englishman turned Revolutionary orator, remains to this day one of the most influential, yet least understood, Americans in history.

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