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Thomas Paine Common Sense Example

In The Common Sense, Thomas Paine argues in favor of the independence of the United States. His argument begins with more general and theoretical reflections about government and religion, and then, proceeds to the specifics of the colonial situation.

Paine begins by distinguishing the government of society. Society, according to Paine, is everything constructive and good that people as a whole fulfill. The government, however, is an institution whose sole purpose is to protect us from our vices. The government has its origins in the evil of man and so, in the best of cases, a necessary evil. Paine says that the only purpose of a government is to protect the life, liberty, and property of people, and that a government should be judged only according to the extent to which it fulfills this goal.

Paine then considers a fictitious scenario where a small group of people have been located on an island and have been removed from the rest of society. Over time, these people develop links with the others and legislation. The creation of laws becomes inevitable. Paine says that people will be much happier if they are responsible for the creation of the laws that regulate them. Paine is also implicitly arguing that such a representation system is also best for the colonies. Having expressed his disagreement with the British kingdom in America, Paine continues to

launch a general attack on the English system of government. Paine says that the British system is too complex, that it is full of contradictions and that it gives too much power to the monarchy. The British system aims to offer a reasonable system of checks and balances, but it does not.

From here, Paine undertakes the discussion, in general, about the notions of monarchy and hereditary succession. Man, says Paine, was born in a state of equality, and the distinction that had been raised between the king and subject is unnatural. At first, Paine reasons, there were no kings in the world, but the ancient Jews decided they wanted a king. This angered God, but he allowed them to have one. Paine presents pages of biblical evidence detailing God's wrath at the Jews' idea of «having a king. The conclusion reached by Paine is that the practice of monarchy originates in sin, and that it is an institution that both the Bible and God condemn. Paine calls the hereditary succession "an abominable practice." He says that even if people had to vote for a king, that does not legitimize the king's sons acting as future leaders. Additionally, the hereditary succession has brought with it innumerable evils, such as incompetent kings, corruption and civil war.

Having covered the preliminary theoretical issues, Paine begins to discuss the details of the American situation. In response to the argument that America has prospered under British rule and must stay in the king's domain. Paine responds that such an argument fails to realize that the colonies have evolved and no longer need the help of Britain. Some say that Britain has protected America and so deserves an alliance, but Paine replies that Britain has only cared for America with the intention of ensuring its own economic well-being. Paine adds that recently; instead, of taking care of the colonies, Britain has attacked them, and that it does not deserve the loyalty of the Americans.

Paine comments that the colonies have little to gain from maintaining their link with Britain. Trade can be better driven, but only after America becomes independent. Paine also states that if the colonies remain united to Great Britain, the same problems that have arisen in the past will re-emerge in the future. Paine argues that it is necessary to seek independence now, since doing the opposite would only momentarily cover the problems that will surely reemerge.

Paine even proposes the form of government that independent colonies must adopt. His recommendation is for a representative democracy that gives approximately equal weight to each of the colonies.

Paine explains why the current weather is a good time to separate from Britain. First, Paine focuses on the present size of the colonies, and on their current capabilities. It presents an inventory of the British navy and provides insights into how America could build a marina of comparable size. Paine recommends this as a way to make sure the defense of America and its prosperity in commerce. Paine also argues that America is small enough to hold together for now. If they let time pass, and the population of the colonies grows, the same sense of union could not subsist. Paine adds that if the Americans rebel now, they can use the vast amounts of land to the west as a way to pay part of the debt they will be subject to.

Paine says that as a British colony, America lacks respect on the international scene. They are seen simply as rebels and cannot form substantial alliances with other nations. In order to prosper in the long term, colonies need to be independent. Paine says that by declaring independence, the United States can ask other countries for help in their struggle for freedom. For all these reasons, Paine says it is imperative and urgent that the colonies declare independence.