

Maryland Society, Sons of the American Revolution

Second Place 2007-2008 Essay Winner

Thomas Paine and the Power of the Written Word

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The American Revolution typically evokes visions of battlegrounds, campfires and soldiers in varying states of misery. Paintings by John Trumbull, Alonzo Chappel, and Charles Wilson Peale provide evidence of the heartbreak and valor of the men and women of that time. (“1776 The Illustrated Edition” 82, 161, 165, 197, 223)

While the military struggle of the American Revolution was consuming the physical efforts of the population, there was also a struggle for the hearts and minds of the American people. Having few means of communication at the time, the cause for American independence had to be spread through the written and oral word. Intellectuals of the time attempted to persuade the colonies with eloquent and resounding oratories and revolutionary pamphlets. Thomas Paine’s *Common Sense* and *The Crisis* greatly influenced the cause for the American Revolution. It is likely that without these works the American people would not have strongly supported independence.

Thomas Paine was a revolutionary, writer, and intellectual born in Britain in 1737. He was the son of impoverished parents, and held many different jobs before he met Benjamin Franklin in London. Franklin was impressed with the young man’s ideas, and convinced him to go to the colonies. He moved there at the time of the revolution. (“1776 The Illustrated Edition” 107, 201; Smith 677; Kreis)

Thomas Paine later wrote the pamphlet, *Common Sense*, a work that supported complete and total independence for the colonies. Its eloquent and moving language persuaded many colonists that independence was the right course to take. *Common Sense* sold about 12,000 copies in three months. George Washington said of the pamphlet, “...I find *Common Sense* is working a powerful change...in the minds of many men.” (“1776 The Illustrated Edition” 112)

Common Sense was also an instrumental document used in the writing of the Declaration of Independence, for it contained key arguments against British rule. These arguments included the premise that it was ridiculous for an island to rule a continent that the very distance between the colonies and Britain made governing the colonies difficult, and that Britain ruled for its own benefit, not for the colonies. Another principle expressed in the pamphlet was that being part of Britain would involve the colonies in drawn out European wars that would severely hurt their

ability to trade. These key arguments, along with others in the pamphlet, helped win over many American colonists to the revolutionary cause. (Smith 678-682; Kennedy 144)

Thomas Paine's second important work, *The Crisis*, was a series of pamphlets published during the Revolutionary War. They encouraged American colonists to keep fighting for their independence, to stay the course and to not give up against Britain. George Washington ordered that *The Crisis* be read to his men in order to inspire them. Paine's opening line convinced colonists to continue fighting for the revolutionary cause, saying, "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 their country; but he that stands it now, deserves the love and thanks of man and woman." *The Crisis* had a great impact on the colonists, for enthusiasm towards independence had been waning. The pamphlets revitalized the patriotic independence movement. ("1776 The Illustrated Edition" 198, 251, 262; Cummings 132)

At the time of the American Revolution, many people could not read. One was accepted as a literate citizen if one could sign a signature on legal documents. Only the wealthy possessed more than one book. Education was valued differently across the thirteen colonies. In the New England colonies, an educated person was one who read Greek and Latin, while in the Mid-Atlantic colonies, practical skills were highly valued. In the South, private tutors worked with the sons of plantation owners to prepare them for school in England. Yet, with all of these disparate ideas about learning, and an unorganized system for communication, Thomas Paine's printed word still managed to reach the majority of Americans. It was read aloud in taverns, in military camps of the Continental Army, and in private homes of the colonists. It should be noted also, that newspapers carried important ideas quickly throughout the developing cities. (Monaghan 79)

After the end of the American Revolution, Thomas Paine continued to write influential works, such as the *Rights of Man*, which influenced the French Revolution. He remained in France and was elected to the French National Assembly. He became disillusioned with French government under the rule of the dictator Napoleon, and returned to the United States at the invitation of President Thomas Jefferson in 1802. He died at the age of 72 in New York City in 1809. Without his inspirational works like *Common Sense* and *The Crisis*, it is doubtful that the colonies would have gained their independence. The power of his ideas demonstrates that it is the minds and hearts of citizens that determine the strength of their determination to create a democracy. While musket and cannon fought for American independence, Thomas Paine's pen fought to convince America that independence was the just and righteous cause. (Leemhuis)

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Biography

Peter Andes is a junior at Stephen Decatur High School in Berlin, Maryland maintaining a 4.0 academic average. His activities include the Academic Team, the Investment Club and the Leo Club. He also co-managed the track team. Along with his academic studies Peter received the Eagle Scout award and spends a great deal of time working in the Scout movement. He eventually wants to find a career that will permit him to study topics that interest him and at the same time serve the community.