

The American Torchbearer of the Enlightenment:

Thomas Paine

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The American War for Independence has remained a vital aspect of the United States' national identity, romanticized generation after generation. However, every nascent movement requires an identity to rally behind. Thus, the Enlightenment movement that stemmed from various philosophers was inextricably tied to the creation of a new nation in the colonies. Chief in implementing and spreading those ideas was an Englishman named Thomas Paine. He was an individual who represented the symbiosis of Enlightenment ideals, particularly those of John Locke and Voltaire, and Paine combined their bold traditions and helped bring them into practice. It is also evident that Paine had grander aims than presiding over the creation of a democratic government in America, as he hoped ardently for the American Revolution's success to be replicated in Europe.

This paper will chart out the lives of Thomas Paine, John Locke, the progenitor of many Enlightenment lines of thought, and a similarly famed French philosopher, Voltaire. From the onset there were already different sects of the Enlightenment such as the Moderate, Skeptical, and Divine branches. Paine and his cohorts spearheaded the Revolutionary branch, whose members believed they could "reproduce some golden age of simple goodness."¹ Enlightenment, in broad terms, was focused around the natural state of individual rights and what made reasonable government. The various aforementioned groups could focus on different areas, such as being primarily skeptical of religious institutions, monarchy, a mix of the two, and so forth. Most importantly, they represented an emergence of thinking, much like the Renaissance, that

¹ Henry May, *The Enlightenment in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976), P. 153.

offered the means through which medieval legacies could finally gradually end in Europe as the ideals of free-thinking gained traction. And many colonists read the works of the Enlightenment voraciously or at the very least were aware of their message. Historians such as Dr. Gordon Wood claim they were “born at a time when the principles of government and freedom were better known than at any time in history.”² Even during the lead up to the Revolution and when they believed themselves to be British subjects, they also gradually deemed themselves apart and accordingly would need to establish a new identity. The Revolution merely hastened the process alongside bringing an armed conflict into the equation. Thus, Americans were subsequently more open to new ideals than the majority of Europe, as they were less steeped in centuries or millennia old tradition. Even those borrowed ideas, such as English liberties, would open the door for revolution, as the colonists spent many years beforehand ruminating on their nature, a tradition which would leave them convinced that the Hanoverian king, George the 3rd and Parliament, trampled over the same laws to which they were entitled.³

The historiography alone on the subject already provides a lively discourse with various interpretations fiercely debated among many well-read historians. Some historians credit Paine less with concocting new notions and more with popularizing the existing ideals of the Enlightenment, itself an undiminished accomplishment in all fairness.⁴ After all, effective arguments in both written and oratory forms have changed the course of history countless times in the past. Others coined Paine as the “Apostle of Freedom” as evidenced by the title to Dr.

² Gordon Wood, *The Creation of the American Republic 1776-1787* (Williamsburg: The University of North Carolina Press, 1969), 4.

³ Bernard Bailyn, *The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press, 1971), 43.

⁴ C. E. Merriam Jr., *Thomas Paine's Political Theories* (Columbia University, 1899), 402.

Fruchtman's work, a man who represented an evolution of Enlightenment ideals and masterfully directed them towards a clear and tangible goal.⁵

Other notable academic voices offer other perspectives. Dr. Gary Nash for instance proposed that a "radical virus" had already taken root in the colonies and Thomas Paine was primarily an avatar of these sentiments.⁶ While doubtless an important figure as indicated by the sections granted to him and Lockean ideals, Nash argued much like John Adams that the "diversified" population of the colonies was equally vital.⁷ Subsequently, while figures such as Thomas Paine are useful anchoring points for newcomers learning about the era, scholars must strive to include the population beyond such figures. After all, it was to the common people that Thomas Paine and other icons of the Founding Fathers endeavored to endear themselves to.

To chart the course of the Enlightenment, John Locke's life and writings must be the first chronological focus. Born in 1632 and well educated, he was later sent to Oxford University by his father. He felt largely ambivalent towards the actual curriculum, however, he did enjoy the environment of the campus. Oxford offered him a comfortable environment to pursue his own self teaching.⁸ At this fairly prodigious stage in his life, he had already begun to write political musings of his own, albeit private or otherwise unprinted.⁹ He wondered what would come next when his tenure concluded at the institution. Happenstance brought Locke to Lord Ashley, a

⁵ Jack Fruchtman, *Thomas Paine: Apostle of Freedom*, (New York/London : Four Walls Eight Windows, 1994).

⁶ Gary Nash, *The Unknown American Revolution*, (Viking Books, 2005), 44.

⁷ Nash, *The Unknown American Revolution*, 2.

⁸ Lord King, *The Life of John Locke*, (London: Henry Colburn and Richard Bentley, 1830), 7.

⁹ King, *The Life of John Locke*, 11.

founder of the Whig movement, as Locke helped to save his life prior to his departure from Oxford. It was Ashley who became the primary source of patronage for Locke for a time.¹⁰

From there Locke juggled time between other nations such as France and Holland. He did this in the hope of combatting his latent asthma which plagued him for 30 years through more conducive environments, corresponding with his friends in England and writing all the while. From there he gradually gained acclaim writing as an icon of the Whigs, as he published lengthy essays and maintained a spirited discourse with fellow intellectuals of the era such as Isaac Newton. He also continued to reside in various places ranging from England and the Netherlands. Dramatic instances such as the Revolution of 1688 also played another role where he resided.¹¹

John Locke was in many ways the primary progenitor of how the Enlightenment gained traction. Of his many writings, the *Two Treatises of Government*, published in 1689, is a prime example of his focus on reasonable leadership. Locke had many novel notions for his time, as he wrote on matters such as the natural state of humanity. When all were equal in nature for example, he proposed that “each transgression may be punished to that degree” when acted against.¹² However, it was an unfeasible state of existence, as no one person would have the prerogative to enforce a state of harmony and human nature would lead to nothing, barring “confusion and disorder.”¹³ This natural state would certainly be anathema towards humanity’s continued wellbeing, as each individual struggled for survival in an uncertain world. To be free

¹⁰ King, *The Life of John Locke*, 57.

¹¹ King, *The Life of John Locke*, 318.

¹² John Locke, *Two Treatises of Government* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 275.

¹³ Locke, *Two Treatises of Government*, 275.

from the “Law of Nature” a society must in turn be formed.¹⁴ This collective could be only be joined when an individual provided consent alongside ceding their natural liberty in order to “unite into a community.”¹⁵ Given power by the social compact, one of Locke’s foremost concepts, this community would ideally work to further the prosperity of, and act according to the whims of the majority of its number. Thus sound government was a common-wealth, its leaders entrusted their prerogative to rule by mutual consent, rather than the divine right of kings many in Europe seemingly cited in order to utilize faith to justify any manner of rule.

However, Locke also warned against any form of government that acted overwhelmingly against “the common good.”¹⁶ The act of “using Force upon the People” without authority was a sure sign of tyranny, quite the opposite of a sound ruler.¹⁷ Such wanton actions would in turn, lay “a foundation for rebellion.”¹⁸ In which case he endorsed the concept that the nation’s citizenry would subsequently have the right to forcibly replace their current government. By the same token, a ruler who “unjustly invades” another’s lands could not hope to rule with any iota of legitimacy, the manner of his rule having come about in a forceful rather than free manner.¹⁹ This line of thought questioned the prerogative of rulers who attained their authority from conquest, a critical look at whether their victories came through providence or they were simply the ruffians who triumphed overall. While this segment might at first appear to be a rebuttal of William of Orange’s take-over of England during the Glorious Revolution, Locke’s own preface

¹⁴ Locke, *Two Treatises of Government*, 283.

¹⁵ Locke, *Two Treatises of Government*, 331.

¹⁶ Locke, *Two Treatises of Government*, 353.

¹⁷ Locke, *Two Treatises of Government*, 370.

¹⁸ Locke, *Two Treatises of Government*, 416.

¹⁹ Locke, *Two Treatises of Government*, 385.

introduces his treatises as justifications for his rule, one which Locke was likely in favor of seeing as he returned to England shortly following the revolutions end.²⁰ His other primary purpose in writing the treatises was in response to Robert Filmer's, book "Patriarchia," a book Locke profusely disagreed with. Even though there were points on which Paine and some others agreed years hence, such as the inherent inequality one accepted by entering into society, Locke laid a profound groundwork of what comprised a sound government and the basic rights of an individual in a society.

Another significant icon of the Enlightenment in Europe was Voltaire, a man who mirrored Locke in many regards such as his penchant for enlivened correspondence and his commitment to concepts that would form the backbone of the "Divine" Enlightenment. Voltaire was born under the name, Francois-Marie Arouet in 1694 to the French aristocracy. He suffered the death of his mother early in his life even as he demonstrated his already rebellious demeanor to his father.²¹ This tenuous relationship resulted in Voltaire severing ties with his father (he would remain close with some of his siblings) following his education. As an adult, he adopted the pen name he would later become renowned for, Voltaire, a word with no discernable meaning, but one he soon famously made all his own. He publicized his talent for creative thinking and writing, as he dabbled in theater and other ventures, all the while developing a "supreme arrogance."²² The man undoubtedly led a colorful life balancing the notoriety that led to censorship from some groups alongside interment in the Bastille with his beloved status in

²⁰ Locke, *Two Treatises of Government*, 137.

²¹ Haydn Mason, *Voltaire: a Biography* (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 1981), 1.

²² Mason, *Voltaire: a Biography*, 4.

other circles. This fame included when he became the “brightest star in the Prussian Court” under the blessing of their newest king, Frederick, an instance that displayed the author’s subversive appeal.²³ For his part, by the time of his death in 1778, he was a widely renowned philosopher, with crowds of onlookers rushing for the mere chance to glimpse him in the town of Ferney.²⁴

Voltaire was acclaimed for proudly championing freedom of speech and denouncing religious abuses and intolerant institutions, sentiments that would leave him widely quoted in the American colonies.²⁵ On religion, besides a healthy wariness of such institutions as the Catholic Church of the time, a large part of his message was simply that the Church should “be contained within its bounds.”²⁶ This ideal balance would both respect piety while also preventing the power grabs that were evident throughout European history. His trademark message was that one should not be entirely enthralled to the whims of a theologian, as they might share the same despotically abusive whims as some royalty, much like the Borgias for instance, but to “adore God for your own reasons.”²⁷ Doubtlessly this was an empowering message for the individual as a believer, affirming that one should not allow institutions too much influence on interpreting one’s faith for them. These skepticisms mirrored and possibly contributed to the American colonies’ tendency to remain wary towards the papacy, a distrust that would take many years to wash away. It is also important to note how enraptured Voltaire was with the comparatively

²³ Mason, *Voltaire: a Biography*, 50.

²⁴ Mason, *Voltaire: a Biography*, 126.

²⁵ Bailyn, *The Enlightenment in America*, 27.

²⁶ Voltaire, *Voltaire on Religion: Selected Writings* (New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing, 1974), 214.

²⁷ Voltaire, *Voltaire on Religion: Selected Writings*, 94.

tolerant civil liberties present in England during his stay there. While the colonies had deeply rooted religious communities such as the Puritans and Quakers, their respective leaders were more focused on local matters out of necessity, abstaining from some of the excesses illustrated in Europe.

There were palpable parallels and similarities in John Locke and Voltaire's arguments that would contribute to their lasting appeal. Even without their immense readership in Colonial America or Thomas Paine popularizing many of their ideas, their similarities would secure them a veritable spot in the European canon of significant philosophers. For starters, both were deeply invested in the political discourses of their respective lives and wrote on religion, albeit, more so in Voltaire's case. Voltaire's message, much like Paine's, even met with a similarly resounding degree of reformative success as he provided the groundwork for the "termination of the French monarchy, aristocracy, and clergy" as they were known, mere decades after his death.²⁸ Both men were supremely doubtful of the supposedly inherent benevolence of the monarchy that fueled the divine right of kings. Voltaire wrote "in support of law and free expression" and against the absolute despotism a number of French kings illustrated.²⁹ Unfortunately in his earlier years, through a combination of his somewhat higher status and a modicum of condescension, Voltaire did paint the common people in an unflattering light in several of his plays as an unwitting mob.³⁰ Voltaire warmed up to the middle class of London, Geneva, and Amsterdam eventually, losing some of his disdain over the years. Ultimately, it was the

²⁸ Fruchtman, *Thomas Paine: Apostle of Freedom*, 213.

²⁹ Peter Gay, *Voltaire's Politics: The Poet as Realist* (New York: Vintage Books, 1965), 169.

³⁰ Gay, *Voltaire's Politics: The Poet as Realist*, 220.

“abysmal poverty” that was painfully evident in France that contributed to his sometimes poor perceptions and in time, a hopeful future might see all equal in society by virtue of a shared state of enlightenment.³¹ Therefore Voltaire did care for the rights of the everyman much like John Locke, he merely balked at the squalor of the era so many had to live in.

It is admittedly doubtful that most colonists could have properly read John Locke or Voltaire’s books. This is the subject of Dr. Oscar and Lillian Handlin’s article in *The American Scholar*, one that even questions if a number of the Founding Fathers read the works themselves or only focused in on segments favorable to their cause.³² However according to the article, enough luminary figures had read the works critically enough that their legacy was already thoroughly steeped in Colonial America. That or it was the broad image of these philosophers and their ideals over a strict interpretation that laid the groundwork for Thomas Paine, as this work claimed European sources lacked a “determinative influence” and rather the Revolution was born of ideals derived from their native soil by and large, further augmented by whatever inspirations they picked and chose.³³ Whether this article or Dr. Wood’s work is closer to the truth as to who read the two authors is of course, debatable, however the Enlightenment’s impact or at least its image on America left a potent array of possibilities for one man to realize.

This man and the primary subject of the paper was Thomas Paine, a man who some claimed to be the “principal author” of American independence.³⁴ Born in 1736 in the Norfolk

³¹ Gay, *Voltaire’s Politics: The Poet as Realist*, 223.

³² Oscar and Lillian Handlin, “Who Read John Locke” *The American Scholar* 58, no. 4 (1989), 547.

³³ Handlins, “Who Read John Locke”, 556.

³⁴ Thomas Rickman, *The Life of Thomas Paine Author of Common Sense, Rights of Man, Age of Reason, Letter to the Addressers* (London: T.C. Rickman, 1819), 10.

region of England, he displayed a precocious appetite for literature early in his schooling.³⁵ He juggled several trades during his time in Europe such as a stay maker, and teacher. He married for a short while, and he wrote decently well received works such as poetry and dramas.³⁶ Even during his initial tenure in England, Paine had already begun to take an interest in politics and writing on them, aptly enough as he was introduced to the works of Locke and Voltaire during this stage of his life. He was a man desperately in need of a fresh start however after he broke up with his wife and his business endeavors fell through. In 1774, he befriended Benjamin Franklin, a twist of fate that would see the famed inventor and future founding father convince Thomas Paine to sail from his home country to the thirteen colonies.³⁷

He plied his talents in the new world as an editor to *The Pennsylvanian* under the employ of Mr. Aitkin, aided by a resounding endorsement from Franklin. Of course, already during this early stage of his time in America, tensions concerning the rule of England over her colonies were reaching their height. Spurred to write on the subject by merit of his own interest and the urging of Mr. Aitkin, Paine soon joined the ranks of Edmund Burke and James Otis as another eloquent author decrying the perceived abuses of English rule in the colonies. Initially titled, *Plain Truth* and published by Robert Bell, the pamphlet known as *Common Sense* took Colonial America by storm.³⁸

Released in 1776, the pamphlet circulated throughout the colonies as it amassed over a million copies in print, galvanizing many towards freedom while also inviting Tory rebuttals.

³⁵ Rickman, *The Life of Thomas Paine*, 33.

³⁶ Rickman, *The Life of Thomas Paine*, 40.

³⁷ Rickman, *The Life of Thomas Paine*, 47.

³⁸ Rickman, *The Life of Thomas Paine*, 52.

Pamphlets were particularly effective means of transmitting ideas for the time, on par with newspapers in regards to ease of circulation and entirely dedicated to the author's respective message. This work interspersed Lockean ideals with concepts of Paine's own creation, a combination that gave the work a thunderous impact through its vernacular language. From the onset, he established a distinction between societies, in that they were a blessing, and governments, which were described as a necessary evil at best, and intolerable in their "worst state."³⁹ This was owing to the social compact that Locke had proposed, a means through which the populace empowered the source of their woes in the hope of security. Thus the people were the enablers of their oppressors ultimately, a sick irony that was hardly lost on Paine.

He argued passionately for an end to England's rule over the colonies, deeming that reconciliation was a naive hope under the clause that such a relation would be "forced and unnatural."⁴⁰ As England would hardly be inclined to make a compromise of their own volition, it was quite absurd for an island nation to have the whole known North American continent in its thrall. This notion was particularly true after its hard-fought gains against the French in the Seven Years War. Breaking apart this relation, forcibly if need be, would allow the colonies an opportunity to chart the course of their own fate in the new world. In Paine's mind, this would allow the colonies a peaceful co-existence alongside the other world powers, benefitting through trade with all parties rather than being dragged into internecine wars at the behest of England.⁴¹

³⁹ Thomas Paine, *Paine Political Writings* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 3.

⁴⁰ Paine, *Paine Political Writings*, 21.

⁴¹ Paine, *Paine Political Writings*, 21.

Europe simply had too many kingdoms in close proximity to remain at peace for long, thus America should enjoy the proverbial castle moat that was the Atlantic Sea in Paine's mind.

Why was *Common Sense* so successful in its aims? For starters, even without its new slew of notions, the way it vindicated the Lockean image of the rights of children and America as a party grossly mistreated by a distant and aloof parent was itself a poignant image for its readers.⁴² Children might not yet enjoy the right to give consent according to Locke, however they were due responsible stewardship and the chance to chart their own course in life after coming of age. This also went along with Locke's proposal that upon a child reaching adulthood, an individual had the right to choose whether to claim allegiance to the nation of their birth, should they possess valid reasons to do so. The ability to consent differentiated a citizen and a slave, again re-emphasized by Paine for his colonial readership. And much like Locke's musings about the invalidity of a monarch's rule coming from conquest or other ill-gotten means, Paine rebuked England's prerogative over the colonies. He argued that Europe would better fit that claim as the New World was a refuge for those persecuted from every corner of the Old World.⁴³

Such were the perceived abuses leveled against the colonies that Paine argued they must separate from England, their obligations particularly rendered invalid in many of the manners Locke described almost a century ago. Therefore the colonies would look to Locke's right to Revolution in the face of blatant abuse, an aspect Paine particularly honed in on. He brilliantly described monarchy as "popery in government," drawing a parallel between his message and the

⁴² Gillian Brown, *The Consent of the Governed* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001), 83.

⁴³ Brown, *The Consent of the Governed*, 95.

themes Voltaire put forth, one of a less than benign power that abused its fellow humans for more power.⁴⁴ Of course, Paine knew full well of the mistrust the colonies had regarding the Papacy and their voracious appetite for Voltaire's writings, ensuring that the parallel painted a poignant illustration in their conscious. Contrasting the writings of Edmund Burke, a man whom Paine called both friend and rival, aristocracy was ultimately far from the ideal form of government merely because it had survived so long, often through iron-clad rules and brutal repression of the populace.

In writing the pamphlet and endorsing the cause for independence so fervently, Paine joined Hamilton and Lafayette, foreigners and immigrants who proudly embraced the nascent American dream and strove to bring it about. Thomas Paine was a proponent of the ideal body of government being the most inclusive form possible which would possess "large and equal representation" as best possible in a national congress.⁴⁵ He decried the mixed government of England, pushing for a representational government instead.⁴⁶ This would leave the government in a state of "constant maturity," one in which the citizenry could make their collective voice known through elected officials and balance future growth of the government with stability.⁴⁷

While the majority of the founding fathers saw fit to overlook race and gender for the time being, Paine was also dramatically opposed to slavery, an ideological facet from which he diverged from Locke's partial justification of the practice.⁴⁸ John Locke largely detested slavery

⁴⁴ Fruchtman, *Thomas Paine: Apostle of Freedom*, 68.

⁴⁵ Paine, *Paine Political Writings*, 36.

⁴⁶ Wood, *The Creation of the American Republic 1776-1787*, 224.

⁴⁷ Wood, *The Creation of the American Republic 1776-1787*, 105.

⁴⁸ Conway, *The Americanism of Thomas Paine*, 2.

in his works, however, he did find it a mercy compared to the death he hypothesized the subject to have otherwise earned. Paine abhorred it all the same.⁴⁹ Later in his life, Thomas Paine even de-emphasized the role of the individual when contrasted with Locke, as he argued instead for the importance of the community in a similar manner to Rosseau in Paine's book, "*The Rights of Man*."⁵⁰ Also akin to Rosseau and keeping with his aforementioned antipathy towards aristocracy, Paine revolted at hereditary succession, as it was not borne of either "right or of utility."⁵¹

Paine also proposed that an ideal government retained a civic equality among the populace as best possible, a status that Locke argued was conceded upon entering society as mentioned prior. America's "only king" would be the law ultimately should they succeed in their rebellion, their newfound equality granted "by conviction and choice."⁵² Besides the obvious Tory rebuttals, some of Paine's most fervent opponents came from the ranks of those who fought equally hard for independence. One significant example was John Adams who claimed such a form of democracy would "produce confusion and every evil work" even as he praised Paine for giving the cause a clear direction.⁵³ After all, Paine was among the first who coined the phrase, "United States" and paved the way for the revolt against England.

Thomas Paine was clearly enraptured by the growing revolutionary spirit, one he helped ignite through his provocative pamphlet. He openly espoused its bountiful natural resources and

⁴⁹ Locke, *Two Treatises of Government*, 284.

⁵⁰ Fruchtman, *Thomas Paine: Apostle of Freedom*, 259.

⁵¹ Merriam, *Thomas Paine's Political Theories*, 133.

⁵² Pauline Maier, *From Resistance to Revolution: Colonial Radicals and the Development of American Opposition to Britain, 1765- 1776* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1972),296.

⁵³ Bailyn, *The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution*, 289.

free spirit as a unique blessing, one England could only dream of. This nation he claimed was uniquely situated to construct vast navies with ease, as her landscapes contained plentiful stores of tar, timber, iron, and more.⁵⁴ Besides self-defense from pirates, he somewhat naively thought that any iota of success in the endeavor to construct an armed flotilla would best the British navy, as its ships were simply too widespread over the empire's holdings or otherwise unfit for service by merit of their age or disrepair.⁵⁵ Following this hypothetical victory, the colonies would flourish under the virtues of freedom and liberty, as he wrote in his poem, "*The Liberty Tree*."⁵⁶ When the dreams of such an easy victory were shattered and the war dragged on, to his credit he reliably stood true to his convictions, concocting the "*The Crisis*" in which he urged the weary soldiers of the Continental Army to remain at George Washington's side during one of the lowest points of the conflict.⁵⁷

Thomas Paine was a man inextricably tied to the American Revolutionary cause, as he wrote prolifically in favor of the movement. He also continued his friendship with Franklin, achieved his Master of Arts from the University of Pennsylvania, and went abroad on several European trips as an envoy to help secure aid.⁵⁸ However, was he only dedicated to American independence along the lines of some of the more conservative and similarly pivotal figures such as John Adams, or were the American Colonies a launching board to spread his ideas further? While the nation had many challenges in its early years, Paine was not tied down to the politics

⁵⁴ Paine, *Paine Political Writings*, 31.

⁵⁵ Paine, *Paine Political Writings*, 33.

⁵⁶ Brown, *The Consent of the Governed: the Lockean Legacy in Early American Culture*, 98.

⁵⁷ Paine, *Paine Political Writings*, 52.

⁵⁸ Rickman, *The Life of Thomas Paine*, 70.

of the new nation compared to his peers, therefore his mind could afford to wander further. Also, what was to become of the man following the victory at Yorktown and subsequent treaties in Paris? What brash claims could Paine write or claim that would warrant his change of fortune from beloved progenitor of American independence to obscure raving firebrand in the public eye by the time of his death in 1809? It is important to note that the rights of humanity shared equal billing with the clause for an independent America at the end of Common Sense, a hint as to what would come next for the author.⁵⁹

Shortly after the conclusion of the American War for Independence, Paine was upheld as a near saintly figure, a man many believed could hold his head high alongside the similarly commended Washington. He was given three thousand dollars by Congress for his services to the nation, received words of lofty respect from Washington himself, and received a spacious 300 acre estate from the state of New York.⁶⁰ He however deemed his purpose in the newly established United States of America to be complete, hence setting forth to Paris in 1787, his considerable reputation as a writer in tow.⁶¹ He dabbled in bridge design, visited his mother in England, and wrote in fervent support of the French Revolution upon its outbreak, pleased that in his mind, they were no longer subject “to the folly of one man.”⁶² He was hardly alone amongst the Founding Fathers who endorsed the French Revolution, as Thomas Jefferson famously

⁵⁹ Paine, *Paine Political Writings*, 45.

⁶⁰ Rickman, *The Life of Thomas Paine Author of Common Sense, Rights of Man, Age of Reason, Letter to the Addressers*, 78.

⁶¹ Rickman, *The Life of Thomas Paine Author of Common Sense, Rights of Man, Age of Reason, Letter to the Addressers*, 82.

⁶² Rickman, *The Life of Thomas Paine Author of Common Sense, Rights of Man, Age of Reason, Letter to the Addressers*, 84.

approved of the movement during its opening throes alongside a decent percentage of the public. However, the positive image of the Revolution and the Jacobins soon became tarnished, even to its fiercest supporters abroad.

Paine fervently held that the French Revolution would assist in bringing about a universal peace and liberty worldwide to the degree that he left his current lodgings in England to actively aid the movement. The American Revolution had already disrupted the balance of powers between kings, in France there existed an opportunity to remove one crown from the equation altogether. He arrived with great fanfare and was embraced by the National Convention at first. However, despite his efforts to preserve the life of the king in the hopes of keeping the movement principled, Paine arrived at a time when partisanship reared its head violently as the revolutionary figureheads split from one another to form various factions.⁶³ Of these, the Jacobins under the leadership of Robespierre inscribed their infamous name in history with their sheer bloodlust, the same urges Mr. Paine sought to curtail. Paine held a prestigious role of a deputy of the Convention over Cambrais for a time, however, his lament at the death of the king opened the door for reprisal once the Reign of Terror commenced in full. Out of principle he balked at dishonesty in all forms, speaking at length that the king's corruption should have been laid bare in a public trial, and lamented upon the turn of fate that saw the new government fall to petty jealousy and in-fighting of its own.⁶⁴ It had become apparent to Paine that "the future of humanity" would not benefit from the bloodbath the French Revolution had become unlike the

⁶³ Rickman, *The Life of Thomas Paine Author of Common Sense, Rights of Man, Age of Reason, Letter to the Addressers*, 107.

⁶⁴ Rickman, *The Life of Thomas Paine Author of Common Sense, Rights of Man, Age of Reason, Letter to the Addressers*, 137.

outcome of the American Revolution.⁶⁵ His idealism and trust in this movement had dramatically failed him.

He, much like Voltaire decades prior, was confined to internment in a famous French prison, this time the Luxembourg prison by Robespierre through a mixture of baseless suspicion and his own brazen writings. Like Voltaire, while his initial aim was to thwart the monarchy, he could not afford to overlook despotism in any form, as it had arose in the Jacobins. According to him, this ignominious treatment required no overt reason save the distrust over his foreign status, in spite of his contributions to the liberty of both the United States of America and France.⁶⁶ In Paine's defense, Robespierre's wording that such an action would be in the best interest of both France and America might have left him to infer as much, even though in reality he was still widely praised and beloved stateside.⁶⁷ He boldly claimed a mutual conspiracy between parties in both America and France were responsible for this turn in his fortune, as he found himself lonely in prison barring Herrault Sechelles, an acquaintance of Jefferson and friend of Paine, before he himself was sentenced to the Guillotine.⁶⁸

During this span of time, he penned the majority of his then controversial treatise, *The Age of Reason*. Arguing in favor of deism, this book appalled the American public of the time, a public who would come to spurn Thomas Paine for the rest of his life.⁶⁹ Paine himself knew of

⁶⁵ Conway, "The Americanism of Thomas Paine." *The Arena* 21, no. 2 (February 1899), 13.

⁶⁶ Rickman, *The Life of Thomas Paine Author of Common Sense, Rights of Man, Age of Reason, Letter to the Addressers*, 154.

⁶⁷ Blakemore. "Revisionist patricide: Thomas Paine's Letter to George Washington." *CLIO* 24, no. 3 (1995).

⁶⁸ Rickman, *The Life of Thomas Paine Author of Common Sense, Rights of Man, Age of Reason, Letter to the Addressers*, 156.

⁶⁹ Paine, *Paine Political Writings*, 302.

the sizable appeal of religion in the colonies when writing during the Revolution as he had integrated biblical scripture throughout his own works. This was further aided by Thomas Paine's pivot in regards to how he wrote about Washington, as he swapped his previous praise in favor of scathing admonishment. He had convinced himself that Washington had a role to play in his imprisonment, despite the reality of the unresolved matter weighing on Washington's mind upon the end of his terms as president.

This criticism led many, even contemporary scholars, to claim that he betrayed his own "mythic role" in the American Revolution as he had likened Washington to the reviled epitome of betrayal, the turncoat Benedict Arnold.⁷⁰ While this paper largely paints a fairly sympathetic portrait of the wayward philosopher, this "radical revision" in his stance contributed significantly to his status as a pariah later in life and was an unfortunate turn for a man who shared such camaraderie with the Patriot cause.⁷¹ However unfortunate or curious this turnabout was for him though, it was hardly disingenuous, even if by drawing somewhat outrageous parallels between General Howe and George Washington he almost guaranteed his icy reception. Paine did this under the clause that Washington's own tactical occasional missteps as general were purposefully meant to sabotage the patriot cause as he was secretly an enemy of American Independence alongside General Howe, a sentiment that endeared very few stateside.

His freedom was ultimately granted through the efforts of the second president of the United States, James Monroe. He resided in Paris a few more years, first sheltered at Mr.

⁷⁰ Blakemore, *Revisionist patricide: Thomas Paine's Letter to George Washington*.

⁷¹ Blakemore, *Revisionist patricide: Thomas Paine's Letter to George Washington*

Monroe's home and then the Bonneville's residence, a setting in which he became casually acquainted with figures such as Condorcet and Napoleon.⁷² Paine however had truly come to miss the shores of America and returned during Thomas Jefferson's tenure as president to his sizable New York estate at New Rochelle.⁷³

He resided in this holding until the time of his death in 1809. He repaid the courtesy the Bonneville's had offered with a new home in the Americas and wrote further on *The Age of Reason*. Then he published his completed treatise on religion in its entirety. Undeniably, this process was far from instantaneous, however, there were no bodies of water to pass and his name was beloved throughout the colonies, a reputation upheld with great alacrity. It was however this same word of mouth reputation that starkly damaged his reputation for the remainder of Paine's life. His stance towards churches aiding aristocracy and despotism was inspired in part by Voltaire. However, his work was widely condemned where Voltaire was still loved. His wording appeared to the audience of the era that he was simply opposed to religion in any form where Locke and Voltaire wrote their respective critiques on the subject far more tastefully. He would keep writing of course, but for the immediate future, he was a pariah in the new nation. Only 6 mourners attended his funeral in 1809.⁷⁴

In spite of this, his indispensable contribution towards the American Revolution could never be entirely forgotten. Efforts to redeem his image, or otherwise give a fairer picture of his

⁷² Rickman, *The Life of Thomas Paine Author of Common Sense, Rights of Man, Age of Reason, Letter to the Addressers*, 164.

⁷³ Rickman, *The Life of Thomas Paine Author of Common Sense, Rights of Man, Age of Reason, Letter to the Addressers*, 178.

⁷⁴ Rickman, *The Life of Thomas Paine*, 188.

post revolution life posthumously took some time in the hope that his image as a drunkard and deist would fade, but they were undertaken in due course. For while his image was heavily damaged later in his life, despite his actions being true to his character, the immediate legacy he left to the new nation was undeniable. This led to an interesting historiographical angle where depending on when a primary source was written, they could hold dramatically differing perspectives on Mr. Paine, much like many other divisive figures in history. He had earned his respective role among the Founding Fathers, even despite his imperfect nature, especially since he was hardly alone in this respect. After all, the squabbles between John Adams and Thomas Jefferson until their reconciliation were legendary, Washington as President had several rocky episodes such as the Whiskey Rebellion, and Alexander Hamilton who was unfaithful to his wife and later perished in a duel that subsequently left Aaron Burr reviled for pulling the trigger.

Beyond this irrefutable legacy present in the very framework of the nascent nation of the United States, Thomas Paine also left a significant mark abroad, even if he was less directly successful. This is not to say, however, he was entirely unsuccessful in these ventures either or at the very least, leave a strong impression. Even besides that, Europe was an equally vital nexus for his own reputation as America, whether his works resonated or interest was piqued when he was officially banned in some instances by means of a rebellious curiosity. Beyond his own influence on the French Revolution, his sway over the common people did not cease following the end of the American Revolution. This could be seen with a slew of varied individuals who he inspired through his passionate commentary to emulate his methods in other European nations such as England and Ireland or come to America to partake in the debate themselves.

These radical individuals that formed this Trans- Atlantic tradition were spurred by Paine’s internationalism, giving him a slew of acolytes that emigrated across the Atlantic.⁷⁵ They were a motley group, comprising various ages and nationalities, who sought to use notions from the New World and Enlightenment in order to combat “intolerance and inequity in their homelands.”⁷⁶ A large percentage of these radicals were of Irish heritage and joined up with the United Irishmen movement, one that sought to free Ireland of English rule and instill a government that mixed republicanism with Lockean ideals.⁷⁷ Many of these radicals such as Duane, Binnes, Driscoll, and even Paine himself after 1803 held scathing views, equal parts idealistic and condemnatory of those who fell short of “their exacting republican standards.”⁷⁸ Zealots in a fashion to their cause, they were nonetheless genuine like Paine, even if their firebrand nature could at once endear the masses they needed to win over to their respective causes, while enraging others.

Ultimately, where did he draw the line between a citizen of the United States or the wider world? Much like Washington’s uncanny prediction in his farewell address, he was wary of getting overly involved in foreign matters, doubly so at the beck and call of another who held America in its grasp. Britain had curtailed America’s trade prospects for too long in his perspective, as its rich reserves of natural resources could easily find a wider market. Foreign alliances and relationships were welcome when they bolstered trade and amicability among

⁷⁵ Michael Durey, *Transatlantic Radicals and the Early American Republic* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1997), 134.

⁷⁶ Durey, *Transatlantic Radicals and the Early American Republic*, 4.

⁷⁷ Durey, *Transatlantic Radicals and the Early American Republic*, 100.

⁷⁸ Durey, *Transatlantic Radicals and the Early American Republic*, 267.

nations, less so when the embroiled the United States into a state of war it would otherwise have no stake in. However, he was also deeply invested in the fate of the wider world as illustrated in his actions in France and his inspiration of the Trans-Atlantic radicals who sought to replicate his success. Much like Locke and Voltaire, his fame or otherwise notoriety depending on how one viewed him, left him well read overseas additionally as his ideas were greater than one single continent, however vast.

What are some of the ways his modern impact can be observed in society? As befitting his comparatively radical status for the time, quite a few evidently. Some of the ideas he broached in a number of his works, including a progressive income tax and Agrarian Justice in a somewhat Jeffersonian vein, were quite novel for the era and in the matter of income tax, still fiercely debated.⁷⁹ Other notions that he, Locke, and Voltaire contributed to the public discussion morphed into ideals known in such forms today as social justice, a number of the Amendments present in the Bill of Rights, and more in the contemporary era. Mutual dignity, both in day to day life and formal capacities, alongside other cherished freedoms such as various deterrents against blatant abuses of power have their roots in what these writers transcribed.

More than two centuries after his death, lively conferences are still hosted in his name such as the “Citizen of the World” gathering in 2009.⁸⁰ Noting that famed Paine scholar Moncure Conway once claimed that Paine’s afterlife is just as interesting as his actual life at the very beginning, the article retells what sort of topics the conference entailed. Following a

⁷⁹ Merriam, *Thomas Paine’s Political Theories*, 401.

⁸⁰ Marcus Morris, *Citizen of the World: The Use and Abuse of Thomas Paine*, Peoples History Museum, Manchester, 29-30 November 2013, 342.

foreword from Harvard Kaye regarding the disparate groups that have posthumously appropriated several of Paine's ideas, a number of varied lectures and talks were given over the course of several days. There were panels on his specific language and subsequent translations, his spirituality, and his influences from eastern culture. Others exhibited his sentiments on prisoners shipped to Australia, the difficulties of translating his writings, and his more commentary regarding his musings pertaining to contentious geopolitical situations in other nations such as "his calls for press freedom" in Italy.⁸¹ The last set of panels in the conference highlighted his impact on post World War international relationships, best exemplified by the formation of the League of Nations and later the United Nations. Also included in the last series of talks were whether later appropriations were true to his actual intentions, and whether or not or why his concepts were present in future revolutions in the 19th century and beyond.

These diverse topics during only one conference illustrate how intricate his writings were and how interpretations could differ based on the context in which they were read. This was apt given how Paine was influenced by his own tumultuous time and responded in kind. Vindicating the keynote in a fashion, the fact that Paine underwent so many evolutions in his abundant writings that he could resonate as "a religious infidel and defender of God" or both a proud American Patriot and Citizen of the World is indicative of his multifaceted, sometimes paradoxical nature.⁸² Such spirited debates are well worth having in both academic and public circles and quite unlikely to cease anytime in the near future, given his multifaceted nature.

⁸¹ Morris, *Citizen of the World: The Use and Abuse of Thomas Paine*, Peoples History Museum, Manchester, 29-30 November 2013, 344.

⁸² Morris, *Citizen of the World: The Use and Abuse of Thomas Paine*, 345.

Thomas Paine was a vital trailblazer for the Enlightenment and ultimately, freedom throughout the United States and the wider world. He was a master of persuasion who himself was touched by the timeless concepts of freedom that John Locke and Voltaire championed before him. Paine knew well how to utilize and build upon such a framework effectively, gaining his prestigious status. Such was his commitment to the legacy of the Enlightenment that when he believed those ideals to have been betrayed by Washington or spoken out against organized religion, he truly believed in what he wrote. Paine carried through in publishing such works, even if he was savvy enough to recognize just how poorly they would likely be received. His domestic and international legacy is one that both John Locke and Voltaire would assuredly appreciate and one with positive ramifications for all who enjoy liberty to this day. He was both a citizen of America and the world.

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