
CHAPTER FOUR

# TYRANNY IS TYRANNY

AROUND 1776, SOME IMPORTANT PEOPLE in the British colonies of North America made a discovery. They found that by creating a nation and a symbol called the United States, they could take over land, wealth, and political power from other people who had been ruling the colonies for Great Britain.

When we look at the American Revolution this way, it was a work of genius. The Founding Fathers created a new system of national control that has worked very well for more than two hundred years.

Control was desperately needed. The colonies boiled with discontent. By 1760 there had been eighteen uprisings aimed at overthrowing the government of one or more colonies. There were also

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Bonfire at the Bowling Green to protest the Stamp Act, New York City, 1765.

six black rebellions, from South Carolina to New York, and forty other riots.

But by the 1760s the colonies also had people we call local elites. These were political and social leaders in their city, town, or colony. Most of them were educated people, such as lawyers, doctors, and writers. Their thoughts carried weight. Some of these elite colonists were close to the ruling circles, made up of governors, tax collectors, and other officials who represented Great Britain. Other elite colonists were outside the ruling circles, but their fellow colonists looked up to them anyway.

These local elites were disturbed by the rising disorder. They feared that if the social order of the colonies were overturned, their own property and importance could be harmed. Then the elites saw a way to protect themselves and their positions. They could turn the rebellious energy of the colonists against Britain and its officials. This discovery was not a plan or a simple decision. Instead, it took shape over a few years as the elites faced one crisis after another.



## Anger and Violence

IN 1763 THE BRITISH DEFEATED FRANCE in the Seven Years' War (called the French and Indian War in the colonies). France no longer threatened Britain's colonies in North America. But after the war, the British government tightened its control over those colonies, because they were valuable. Britain needed taxes from the colonists to help pay for the war. Also, trade with the colonies brought large profits to Great Britain every year.

But unemployment and poverty were rising in the colonies. Poor people wandered the streets, begging. At the same time, the richest colonists controlled fortunes worth millions in today's dollars. There were many very poor people but only a few very rich people.

Hardship made some colonists restless, even rebellious. In the countryside, where most people lived, poor and rich came into conflict. From the 1740s to the 1760s, tenants rioted and rebelled against landlords in New York and New Jersey.

White farmers in North Carolina formed a "Regulator Movement" in 1766. The Regulators called themselves poor peasants and laborers. They

claimed to stand for the common people against rich, powerful officials who governed unfairly. The Regulators were angry about high taxes. They also resented lawyers and merchants taking poor people to court over debts. When Regulators organized to keep taxes from being collected, the governor used military force against them. In May 1771, an army with cannon defeated several thousand Regulators. Six Regulators were hanged.

In Boston, the lower classes started using town meetings to air their complaints. One governor of Massachusetts wrote that Boston's poor people and common folk came regularly to the meetings. There were so many of them that they outvoted the "Gentlemen" and other Bostonians close to the ruling circle.

Something important was happening in Boston. It started with men like James Otis and Samuel Adams. They belonged to the local elite, but they were not part of the ruling group that was tied to Britain. Otis, Adams, and other local leaders recognized the feelings of the poorer Bostonians. Through powerful speeches and written articles, they stirred up those angry feelings and called the lower classes into action.





The Boston mob showed what it could do after the British government passed the Stamp Act of 1765. This law taxed the colonists to pay for the Seven Years' War. Colonists had already suffered during the war, and now they didn't want to pay for it. Crowds destroyed the homes of a rich merchant and of Thomas Hutchinson, one of those who ruled in the name of Britain. They smashed Hutchinson's house with axes, drank his wine, and carried off his furniture and other belongings.

Officials reported to Britain that the destruction of Hutchinson's property was part of a plan to attack other rich people. It was to be "a War of Plunder, of general levelling and taking away the Distinction of rich and poor." But such outbursts worried local leaders like James Otis. They wanted the class hatred of the poor to be turned only against the rich who served the British—not against themselves.

A group of Boston merchants, shipowners, and master craftsmen formed a political group called the Loyal Nine. They set up a march to protest the Stamp Act. The Loyal Nine belonged to the upper and middle classes, but they encouraged lower-class people such as shipworkers, apprentices, and craftsmen to

join their protest (but they did not include blacks). Two or three thousand people demonstrated outside a local official's home. But after the "gentlemen" who planned and organized the protest left, the crowd went further and destroyed some of the official's property. Later, the leaders said that the violence was wrong. They turned against the crowd and cut all ties with the rioters.

The next time the British government tried to tax the colonies, the colonial elites called for more demonstrations. But this time leaders like Samuel Adams and James Otis insisted, "No Mobs—No Confusions—No Tumults." (A "tumult" was a riot.) They wanted the people to show their anger against Britain, but they also wanted "Persons and Properties" to remain safe.

## Revolution in the Air

AS TIME WENT ON, FEELING AGAINST the British grew stronger. After 1768, two thousand British troops were stationed in Boston. At





a time when jobs were scarce, these soldiers began taking the jobs of working people. On March 5, 1770, conflict between local workers and British soldiers broke into a tumult called the Boston Massacre.

Soldiers fired their guns at a crowd of demonstrators. They killed a mixed-race worker named Crispus Attucks, and then others. Colonist John Adams, a lawyer, defended the eight British soldiers at their trial. Adams called the crowd at the massacre "a motley rabble" and described it in scornful terms. Two of the soldiers were discharged from the army. The other six were found not guilty, which made some Bostonians even angrier. Britain took its troops out of the city, hoping things would quiet down.

But the colonists' anger did not go away. Political and social leaders in Boston formed a Committee of Correspondence to plan actions against the British. One of their actions was the Boston Tea Party of 1773. To protest the tax on tea, a group of colonists seized the cargo from a British ship and dumped it into Boston Harbor.

Britain's answer to the Boston Tea Party was a set of new, stricter laws. The British closed the

port in Boston, broke up the colonial government, and sent in troops. Colonists held mass meetings of protest.

What about the other colonies? In Virginia, the educated elite wanted to turn the anger of the lower orders against Britain. They found a way in the speechmaking talents of Patrick Henry. In inspiring words, Henry told the colonists why they should be angry at Britain. At the same time, he avoided stirring up class conflict among the colonists. His words fed a feeling of patriotism, a growing resistance against Britain.

Other inspiring words helped turn the resistance movement toward independence. In 1776 Thomas Paine published a pamphlet, or short book, called *Common Sense.* It boldly made the first claim that the colonies should be free of British control.

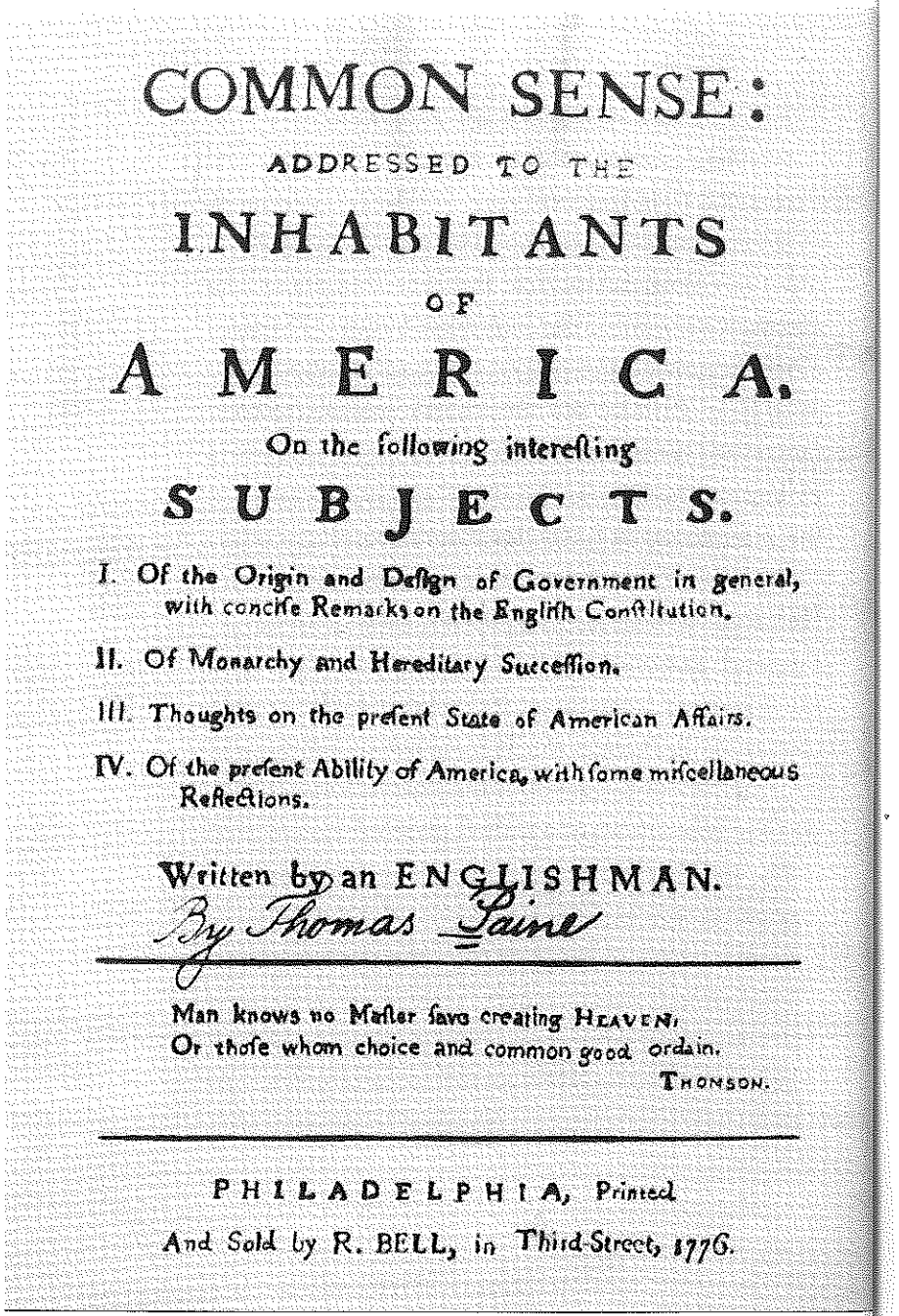
Paine argued that sticking to Great Britain would do the colonists no good and that separating from Britain would do them no harm. He reminded his readers of all the wars that Britain had dragged them into—and of the lives and money those wars had cost them. Finally he made a thundering statement:



> Everything that is right or reasonable pleads for separation. The blood of the slain, the weeping voice of nature cries, 'TIS TIME TO PART.'

*Common Sense* was the most popular pamphlet in colonial America. But it caused some alarm in elite colonists like John Adams. These elites supported the patriot cause of independence from Britain, but they didn't want to go too far toward democracy. Rule by the people had to be kept within limits, Adams thought, because the masses made hasty, foolish decisions.

Thomas Paine did not belong to the elite class. He came to America as a poor emigrant from England. But once the Revolution started, he separated himself from the crowd actions of the lower classes. Still, Paine's words in *Common Sense* became part of the myth of the Revolution—that it was the movement of a united people.



COMMON SENSE:

ADDRESSED TO THE

INHABITANTS

OF

AMERICA.

On the following intereſting

SUBJECTS.

I. Of the Origin and Deſign of Government in general, with conciſe Remarks on the Engliſh Conſtitution.

II. Of Monarchy and Hereditary Succeſſion.

III. Thoughts on the preſent State of American Affairs.

IV. Of the preſent Ability of America, with ſome miſcellaneous Reflections.

Written by an ENGLISHMAN.

By Thomas Paine

Man knows no Maſter ſave creating HEAVEN,
Or thoſe whom choice and common good ordain.
THOMSON.

PHILADELPHIA, Printed
And Sold by R. BELL, in Third-Street, 1776.

## Whose Independence?

EVERY HARSH ACT OF BRITISH CONTROL made the colonists more rebellious. By 1774 they had set up the Continental Congress. It was an illegal political body, but it was also a step toward independent government.

The first military clash between colonists and British troops came at Lexington and Concord in April 1775. Afterward, the Continental Congress decided on separation from Great Britain. Thomas Jefferson wrote a Declaration of Independence. The Congress adopted it on July 2, 1776, and announced it two days later.

Throughout the colonies, there was already a strong feeling for independence. The opening words of the Declaration gave shape to that feeling:

> We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness—That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed—That whenever any Form of Government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the Right of the People to alter or to abolish it, and to institute new Government. . . .

*(left)*
Title page of Thomas Paine's revolutionary pamphlet "Common Sense," 1776.

Next, the Declaration listed the unjust or harmful acts of the British king. It described his rule as tyranny, or oppression—that is, rule by force, without fairness. The Declaration called for the people to control their government. It reminded them of the burdens and difficulties Britain had caused them. This language was well suited to bring various groups of colonists together. It could even make those who were at odds with each other turn against Britain.

But the Declaration did not include Indians, enslaved blacks, or women. As for the Indians, just twenty years earlier the government of Massachusetts had called them "rebels, enemies and traitors" and offered cash for each Indian scalp.

Black slaves were a problem for the author of the Declaration. At first, Jefferson's Declaration blamed the king for sending slaves to America, and also for not letting the colonies limit the slave trade. Maybe this statement grew out of moral feelings against slavery. Maybe it came from the fear of slave revolts. But the Continental Congress removed it from the Declaration of Independence because slaveholders in the colonies disagreed among themselves about whether or not to end slavery. So





Jefferson's gesture toward the enslaved black was left out of the Revolution's statement of freedom.

"All men are created equal," claimed the Declaration. Jefferson probably didn't use the word "men" on purpose, to leave out women. He just didn't think of including them. Women were invisible in politics. They had no political rights and no claim to equality.

By its own language, the Declaration of Independence limited life, liberty, and happiness to white males. But the makers and signers of the Declaration were like other people of their time. Their ideas grew out of the ordinary thinking of their age. We don't study the Declaration of Independence so that we can point out its moral failures. We study it so we can see how the Declaration drew certain groups of Americans into action while it ignored others. In our time, inspiring words are still used to get large numbers of people to support a cause, even while the same language covers up serious conflicts among people or leaves out whole parts of the human race.

The reality behind the Declaration of Independence was that a rising class of important people in the colonies needed enough support to

defeat England. At the same time, they didn't want to disturb too much of the settled order of wealth and power. In fact, the makers of independence were part of that settled order. More than two-thirds of the men who signed the Declaration had served as colonial officials under the British.

When the fiery Declaration of Independence was read from Boston's town hall, the reader was Thomas Crafts. He was one of the Loyal Nine, who had opposed militant action against the British. Four days later, Boston's Committee of Correspondence ordered the town's men to show up to be drafted into a new patriot army. But the rich, it turned out, could avoid the draft. They could pay someone else to serve in the army for them. The poor had no choice but to serve. This led to rioting and shouting: "Tyranny is tyranny, let it come from whom it may."