

COMMON SENSE, RENEWED

A Plain Address to the Citizens of America on the Dangers of Monarchy Disguised, the Tyranny of Faction, and the Necessity of Reclaiming the Republic

By the Spirit of *Common Sense* — After Thomas Paine

"These are the times that try men's souls."

— Thomas Paine, *The American Crisis*, December 1776

FOREWORD: On the Occasion of This Pamphlet

Reader, there are moments in the life of a nation when plain speech becomes the highest patriotism. We live in such a moment now.

The author of *Common Sense*, of *Rights of Man*, and of *The American Crisis* — Thomas Paine, born in England, made wholly by America — is not here to take his pen in hand. He died in 1809, in poverty and out of fashion, having been too honest for the comfort of those who preferred liberty as a decoration rather than a practice. Yet the principles he forged remain alive, for principles do not die when their authors do. They outlast every king, every demagogue, every faction that ever dressed itself in the stolen garments of the people's will.

What follows is written as Paine would write it — with plain argument, with direct appeal to reason and conscience, and with that indignation which belongs to every free person who watches the commonwealth they love being put quietly up for auction.

The names have changed. The dangers have not.

In Paine's time, the threat to liberty wore a crown and sat upon a throne across an ocean. Today the threat wears a red cap, draws crowds with the intoxicating music of grievance, and wraps the ambitions of a single man in the flag of the nation he seeks to commandeer. It calls itself by patriotic names — "America First," "Make America Great Again," Agenda47, Project 2025 — as though a people who have forgotten to think will not notice that every arrangement proposed is for the benefit of one man, one faction, and one class of newly minted lords.

The reader is asked only this: that she set aside, for the duration of these pages, whatever she has been told to feel, and permit reason and conscience to determine for themselves. That is all Paine ever asked. It is all any honest writer can ask.

PART THE FIRST: Of Governments and Their Pretenses

Of all the artifices by which power disguises its nature, none is more cunning than the claim to speak for the people while systematically stripping the people of their power. Let us begin, then, where every honest inquiry must begin — not with passion, not with party, but with the plain examination of what government is and what it has lately become.

Government, as Paine wrote, is at best a necessary evil — a contrivance of human wisdom to provide for human wants. It derives its just powers from the consent of the governed, and when it ceases to serve that purpose, it becomes not government but usurpation. The whole art of tyranny consists in persuading the people that the usurper is their protector, that the cage built around them is a fortress built for them, and that the man who holds the key does so out of love.

This is precisely the claim now being made in America.

We are told that the nation is in decline — that foreigners have invaded it, that elites have corrupted it, that a mysterious and malevolent "deep state" has burrowed into its institutions and turns the machinery of government against the people's will. We are told that one man — and only one man — sees the conspiracy clearly, and that only he possesses the will and the strength to destroy it. We are told to trust him absolutely, to forgive him everything, to excuse every excess as the necessary violence of a necessary war. We are warned that to question him is to aid the enemy.

Reader, do you not recognize this music? It is the oldest tune in the repertoire of those who would be kings. It was played by Caesar before he crossed the Rubicon. It was played by Cromwell before he dismissed Parliament. It was played by every ambitious man who ever found in the people's genuine grievances a ladder for his own ascent.

A people's legitimate discontent is not a mandate for personal rule. It is a call for accountable government. The demagogue hears discontent and offers himself as the cure; the democrat hears discontent and offers the people themselves as the remedy. These are not the same offer. They never were.

PART THE SECOND: Of the Man and His Movement

Let us now speak plainly about what MAGA is and what it is not.

It is not, as its advocates would have it, a simple love of country. Every citizen loves their country; that love proves nothing about the wisdom or justice of any particular program. To love a country is to love its people, its laws, its institutions,

and the principles upon which it was founded. To love it well is to be willing to defend those things even against those who, speaking in the country's name, work to undo them.

MAGA is something more specific and more dangerous than patriotism. It is a politics of grievance organized around a single personality, drawing its energy from the conviction that a portion of the people — the "real" Americans, the "forgotten" men and women — have been robbed of a greatness they once possessed, by enemies foreign and domestic who must be named, condemned, and punished. It is identity politics of the most primitive variety: the politics of us and them, of the tribe and its enemies, of purity and contamination.

Now, there is not a nation on earth that does not have its genuine grievances. The working people of America have been poorly served by many administrations, of both parties, for many decades. The hollowing out of manufacturing, the indignity of stagnant wages, the sensation of being looked down upon by those who manage the great institutions of finance and culture — these are real injuries that deserve real remedy. Thomas Paine knew what it was to be a poor man in a world organized for the benefit of the wealthy. He spent his entire life arguing for policies — what we would now call social welfare, progressive taxation, a basic income for the poor — that recognized the dignity of every human being and the duty of government to protect it.

But Paine's answer to the grievances of common people was to give common people more power over their government, not to transfer all power to an extraordinary man who claimed to speak for them. He understood, with perfect clarity, the difference between a leader who enlarges the liberty of those who follow him and one who merely exchanges one set of masters for another.

The man at the head of this movement — Donald Trump, now holding the presidency for the second time — is not of the type that enlarges liberty. He is of the type that Paine spent his life warning against: the man who declares himself indispensable, who demands loyalty rather than earning it, who sees the law as a weapon to be wielded against his enemies and a restraint to be dissolved when it applies to himself.

Consider the record. In his first year of his second term, this president fired inspectors general whose function was to check executive abuse. He defied congressional appropriations, treating the public treasury as his personal instrument. He issued executive orders — breathtaking scope, among them one asserting effective control over independent regulatory agencies — the very bodies whose independence exists precisely to prevent the executive from bending regulation to factional advantage. He invoked ancient emergency powers to impose sweeping tariffs without clear statutory authority, concentrating in himself an economic power that the Constitution places in the hands of Congress. He moved to end birthright citizenship by executive order, a step so plainly contrary to the Fourteenth Amendment that federal courts blocked it immediately and repeatedly.

His supporters call this vigor. Paine would call it what it is — the systematic destruction of the constitutional architecture that prevents any one man from becoming, in effect, a king.

"A constitution," Paine wrote, "defines and limits the powers of the government it creates. It therefore follows, as a natural and also a logical result, that the governmental exercise of any power not authorized by the constitution is an assumed power, and therefore illegal."

By that standard — Paine's own standard — much of what has been done in the name of MAGA is not bold governance. It is lawlessness dressed in the uniform of patriotism.

PART THE THIRD: Of Project 2025 — A Blueprint for Bondage

There exists a document — nine hundred pages long, produced by the Heritage Foundation and over one hundred partner organizations — which represents the most systematic attempt in American history to rewrite the relationship between the president and the governed. It is called Project 2025, and though its principal beneficiary has at various times denied reading it, his administration has proceeded to implement its provisions with remarkable fidelity.

Let the reader understand what this document proposes, for it is most clearly understood by setting it alongside the principles that animated the American founding.

The founders — and Paine above all — feared concentrated power. They knew from history and from observation that power, when it accumulates in a single pair of hands, becomes self-perpetuating, self-serving, and ultimately incompatible with the liberty of those over whom it is exercised. This is why they built a system of separated powers, of checks and balances, of independent institutions insulated from the immediate demands of political faction. This architecture was not an accident. It was the hard-won wisdom of people who had lived under concentrated power and found it intolerable.

Project 2025 proposes to demolish this architecture. Its governing philosophy — the so-called "unitary executive theory" — holds that the president controls the entire executive branch absolutely, including those agencies that previous generations deliberately made independent of White

House control. The Federal Reserve, the Federal Trade Commission, the Federal Communications Commission, the Securities and Exchange Commission — all of these, under Project 2025's theory, become instruments of presidential will. Their professional staffs, accumulated across generations and insulated from political pressure by civil service protections, are to be replaced by political loyalists certified for their ideological correctness.

The document calls for the dismantling of the Department of Education and the Department of Homeland Security. It proposes eliminating Head Start, which provides early education and care for more than eight hundred thousand children in poverty. It would cut overtime protections for millions of workers, repeal prescription drug price caps, and make union organizing more difficult while accelerating the decertification of existing unions.

It proposes, in the area of social policy, a thoroughgoing imposition of religious conservative doctrine upon the whole of American life: the criminalization of sending and receiving abortion medications, the elimination of legal protections against discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation and gender identity, and — in a move that would have struck Paine as a perfect specimen of clerical tyranny — the active use of federal law to enforce the moral code of a specific religious faction upon a religiously diverse nation.

Reader, compare this program to the one Paine articulated. He wrote that man has no right to set up hereditary government, that no man or body of men can establish a system that removes from posterity the rights that are theirs. He wrote that government should be the protector of rights, not their destroyer — that the measure of a legitimate government is whether those who live under it are better off for its existence.

He argued passionately for the welfare of the poor, for the rights of workers, for separation of church and state, for a secular republic that serves as, in his memorable phrase, "an asylum for mankind."

Project 2025 is the photographic negative of everything Paine believed. Where he wanted power distributed, it concentrates power. Where he wanted the poor protected, it withdraws protection. Where he wanted church and state separated, it fuses them. Where he wanted government made accountable to the people, it makes the people accountable to the president.

This is not conservatism in any recognizable sense. It is not a humble return to the ways of the founders. It is a revolution — not Paine's kind of revolution, which sought to enlarge freedom — but the other kind, which uses the machinery of democracy to dismantle democracy from within.

PART THE FOURTH: Of Agenda47 — The Personal Manifesto of an Aspiring Monarch

Agenda47 is the personal policy manifesto of Donald Trump, assembled during his 2024 campaign and now being implemented through executive orders and political pressure at a pace that leaves the citizenry little time to apprehend what is happening before the next thing has already occurred.

It calls for expanding presidential power to dimensions the founders would not have recognized as republican government. It proposes ending birthright citizenship — a direct assault on the Fourteenth Amendment, ratified at the cost of the bloodiest war in American history. It envisions the use of the military and the National Guard in American cities, not for their defense against foreign enemies, but for domestic

enforcement actions. It would concentrate in the executive branch the power to impound funds appropriated by Congress, effectively giving the president a veto not only over legislation but over the public's own appropriated money after the legislative process is complete.

These are not eccentric proposals. They represent a coherent vision of what the presidency should be — not the limited, accountable executive office the founders designed, but an imperial position constrained only by the will and judgment of the man who holds it.

Paine wrote of such arrangements with characteristic directness: "When extraordinary power and extraordinary pay are allotted to any individual in a government, he becomes the center, round which every kind of corruption generates and forms."

He was describing, with uncanny precision, what we see before us now. An administration that has remade or abolished whole federal departments. A president who has directed the Justice Department to investigate his personal political adversaries. A governing apparatus that has sought, at every turn, to convert the public power of the state into an instrument of personal and factional advantage.

The greatest tyrannies, Paine wrote, are always perpetuated in the name of the noblest causes. America First. The forgotten people. Stopping the steal. Making the nation great again. These are noble-sounding words wrapped around a program for personal and factional rule. The nobility of the words does not sanctify the program. It only makes the program more dangerous, because it makes it more difficult to see clearly.

PART THE FIFTH: Of the Church Militant in Politics

No portion of this movement is more alarming to a student of history — or more directly contrary to the principles Paine fought for — than its relationship to religious nationalism.

Paine was not an atheist, though his enemies called him one. He believed in God and expressed that belief with genuine reverence throughout his life. But he believed with equal passion that religion, when it is given the power of the state, becomes the most ferocious of all tyrannies — "of all the tyrannies that affect mankind," he wrote, "tyranny in religion is the worst; every other species of tyranny is limited to the world we live in."

The MAGA movement, and the Project 2025 blueprint that gives it governing form, is deeply entangled with Christian nationalism — the belief that the United States is, or should be, a specifically Christian nation, and that its laws and institutions should reflect Christian (by which is meant a particular sectarian version of evangelical Protestant) doctrine. Project 2025 explicitly calls for enacting laws supported by the Christian right, including criminalizing the distribution of contraception medications, reversing protections for LGBT Americans, and removing from federal law any requirement of secular neutrality in matters of religion.

Paine fought against exactly this arrangement for his entire adult life. He saw, with clarity that has not dimmed in two and a half centuries, that when a sect achieves power over the state, it uses that power not to spread the love it professes but to enforce the obedience it desires. Every established church in history, every fusion of political and religious authority, has produced the same result: the persecution of dissenters, the silencing of free inquiry, and the subordination of the rights of conscience to the demands of orthodoxy.

"Toleration," he wrote, "is not the opposite of intolerance, but it is the counterfeit of it. Both are despotisms." He meant that a government which grants religious liberty as a favor does not truly recognize it as a right. Liberty of conscience is not the government's to give or withhold. It belongs to every human being by virtue of their humanity.

A republic that writes one sect's theology into its laws has abandoned republican government. It has become, whatever its other features, a theocracy. And the distance between a theocracy and a tyranny, as history abundantly shows, is very short.

PART THE SIXTH: Of the Law and Its Enemies

In America, wrote Thomas Paine, the law is king. Not a man. Not a party. Not a faction wrapped in patriotic bunting. The law.

This principle is not a technicality. It is the foundation on which everything else rests. Without it, all the other rights — speech, assembly, press, the franchise, the presumption of innocence — become privileges dispensed or withheld at the pleasure of those who hold power. With it, no person, however wealthy, however popular, however persuasive, stands above the claims of their fellow citizens.

The current administration has treated this principle as an obstacle rather than a foundation. It has fired inspectors general — the internal watchdogs whose function is to detect and report executive abuse — within hours of taking office. It has instructed the Justice Department to prosecute political adversaries and protect political allies. It has asserted in court that the president possesses immunity from prosecution for official acts, a claim that, if accepted, would mean that no law constrains the president so long as the act in question can be

characterized as official. It has defied court orders with a brazenness that, in Paine's day, would have been recognized immediately as the behavior of a tyrant testing the limits of resistance.

Constitutional scholars — people who have devoted their professional lives to understanding the architecture of American self-governance — describe these developments as unprecedented, as a push toward authoritarianism without parallel in the history of the republic. The Brennan Center for Justice has documented case after case in which the administration has asserted executive power that "violates the Constitution and federal laws." Independent analyses conclude that Project 2025's "unitary executive theory" would, if fully implemented, destroy the system of checks and balances as it has functioned for two and a half centuries.

Against all of this, what is the ordinary citizen to do?

The answer Paine would give is the same answer he gave in December 1776, when Washington's army was shivering at Valley Forge and the cause of independence seemed near to extinguished:

Persevere. Stand up. Speak clearly. Shame the neutral and the passive into action. Remind the people of what they are capable of, and what they stand to lose.

"These are the times that try men's souls," he wrote, "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 is not identical to the one of 1776 — no crisis is. But the structure of the danger is the same: concentrated power, contempt for legal limits, the corruption of public institutions by private ambition, the silencing of dissent. And the structure

of the remedy is the same: informed citizens, organized and persistent, who refuse to be frightened into compliance and refuse to be shamed out of their convictions.

PART THE SEVENTH: Of What America Was Meant to Be

Let us not end in mere denunciation, for denunciation without vision leaves a people nothing to stand for — only things to stand against.

Paine's vision was magnificent in its generosity. He believed America to be, in principle, something unprecedented — not a nation defined by blood or soil or the accident of birth into one tribe rather than another, but a republic defined by its commitment to principles available to all of humanity. "This new world," he wrote, "hath been the asylum for the persecuted lovers of civil and religious liberty from every part of Europe." He saw in the American experiment the possibility of demonstrating to the whole world that free people, governing themselves by reason and consent, could build a society more just, more peaceful, and more prosperous than any that had been achieved by inheritance, conquest, or divine right.

That vision is worth defending.

It is worth defending against the MAGA contention that America's greatness belongs to a particular subset of its people — that some citizens are more truly American than others, that the newcomer is a threat rather than a continuation of the founding story, that the diversity of the nation is a weakness to be corrected rather than a strength to be celebrated.

It is worth defending against Project 2025's contention that the executive should be freed from the constraints of law and the accountability of independent institutions.

It is worth defending against Agenda47's vision of a president who rules by decree, who punishes dissent, who turns the machinery of justice against political opposition, and who treats the Constitution as an advisory document rather than the supreme law of the land.

It is worth defending against the fusion of religious orthodoxy and state power that would, if realized, make the liberty of conscience — that most intimate of all freedoms — contingent on the tolerance of whichever sect holds the reins of government.

It is worth defending because it is worth having. Because the alternative — a republic in name only, a system of personal rule dressed in the borrowed language of democracy — is not great. It is merely large. And size, without justice, is only another name for empire.

"The cause of America," Paine wrote in 1776, "is in a great measure the cause of all mankind." Those words have not grown old. They have only grown more urgent.

PART THE EIGHTH: A Direct Address to the Citizens

You who read these pages are not observers of history. You are participants in it. The outcome of the present crisis depends, as the outcome of every crisis in the history of free people has depended, not upon the decisions of courts or the calculations of politicians, but upon what ordinary citizens decide they will and will not tolerate.

It is fashionable, in times of darkness, to practice a kind of cultivated despair — to say that the situation is hopeless, that the forces arrayed against liberty are too powerful, that one person can do nothing, and that nothing therefore should be done. Paine had no patience with this posture. He called it, with admirable precision, the politics of the summer soldier and the sunshine patriot.

The summer soldier appears in fair weather and vanishes when the campaign grows difficult. The sunshine patriot loves his country when love is easy and is unavailable when love requires sacrifice. Neither is adequate to the demands of free government. Both are adequate to the demands of those who prefer a passive and unresisting population.

What is required is simpler and harder than despair: engagement, persistence, and the willingness to speak plainly about what is happening and what it means. These are not heroic actions. They are civic duties — the ordinary maintenance work of self-governance, without which no republic survives.

Vote in every election. Not just the spectacular ones — the presidential contests where the stakes are obvious — but the local elections, the school board races, the contests for state legislature and county commission, where the practical administration of daily life is actually decided.

Speak. In your community, your place of worship, your family, your workplace — wherever speech is possible. Not in anger, not in contempt, but with the calm and confident authority of a citizen who knows their rights and intends to exercise them.

Organize. Paine understood that individuals, however brave and however right, accomplish little in isolation. It is the organized expression of common purpose — the association,

the committee, the coalition — that moves the machinery of a republic.

And above all, refuse to be deceived by the language of patriotism weaponized against the republic. When a man tells you that America is great only when it follows him; that the law applies to his enemies but not to himself; that the institutions designed to check his power are the enemies of the people; that those who question him question America itself — hear those words not as patriotism but as its counterfeit, and treat them as Paine would have treated them: with reason, with resistance, and with the enduring confidence that a free people, once they see clearly what is at stake, will not lightly surrender what their predecessors bled to establish.

A FINAL NOTE: On Why This Voice, Now

Thomas Paine has been called the most radical of the founders and the most forgotten. He was forgotten in part because he was inconvenient — he pressed his principles to conclusions that embarrassed those who held them only in moderation. He argued for the welfare of the poor when the powerful wished to speak only of liberty. He attacked organized religion when the pious wished religion to be above criticism. He continued to insist on the equal rights of all people when others wished to limit that equality to those who owned property.

He was also forgotten because he died without wealth, without land, without the tangible proof of success that the republic was already learning to equate with virtue. He gave his income from *Common Sense* — which was considerable — to the Continental Army. He refused to profit from a revolution he had helped to make. He died with little more than he arrived with,

and the nation he had helped to create was largely too embarrassed to mourn him.

We remember him now because the principles he expressed have outlasted the embarrassment. They belong to no party and no faction. They are available to every citizen who wishes to think clearly about what free government means and what it requires. In a time when the language of liberty is being used to dismantle the institutions of liberty, they are not merely historical. They are necessary.

These are the times that try men's souls. Stand up.

*This work is written in the spirit and tradition of Thomas Paine's pamphlets: *Common Sense* (1776), *The American Crisis* (1776–1783), and *Rights of Man* (1791–1792). It is intended as a contribution to civic education and public discourse in the tradition of plain-spoken democratic argument.*
