

The Resurgence of Thomas Paine

BY RICHARD GIMBEL

MANY years ago when Gifford Pinchot was Governor of Pennsylvania he honored me by requesting that I accept an appointment to a high position in his administration. Knowing nothing whatsoever about politics, I sought a conference with him. I inquired, "What makes one successful in politics?"

The astute Governor replied, "The main ingredient of success in politics is to restrict yourself to endorsing very few worthwhile projects. It would be best if you identified yourself with only one. For," as he explained, "no matter how beneficial a project may be to the general community, it nevertheless hurts quite a few persons, sometimes important in politics or in finance. If you succumb to espousing every good cause, you keep building up the number of your enemies. Soon they reach such proportions that you cannot possibly be re-elected, and become generally disliked."

No one illustrates this form of committing political suicide better than Thomas Paine. He did not hesitate a moment to rush in to promote every good cause and to expose every injustice, and he ended up being generally despised, with virtually everyone his enemy for one reason or another.

Two hundred and twenty-two years ago, when Thomas Paine was born in Thetford, Norfolk, England, nearly all governments were hereditary monarchies, despotic or benign. Opportunities for free education for the working-man's children were either scarce or non-existent. Paine's

first thirty-seven years were of little significance. They included a formal education through the Thetford Grammar School, which was all his family could afford, and two brief marriages. He tried to earn a decent livelihood, but failed or was unhappy in every job he tried. When working for the government as an exciseman, he discovered that his meager pay was insufficient to include upkeep for a horse, which was a necessity. Graft was rampant and the government was cheated to make ends meet. Seeing the injustice to both sides, Paine organized the excisemen into a kind of union and wrote for them a plea for an increase in their pay, which he addressed to each member of Parliament. The result was foregone: he was dismissed.

Benjamin Franklin had at this same time been dismissed from his position as Postmaster for North America, and the two of them met in London at scientific lectures and became friends. Franklin must have been favorably impressed by Paine's methods of reasoning, because he sent him to America with letters of introduction to his son-in-law Richard Bache, a prosperous wine merchant in Philadelphia, and apparently also to his natural son William Franklin, then royal Governor of New Jersey. (See letter from Paine to Franklin, March 4, 1775.)

The best way to correct an injustice, Paine thought, was to publicize it. When he found a slave market opposite his lodgings in Philadelphia, he immediately wrote for the newspaper (*Pennsylvania Journal*, March 8, 1775) an article against slavery so powerful that it not only attracted attention, but also gained him important friends, such as the Philadelphia physician, Dr. Benjamin Rush. Perhaps it is only coincidental, but the first association against slavery in America was organized in Philadelphia shortly after Paine's article appeared.

A month later when blood was spilled in the Battle of Lexington (April 19, 1775), Paine felt so strongly against this outrage by the British Government that he thought the newspapers would not give sufficient space to do justice to his carefully worked-out arguments. The article, more than eighty pages long, he called *Common Sense*. Dr. Rush introduced Paine to a fearless liberal printer named Robert Bell, who was willing to take the risk of publishing it. Its clear portrayal of the reasons for independence spread like wildfire throughout the colonies. As a direct result, the Declaration of Independence was signed, and Paine became a famous man.

Paine enlisted in the war as a common soldier. After the long, disheartening retreat across the Jerseys, the war appeared lost, and it became necessary for Paine to pick up his pen. He wrote *The American Crisis*, opening with the words: "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 his country; but he that stands it now, deserves the love and thanks of man and woman"—words which were never to be forgotten. The pamphlet provided the needed lift. The result: Washington crossed the Delaware and the first American victory at Trenton followed. At each subsequent crisis Paine's pen was called on for assistance, and he never failed to respond effectively, thirteen times in all.

During the war his fiery arguments drove the Tories from positions of influence. He attacked profiteers, inflationists, and counterfeiters as well. He revealed confidential data in order to expose the crooked dealings of the influential Silas Deane. When politicians considered taking the supreme command of the Army away from George Washington, Paine hastened to defend him. When funds were needed to feed and clothe the soldiers, he founded the first bank in this country and defended it from all attacks. He freely printed

his opinion on every controversy. Not having Governor Pinchot as an adviser, he did not realize the growing number of enemies he was making.

Although his pen had contributed as much to the success of the war as Washington's sword, Paine was disappointed that he failed to receive any reward for his patriotic writings. To gain the widest circulation these had been sold by the hundreds of thousands, purposely without any recompense whatsoever to the author. He was nearing fifty years of age and wished to retire to write a history of the War. His friends found, however, that he had trod on so many toes that they only succeeded with difficulty in securing for him a farm in New Rochelle from the State of New York, £500 from the State of Pennsylvania, and \$3000 from Congress. This was but a fraction of what he deserved.

His well known prejudice against slavery, his conviction that every adult should vote, landowner or not, prevented him from being considered as a delegate to the forthcoming Constitutional Convention. No one could have contributed more toward a liberal constitution than Paine. The Civil War might have been averted had Paine attended the Convention.

Now Paine turned his attention to something useful in peace. He had invented the first large bridge to be made entirely of iron, designed to cross the broad Schuylkill River near Philadelphia in a single arch, without the use of piers. Franklin advised Paine that no one in America would dare build so novel a bridge without first getting the approval of the French Academy of Science. So, once again we find Paine, armed with appropriate letters of introduction from Franklin, setting sail for Paris.

When he arrived there he conferred with our Ambassador, Thomas Jefferson, and these two great liberals saw everything eye to eye. The success of the American Revolution

and the setting up of a republican form of government were making deep inroads in the minds of the downtrodden masses, both in France and in England. Paine's dream of a world revolution seemed likely to come true. To Paine a revolution meant a change from hereditary government to a representative democratic system with universal suffrage and safeguards for the inherent rights of the little people, who owned no land.

While he was in Paris, the treacherous flight of Louis XVI, King of France, took place. Paine thought it was good riddance to bad rubbish, and was astounded that the people wanted their runaway King to return. As he had first sparked independence for America, he was now the first one to spark a republic for France. His printed *Manifesto* demanding a republic was posted all over Paris. Like the famous *Theses* of Martin Luther, it was audaciously nailed to the very door of the National Assembly, where it could not fail to receive attention. But with the capture of the King and his return to Paris, Paine's republican "bubble" burst, though not without planting a seed that was to grow rapidly.

He now returned to England, where a large-scale model of his iron bridge was being built. He fomented republican clubs, which exchanged sentiments of friendship with those in Scotland and Ireland, as well as those in France. Paine's revolution seemed to be brewing in Great Britain.

Edmund Burke, whose friendly actions during the American Revolution had endeared him to Paine, made Paine's acquaintance. They visited together and corresponded. Suddenly, Burke changed sides and assailed the principles of the French Revolution. Paine accused Burke of being a pensioner in a fictitious name, and hinted this might have been the real reason he changed his mind. Paine gloried in the task of publicly answering him, which he did in his

monumental work the *Rights of Man*. It first appeared on February 22, appropriately dedicated to George Washington. Praising Washington's "exemplary virtue," he prayed that he would see "the new world regenerate the old." At this time Paine was at the height of his popularity, and he felt certain that *Rights of Man* would do for England what *Common Sense* had done for America. Unfortunately for his cause, it was at just this time that the most dreadful massacres of innocent people in France took place. England, horrified at this kind of a revolution, took warning and went to the other extreme, and for a while England was the least free spot on earth. The National Guard was called out. A royal proclamation was issued for the purpose of suppressing Paine's book, and by court action Paine was declared an outlaw. Publishers, printers, and sellers of Paine's work were jailed for libel as fast as they could be tried. Yet Paine's book seems mild enough to us today. Paine said of the libel:

If to expose the fraud and imposition of monarchy, and every species of hereditary government—to lessen the oppression of taxes—to propose plans for the education of helpless infancy, and the comfortable support of the aged and distressed—to endeavor to conciliate nations to each other—to extirpate the horrid practise of war—to promote universal peace, civilization, and commerce—and to break the chains of political superstition, and raise degraded man to his proper rank—if these things be libellous, let me live the life of a Libeller, and let the name of LIBELLER be engraved on my tomb.

The polished rhetoric of Burke could not refute the blunt logic of Paine's arguments. The government resorted to a smear campaign of unprecedented proportions. It had published a *Life* of Paine, which maliciously purported on its title page to be "A Defense of Paine's Works" and then was filled with lies and slanders. According to this *Life*, the death of Paine's first wife was due to ill usage and a pre-

mature birth; the cause of legal separation from his second wife was said to be his refusal to cohabit with her through the three and one-half years of their marriage; and the claim was made that he had swindled many, including his own mother.

In contradistinction, consider the treatment Paine received when he went to France. Four Departments had vied with each other to elect Paine to the French National Convention. Paine accepted a seat from the Department of Calais and henceforth embraced and defended the French Revolution. He worked on a new democratic Constitution for France. Unfortunately, it was never activated, and as a result chaos reigned. This proved to be disastrous to France. The murderous course now taken by the Revolution alienated the entire world, and Paine had to take full share of responsibility for all actions coming from a government established according to the form he had so strongly advocated. Yet Paine tried to prevent bloodshed and went further than anyone else to save Louis XVI from the guillotine. Paine, the hater of kings, cried, "Kill the King, but not the man," for he remembered that this same French King had courageously given vital aid to the struggling American colonies in their darkest hour. Robespierre, smashing all who opposed him, considered Paine's humanitarianism a drawback, and ordered this "arch rebel" of England and America jailed, ironically, as a dangerous conservative.

The tenets of Christian religion had troubled Paine from the time he was seven years old, but although he kept making notes on this subject, he purposely delayed publication of his beliefs until late in life, for then, being closer to the next world, he would be more concerned. But the reign of terror in France so threatened Paine's life with early extinction that he resolved to bring his work to a close and

publish it. So well had Paine estimated his remaining freedom that only six hours after he had finished his writing, the dreaded knock came on the door; the police had arrived and he was arrested. He contrived by a subterfuge to stop on the way to prison at the lodging of Joel Barlow, who was doing the proof-reading. He handed to Barlow the remainder of his manuscript, called *The Age of Reason*, and asked him to publish it at once. He had dedicated it to his fellow Citizens of America:

I put the following work under your protection. It contains my opinion upon religion. You will do me the justice to remember, that I have always strenuously supported the right of every man to his own opinion, however different that opinion might be to mine. He who denies to another this right, makes a slave of himself to his present opinion, because he precludes himself the right of changing it.

The most formidable weapon against errors of every kind is reason. I have never used any other, and I trust I never shall.

He refused to believe that the orders to commit crimes, which he found in the Bible, were the words of God. He called them mythical. He would not accept any of the miracles, for he considered them based solely on hearsay evidence. However, it is difficult to find any logical reason for branding Paine an atheist, when his expression of faith is so unmistakably written in *The Age of Reason*:

I believe in one God, and no more; and I hope for happiness beyond this life. I believe in the equality of man, and I believe that religious duties consist in doing justice, loving mercy, and endeavouring to make our fellow-creatures happy.

Paine's book failed in its purpose to save France from atheism, and was fiercely denounced in all other countries as the work of the devil. In England, Thomas Williams, who reprinted it, was thrown into jail and the work suppressed as blasphemous. Punishment as severe as fourteen years in a penal colony, like Botany Bay, was inflicted.

Even speaking favorably of the work might earn one the pillory. Nevertheless, *The Age of Reason* continued to circulate surreptitiously.

In his French prison Paine expected early release through intercession of President Washington. He was an American citizen against whom no charge had been made. But month by month he waited in vain and became dangerously ill as a result of his confinement in a damp cell. Robespierre finally condemned him to death, but before the busy guillotine could chop off Paine's head, Robespierre had lost his own. Months later Paine's release was obtained by the American Ambassador James Monroe on his own responsibility, but Paine's grievance against Washington mounted.

While being nursed back to health in Monroe's home, he wrote Washington two identical letters, asking him to explain why he had ditched his old friend, and sent them by different vessels to guarantee their receipt. Washington received both. When a year had passed without any reply, Paine, feeling betrayed, hotheadedly published in America a bitter attack on Washington. This accomplished little more than to complete Paine's fall from public favor, particularly in his own country.

Paine's next great work was *Agrarian Justice*. Here he outlined his plan for really ameliorating the conditions of the poor and aged. By levelling a tax on the landowners, he would create a national fund in every nation, to pay every person reaching twenty-one years of age a sum of money to enable him or her to begin the world. When one reached the age of fifty (then considered old) a sum would be given annually, sufficient to enable him to go on living without wretchedness, and to go decently out of the world. Paine's excellently thought-out social security program was unfortunately considered too advanced to receive the attention it deserved.

Now Paine became one of a group in Paris to organize a new religious society called "The Theophilanthropists," a compound word meaning "Lovers of God and Man." Paine's religion consisted only of belief in "one God" and "doing good." The French government at first supported this religion and allowed its followers to use Notre Dame and three other church edifices in Paris; but after a few years' growth, Napoleon, who had made peace with the Pope, crushed the society.

Paine's battle for freedom in the Old World had come to a grinding halt. Paine, however, refused to give up. He now decided to return to the New World. He would go to his farm in New Rochelle, hoping to find freedom and tolerance there. Thomas Jefferson, the first real Democrat, who had steadfastly remained a friend of Paine, was President of the United States. He was bold enough to offer a frigate (today's equivalent a battleship) to bring Paine safely through any British blockade back to America. However, Paine took an ordinary vessel.

Much to Paine's dismay, from the moment of landing in Baltimore he was outrageously attacked as a blasphemer. This continued unrelentingly for the remaining five years of his life. The Federalists, taking umbrage at Paine's attack on their idol, Washington, pulled out all the stops in fiery denunciation of Paine the Infidel. Even on a stage coach, the driver, learning that Paine was a passenger, refused to proceed until Paine got out, fearing that such a defiler of God would invite retribution by lightning, at least. So whipped up was this hatred, that the City of New Rochelle stopped him from voting when he went to cast his ballot, on the ground that he was no longer a citizen. How ungrateful could his country be?

Many of Paine's friends shunned him, except disciples like Elihu Palmer, or the fearless democrat, President Jefferson,

and a few others. Paine, past seventy, still continued to publish powerful essays, furthering both his religious and political principles and assailing his enemies. Since his name was no longer an asset, they were mostly anonymous.

All this controversy might have been expected to end in 1809 when Paine died at the age of seventy-two, one hundred and fifty years ago; but this was not to be the case. He had requested in his will to be buried in a Quaker burying ground, provided the authorities would admit a person who did not belong to their Society. Otherwise, he desired to be buried on his own farm in New Rochelle.

His obituary, written by his enemy, James Cheetham, editor of the [New York] *American Citizen*, appeared on June 10 and was the one which was widely copied. It read:

Died on Thursday morning, the 8th inst. Thomas Paine, author of the *Crisis*, *Rights of Man*, &c, &c. Mr. Paine had a desire to be interred in the Quaker burying ground, and some days previous to his demise, had an interview with some Quaker gentlemen on the subject, but as he declined a renunciation of his deistical opinions, his anxious wishes were not complied with. He was yesterday interred at New-Rochelle, Westchester county, perhaps on his own farm. I am unacquainted with his age, but he had lived long, done some good, and much harm.

The obituary written by his friend, Jacob Frank, editor of the [New York] *Public Advertiser*, had appeared the day before, June 9, but seems not to have been copied by any other paper.

With heartfelt sorrow and poignant regret, we are compelled to announce to the world, that Thomas Paine is no more. This distinguished Philanthropist, whose life was devoted to the cause of humanity, departed this life, yesterday morning. But if ever a man's memory deserved a place in the breast of a freeman, it is that of the deceased, for

Take 'em all in all

We ne'er shall look upon his like again!

The friends of the deceased, are invited to attend his funeral, this morning, at nine o'clock, from his late residence at Greenwich, from whence the corpse will be conveyed to New Rochelle, for interment.

William Cobbett, an ultra-Tory during his first American sojourn, printed in the [Philadelphia] *Political Censor*, September 1796, thirteen years before Paine died, this unfriendly prediction:

He has done all the mischief he can in the world, and whether his carcass is at last to be suffered to rot on the earth, or to be dried in the air is of very little consequence. Whenever and wherever he breathes his last he will excite neither sorrow nor compassion; no friendly hand will close his eyes, not a groan will be uttered, not a tear will be shed. Like Judas he will be remembered by posterity; men will learn to express all that is base, malignant, treacherous, unnatural and blasphemous, by the single monosyllable, PAINE.

Who would believe that only a few years after Paine's death Cobbett would retract every vile word he had written about Paine? Having the opportunity to study Paine's writings during a long confinement in Newgate Prison for expressing some liberal sentiments, Cobbett became a convert. Doing a complete about-face, he started to expound Paine's principles to the British masses. Later he was forced to flee once more to America. After a two-year sojourn there, in an act of unusual penance he exhumed Paine's bones from their resting place in New Rochelle and brought them to England in order to give them a new funeral worthy of so great a man. The British, however, now despising Cobbett almost as much as Paine, ruined the plan by ridicule. Paine's bones have since disappeared, giving circulation to a weird tale used by a preacher, denouncing Paine: "Thomas Paine was so wicked that he could not be buried; his bones were thrown into a box which was bandied about the world until it came to a button manufacturer, and now Paine is traveling around in the form of buttons."

Suppression of Paine's work in England had the opposite effect desired and increased the demand for them. New

printers, like W. T. Sherwin and Richard Carlile, were found who would take the risk of publication. Arrested or not, they continued battling for the freedom of the press, even from their cells in jail. Over the years such freedom was finally won and Paine's works have been regularly reprinted since then. For instance, nine editions of the *Rights of Man* have been published in London since World War I. The *Age of Reason*, now a Bible for Free-thinkers, this year was reprinted in New York in an edition of 100,000 copies. Today people are not ostracized who refuse to take their Bible literally.

Succeeding generations have seen the smoke screen of personal abuse around Paine gradually disappear, allowing him to stand forth as the greatest advocate of democracy, social security, and freedom of thought the world has yet seen.

Public appreciation of Paine is mounting. In England, his birthplace at Thetford, Norfolk, is marked in bronze, and at Lewes, Sussex, all places associated with him are marked. In London, his portrait hangs in the National Portrait Gallery, and there is another portrait and a bust in the South Place Ethical Society. In France, a great statue by Gutzon Borglum of Paine pleading for the life of Louis XVI stands facing the dormitories of the University of Paris. In America, he has been elected to the Hall of Fame in New York, where his bust stands next to that of his great friend Thomas Jefferson. There is another bust in the New York Historical Society, and his last home in Greenwich Village is marked by a bronze plaque. If you visit Jefferson's home in Monticello, the guides will point out to you the miniature portrait of Paine painted from life by John Trumbull. In the National Gallery, Washington, D.C., there is a portrait painted from life by John Wesley Jarvis. In Philadelphia, his portrait hangs in Independence Hall.

There is a small portrait in our American Antiquarian Society. In New Jersey, at Bordentown, his little house is marked with bronze, while in Morristown, there is a large statue which has been gold-plated, carrying out the suggestion once made by Napoleon that every city in the world should erect a statue of gold to Paine. Napoleon also said he never went to bed at night without a copy of Paine's *Rights of Man* under his pillow. New Rochelle has also repented, for the original burial place is graced by an imposing monument; the home is preserved as a historic shrine; and there is a beautiful museum building nearby which is devoted to an exhibition of his works. They even gave him back his citizenship by an official act a few years ago. Next Tuesday the Library of Yale University opens a comprehensive exhibit of his works and manuscripts.¹

Paine has influenced nearly all our Presidents, particularly Abraham Lincoln. Woodrow Wilson's "League of Nations" may have been indebted to Paine, who conceived an "Association of Nations" under a rainbow-colored flag, who would maintain their neutrality by an economic blockade of any aggressor. In the *Rights of Man*, which with his other works, the Soviet Union has this year translated into Russian, appears his plan of disarmament. Let me read to you what Paine wrote in 1792:

It is, I think, certain, that if the fleets of England, France, and Holland were confederated, they could propose, with effect, a limitation to, and a general dismantling of all the navies in Europe, to a certain proportion to be agreed upon.

First, That no new ship of war shall be built by any power in Europe, themselves included.

Secondly, That all the navies now in existence shall be put back, suppose to one-tenth of their present force.

If men will permit themselves to think, nothing can appear more ridiculous and absurd, exclusive of all moral reflections, than to be at

¹ A Catalogue of the Yale Exhibition will appear in the next *Proceedings* of the Society.

the expence of building navies, filling them with men, and then hauling them into the ocean, to try which can sink each other fastest. Peace, which costs nothing, is attended with infinitely more advantage, than any victory with all its expence.

. . . the above confederated powers, together with that of the United States of America, can propose with effect, to Spain, the independence of South America. . . .

. . . nations will become acquainted, and the animosities and prejudices fomented by the intrigue and artifice of courts, will cease. The oppressed soldier will become a freeman; and the tortured sailor, no longer dragged along the streets like a felon, will pursue his mercantile voyage in safety. It would be better that nations should continue the pay of their soldiers during their lives, and give them their discharge and restore them to freedom and their friends, and cease recruiting, than retain such multitudes at the same expence, in a condition useless to society and themselves.

These were Paine's words, taken from Part II of the *Rights of Man*.

Do you suppose that Khrushchev, before he presented his plan of disarmament to the United Nations last month, had read Paine's plan?

I think there has been a resurgence of Thomas Paine.

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