

both me and my work through a university research grant. That support was invaluable both in encouraging me and in providing me with the time to proceed with this project.

On my own faculty in American University's School of Communication, I thank Dean Sanford J. Ungar for his confidence, trust, and friendship. Without Sandy's unwavering support, I would neither have begun teaching the course *How the News Media Shape History* or have committed that course to paper through this book.

Because much of the material contained in this book has evolved from my classroom lectures and from the materials I have written for my course, I am indebted to the hundreds of students who have provided me with feedback on the material. In particular, I thank Deborah Acomb, Jim Montalto, Maureen Rich, and Kyle Rose for their substantive comments in the final stages of the writing. I still marvel at the fact that even though I wear the mantle of *teacher*, I learn so much from my magnificently creative students.

Some of the material in this book originated as conference papers and articles in scholarly journals. Among those persons whose contributions I want to acknowledge, therefore, are dozens of individuals I cannot name because their identities are masked behind the blind review process of the American Journalism Historians Association, International Communications Association, and Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication. I especially want to thank those members of the AEJMC History Division who honored me in 1996 for my work on the 1920s newspaper crusade against the Ku Klux Klan.

Finally, I thank my children, Matt and Kate, and my life partner, Jim Grooms, for continuing to enrich my life and make its activities worthwhile—whether writing a book or walking the dog.

Rodger Streitmatter

Introduction

IN 1990, I created a course titled *How the News Media Shape History*. The interdisciplinary course, which combined journalism and history, became part of the General Education Program at American University. After receiving positive responses from the students who had taken the course, the director of the program was soon urging me to teach the course not just once a year, but twice—or even more often, if I was willing. I still remember the vivid image that the director, Ann Ferren, used to persuade me: “Rodger, students are clamoring to get into this course. If you teach it only once a year, it’s like putting one tiny little jelly bean in the middle of the quad and telling all 12,000 of our students to fight over who gets it.”

Why have students been so eager to grab my little jelly bean of a course? They have been strongly attracted, hundreds of students have since told me, to the concept of the news media *shaping* this country.

Today’s college students, as well as the public in general, recognize that the American news media are one of this country’s most powerful institutions. They see journalism as so powerful, in fact, that newspaper publishers and television anchors are perceived as more influential than members of the United States Congress or Supreme Court. Many students and other observers criticize the news media as being *too* powerful; others praise the news media’s power, arguing that a free press is fundamental to democracy. But the detractors and defenders both agree on one point: The news media have impact.

It is those perceptions that have made my course popular, and it is that continued popularity that has impelled me to commit the material I use in the course to paper. *Mightier than the Sword* describes fourteen discrete episodes in American history during which the news media have played a critical role in shaping landmark events.

I have chosen the word *shaping* with considerable care. For as I try to impress upon my students at the beginning of each semester, I do not mean to imply that the Fourth Estate single-handedly *causes* events to occur. To suggest such a causal relationship between the news media and American history would be simplistic, as it would ignore the interdependence among governmental, legal, social, and economic institu-

tions driving this nation. I am convinced, however, that journalistic coverage can *shape*—and profoundly so—an issue. More specifically, the news media can place an issue on the public agenda . . . can move it to the *front* burner . . . can get people talking about the issue. And once an issue has been moved into the spotlight, other institutions can cause real change to occur.

Each chapter in this book focuses on such a milestone in the evolution of the United States that was significantly influenced by journalism paying attention to it. Ultimately, these fourteen separate stories coalesce to relate a single phenomenon of singular importance to understanding the past as well as the future of this country: As the American news media report and comment on the events of the day, they wield enormous *influence* on those events.

I have selected the particular episodes in this book for several reasons. They span more than two centuries—from Thomas Paine's influence on the coming of the American Revolution to Rush Limbaugh's curiously similar role in the Republican Revolution of the 1990s. They represent a variety of print and electronic media, ranging from newspapers and news magazines to radio, television, and electronic mail. At the same time, these particular vignettes illustrate how the news media have interacted with a broad range of other forces—from foreign policy strategists to captains of industry to rabble-rousing demagogues—to have far-reaching effects on the political, economic, and social fabric of this nation.

Many of the topics are familiar to anyone with a rudimentary knowledge of journalism history, such as how William Randolph Hearst helped build public pressure for the Spanish-American War and how, a century later, television news played a major role in ending the war in Southeast Asia; other topics take communication scholarship in new directions, such as how 1920s newspapers helped defeat the Ku Klux Klan and how news organizations helped propel millions of American women into the World War II work force. The topics consciously expand the definition of landmark *events* far beyond wars and politics, as those milestones also include social movements, describing how the news media have treated—or *mistreated*—women, Jews, and African Americans.

Although each nexus between the news media and American history described in the following pages is important, by no means does this book provide a comprehensive history of the evolution of American journalism. Looking at such a limited number of episodes cannot document the myriad incidents and trends that have marked the development of this country's news media. Indeed, I have assiduously avoided compiling the mind-numbing lists of names, dates, and news-

paper titles that bog down the standard journalism history tomes. I also have attempted to keep this book focused and concise—seeking to create a work that is not only illuminating but also engaging and perhaps even, at times, vivid.

The examples I have selected include negative as well as positive assessments. As a former newspaper reporter and now a journalism professor, I firmly believe that journalism is a noble pursuit that can, at its best, shine the bright beacon of truth into the darkest corners of life—and then move the human spirit to clean up those dark corners. At the same time, however, I know the news media sometimes squander the rights guaranteed to them in the First Amendment. Several chapters of *Mightier than the Sword* focus on such regrettable instances when this powerful institution behaved to the detriment of the people it purported to serve.

This book concludes with a final chapter that focuses on *how* the news media have shaped history. More specifically, by drawing examples from the material described in the previous chapters, I identify some of the common characteristics displayed by the news media involved in shaping this nation. I am hopeful that contemporary newsmen and newswomen—as well as the news organizations they work for—may be inspired to adopt some of these characteristics while pursuing their work today and in the future.

Mightier than the Sword: How the News Media Have Shaped American History, like my two previous books—*Raising Her Voice: African-American Women Journalists Who Changed History* and *Unspeakable: The Rise of the Gay and Lesbian Press in America*—builds on both my professional background in daily journalism and my Ph.D. in United States history in an effort to increase our understanding of both American journalism and American history.

In writing this particular book, I had two specific audiences in mind. The first is journalism students. For young men and women entering the field, *Mightier than the Sword* provides a sense of the history, power, and responsibility inherent in a journalism career. The second and much larger audience is the broad one of men and women who want to learn more about the intertwining of the American news media and American history—as well as what that phenomenon means in the context of the 1990s. These readers are legion.

Indeed, it is difficult to name a more white-hot topic than the power of the news media. The contentious debate includes such thorny questions as: Is the media's job to *report* the news objectively or should they also *lead* society? Do the news media represent a public trust that is responsible for serving the people, or are the news media merely a business that is responsible only for serving its stockholders?

What are—or should be—the limits of news media influence? *Mightier than the Sword* speaks to each of these questions.

Some historians will criticize my tight focus on the news media, saying it does not provide sufficient context. Those critics will be on solid ground. I readily acknowledge, for example, that my chapter about the news media's role in Watergate could be expanded into a 200-page discussion of the various forces that brought about and helped expose the men responsible for that shocking episode of political corruption. Indeed, dozens of books *have* been written on that subject. What has not been written—until now—is a single book that synthesizes a sampling of major events, such as Watergate, that have been *shaped* by the news media. This is the unique perspective *Mightier than the Sword* offers.

Some critics also will find fault with several of the works I classify as *news* media. They will argue that Paine's essays are partisan rhetoric, not journalism, and that Limbaugh's and Father Charles Coughlin's jeremiads are social and political commentary, not journalism. I disagree. Paine's essays were news in the 1770s because they introduced new *ideas* into the most vital conversation of the day. The essays functioned as journalism, even though they sought not only to inform readers but also to persuade them to support a particular point of view. All colonial publications were partisan, as the concept of journalistic objectivity did not emerge until the nineteenth century. If 1700s partisan publications are not news media, eighteenth century American journalism did not exist. As for Limbaugh's and Coughlin's tirades, I see no difference between them and the opinions published on the *New York Times* editorial page. Indeed, if the words of these two radio commentators are not part of the news media, neither are *Times* editorials.

Before beginning the story of how the news media have shaped American history, I want to acknowledge the man who inspired the title for this book: Thomas Jefferson. In a letter to Tom Paine in 1792, Jefferson lauded Paine's critical role in propelling the American colonists toward independence from Great Britain and then wrote encouragingly: "Go on then in doing with your pen what in other times was done with the sword: show that reformation is more practicable by operating on the mind of man than on the body."

1

Sowing the Seeds of Revolution

IN THE SUMMER OF 1776, a band of political rebels turned the world upside down. They showed, for the first time in the history of the world, that the discontent of a few colonists could swell into open rebellion so strong and so potent that it could create a world power all its own. Such impudence evolving into pure might was unheard of in the eighteenth century or in any of the centuries that had preceded it. The same process would occur again and again—in France, Russia, Cuba, the Philippines—but the events of 1776 stand alone. For they were the first.

Such redefinition of human history does not erupt overnight, as forces had been working long before the fifty-six rebels signed their names to the Declaration of Independence. Among those forces were the powerful words of determined men who possessed both the talent and the intellectual insight to craft graceful and passionate prose that demanded freedom from an oppressive government. Those words helped change the course of human events, transforming lukewarm patriots into fiery revolutionaries.

The transformation unfolded through a series of publications produced by several political dissidents. It was very much a continuum. Individuals expressing their outrage in those early publications laid the psychological groundwork for the fight that was to come. These journalists created the consciousness and mind-set that allowed for

political and social revolution—as well as armed conflict. Important milestones in the journalistic march toward independence included publication of the “Journal of Occurrences” in 1768 and 1769, followed by the extended verbal response to the Boston Massacre of 1770. Those two publishing phenomena set the stage for Thomas Paine’s clarion call for independence in early 1776. Paine’s *Common Sense* impelled thousands of mildly discontented subjects of the British crown to become political insurgents fully committed both to revolution and, ultimately, to shaping American history.

Dissension Takes Root

One place to begin the political background of the American Revolution is with the 1763 British victory in the decade-long conflict with the French. With that military triumph, the British defeated the French in North America as well as in India. The hard-fought victory meant the French finally were expelled from America, leaving the fur trade solely to the British. But the high cost of victory also left the British treasury near bankruptcy.

In search of ways to pay the cost of defending the wide frontiers that had been won in the war, officials in London decided the American colonists had gained so much in the victory over the French that they should pay the bulk of the war debts and defense costs. The colonists were willing to help—up to a point. Colonial legislatures were prepared to increase levies, but they did not raise enough revenue to satisfy the British.

Economics was not the only factor in the coming revolution, as ideas were stirring people, too. This is where the press played a pivotal role. The literature of the colonial era appeared in newspapers, magazines, pamphlets, and broadsides that expressed the arguments—as well as the passions—of the rebels. Revolutions seldom, if ever, occur because of logic. They require passion, and this emotional element was brought to the movement by a group of radical visionaries fully aware of the power of the press.

The earliest wave of rebels insisted that the people deserved a larger voice in their governance. Specifically, they believed the colonies needed to be granted home rule. They argued that citizens themselves, not the higher level of government, should make the laws governing the colonists—although all but the most radical of them continued to accept that the British crown should remain the final authority in their lives.

Sam Adams: Firebrand of the Revolution

The best known of the early radical writers was Sam Adams, the cousin of John Adams and the man who would, in 1773, organize the Boston Tea Party. In the 1760s, the firebrand of the Revolution became a prominent voice in the *Boston Gazette*, writing hundreds of political essays and news articles. Because other newspapers reprinted his pieces, Adams’s radical message spread throughout the colonies.

Adams’s words were worthy of note. As early as 1764 he argued that the British Parliament was overstepping its authority by imposing too many taxes on the colonists. If the House of Commons could compel New England to pay ruinous taxes on a staple such as molasses, Adams insisted, the colonists’ liberty was held on uncertain tenure. Parliament would continue to increase taxes, he said, asking rhetorically, “If our Trade may be taxed why not our Lands? Why not the Produce of our Lands & every thing we possess or make use of? This we apprehend annihilates our Charter Right to govern & tax ourselves.” Adams’s protests, in short, represented one of the earliest cries against taxation without representation.¹

Sam Adams and the other radicals who gathered around him in the *Boston Gazette* office firmly believed the only way the colonies could resolve their disputes with Britain was to secure home rule. That meant they had come to the position—considered extreme by the vast majority of British citizens in the 1760s—that it was imperative for the colonies, not the Mother Country, to establish the laws of governance for the colonies, although the crown would continue to hold veto power. This idea was highly controversial. To develop their own laws would be tantamount to a child determining his or her own limits of behavior.

Although Adams was Harvard educated and from one of the most prosperous families in the colonies, he was also a backstairs politician who understood, as well as any man of the age, the need to arouse public opinion as a step toward gaining grassroots support for the revolutionary ideas that he and his associates espoused. He wrote, “Where there is a Spark of patriotick fire, we will enkindle it.”²

“Journal of Occurrences” as News Service

To this end, Adams conceived of what became America’s first systematic gathering and distributing of news—a precursor of such modern-day operations as the Associated Press and United Press International.

Adams named his intercolonial news service the "Journal of Occurrences," and it quickly evolved into an important communication network that spread his particular anti-British rhetoric to every corner of the colonies.

Items for the journal were written by Adams and other Boston agents and then were reprinted in the thirty-five weekly newspapers being published in the colonies at the time. The process began with Adams and other Boston radicals writing accounts of events and sending them to John Holt, who published the *New York Journal*. Upon receiving an item from Boston, Holt published it in the next edition of his weekly newspaper. Holt then sent copies of his newspaper to the publishers of newspapers throughout the colonies, who reprinted the items in their future issues.

Adams's impetus for establishing the "Journal" was Britain's decision to station troops in Boston. Officials of the crown were concerned that they were losing control of the colonies, particularly because of an increasing number of riots and protests over tax initiatives. So the British sent four regiments of British soldiers to Boston to maintain order and remind the restless colonists that they were, in fact, British subjects.

The "Journal of Occurrences" began operating in September 1768, the same month the troops arrived. It became immediately apparent that the purpose of Adams's innovative journalistic venture was to build opposition to the troops—and, therefore, to the British—by creating and disseminating a record of the loathsome acts the British soldiers were committing against the colonists.

The journal was organized like a personal diary. Each installment listed the dates for a particular week, and under each date were descriptions of the individual bits of news that had occurred on that particular day. A typical weekly installment covered about three columns on the front page of each newspaper. The first ended with a note to publishers: "*The above Journal you are desired to publish for the general satisfaction, it being strictly fact.*"³

Names of the correspondents were not published, but historians who have studied the style of the material have identified the authors who helped Adams maintain a continuing daily flow of news. They included Benjamin Eades, publisher of the *Boston Evening Post*, and Isaiah Thomas, a young printer who soon would found the *Massachusetts Spy* as the most radical of the patriot papers.⁴

The "Journal" created a shocking record of misdeeds. Many news items spoke generally of the soldiers' uncouth behavior and low morals. Some reported that the soldiers uttered "the most profane & abusive language," and others said that the British troops were constantly involved in "drunkenness, debaucheries, and other extravagan-

cies" and exhibited "licentious and outrageous behaviour." Still other items accused the men of committing crimes at the expense of the American colonists, such as extorting money from people walking on the street and stealing merchandise from colonial shopkeepers.⁵

The most frequent single subject covered in the "Journal" was soldiers insulting and mistreating law-abiding citizens—with most of the victims not identified by name. Accounts told of physicians and merchants being "jostled," having bayonets thrust at them, and being knocked to the ground while merely walking down the street or having a drink in a coffeehouse. Typical of the items was one relating how three soldiers surrounded a man walking on the street, "damning him, and asking why he did not answer when hail'd; immediately upon which, one of them without any provocation gave him a blow, which was seconded by another, whereby he was brought to the ground; they then stamped upon him, using means to prevent his calling out; then they robbed him of all the money in his pocket."⁶

The most disturbing items were those chronicling brutalities against Boston women. One item began, "A girl at New-Boston, was lately knock'd down and abused by soldiers for not consenting to their beastly proposal." Another read, "A young woman lately passing thro' Long-Lane, was stopt and very ill treated by some soldiers, the cry of the person assaulted, brought out another woman into the street, who for daring to expostulate with the ruffians, received a stroke from one of them."⁷

Several incidents involved what today would be classified as capital offenses. One item reported that a woman had filed a complaint with a local magistrate "against a soldier, and some others for a violent attempt upon her, but a rape was prevented, by the timely appearance of a number of persons." Another described a soldier who entered the home of an "aged woman" on the pretense of seeking medical advice but then "seized her, by the shoulders, threw her upon the floor, and not withstanding her years, attempted a rape upon her." The item reported that the "brutal behaviour" ended only because the woman's persistent screams brought help from her neighbors. Another entry told of a woman dying after being "ravished by soldiers unknown," with the attending physicians attributing her death to "the over exertion of her strength" at resisting their attacks.⁸

Regardless of the circumstances, the items came wrapped in a tone of outrage as Adams and the other correspondents made liberal use of biased phrasing. Affronts against the colonists were described as "gross" and "shocking to humanity." The soldiers were labeled "villains," "wretches," and "bloody-backed rascals." A woman's call for assistance became a "cry of murder."⁹

In addition, the authors also attached editorial comments to many of the items, with the additions printed in italic type. The editorial comments clearly exposed that the creative minds behind the news items were adamantly opposed to the British troops being stationed in Boston. One early comment came at the end of a long list of insults and abuses: "*Here Americans you may behold some of the first fruits springing up from that root of bitterness a standing army.*" Later remarks reinforced the writers' agenda: "*These are times in which no inhabitant knows what ground he stands upon, or can call his own*" and "*The peace and good order of the town is not like to be preserved or promoted by our military inmates.*"¹⁰

Adams was an impassioned writer who crafted a broad array of spicy news items that readers found far more delectable than the diet of sermons and outdated weather reports that readers of the era had become accustomed to. The descriptions of improper behavior by the British troops became popular reading fare—as the blood pressure of the colonists continued to rise.

In their private correspondence, British officials indignantly denied that the troops were the monsters Adams painted them to be. Massachusetts Colonial Governor Francis Bernard wrote of the news items, "If the Devil himself were of the Party, there would not have been got together a greater collection of impudent virulent & Seditious Lies, Perversions of Truth & Misrepresentations than are to be found in this Publication." Thomas Hutchinson, soon to replace Bernard, wrote, "Nine tenths of what you read in the Journal of Occurrences in Boston is either absolutely false or grossly misrepresented."¹¹

And yet the British officials also had to acknowledge that the accounts were having the impact Adams had hoped. As early as January 1769, Hutchinson wrote British officials that the "Infamous falsehoods" were turning large numbers of American colonists against both the British troops and the crown. Six months later, feelings toward the troops had grown so rancorous that British officials admitted that the presence of the troops was fomenting hostility rather than selling it. Officials therefore decided to withdraw the militiamen, who left Boston in August 1769. In short, Adams and his journalistic strategy had triumphed magnificently.¹²

The "Journal of Occurrences" then ceased operation. It had produced some 300 individual entries—essentially, one for each day during the ten months that British troops were stationed in Boston. The incidents chronicled in the "Journal"—occurring with complete regularity day after day, week after week, month after month—were effective in ridding Boston of the unwanted British soldiers and in gaining support for Adams and his radical notions. According to today's stan-

dards of news professionalism, however, there was a fundamental problem with most—if not all—of the accounts: They were not true.

Evidence that a large number of the items were either fabrications or extreme exaggerations evolves from the exact dates they were printed in the newspapers. The attempted rape on the elderly woman, for example, allegedly took place on April 30, but it was not reported in Boston newspapers until June 26. If such a violent physical attack actually had occurred, surely the Boston newsmen would have warned their fellow townspeople as quickly as possible. Surely they would not have followed the drawn-out procedures of first publishing the item in the *New York Journal* and only later publishing it in the Boston papers—resulting in a two-month delay between the attack and its being reported to local residents. If such an attack against a local woman had, in fact, occurred and the story about it was news rather than propaganda, certainly the Boston correspondents would have reported the event in their local papers immediately so their fellow townspeople could have taken precautions to protect themselves from the danger in their midst.¹³

The colonial editors apparently felt justified in publishing the descriptions of imaginary incidents because they believed fanning the flames of hatred against the British served the patriot cause. At the same time, the pioneering journalists recognized the need to suggest as strongly as possible that the items were, indeed, based on fact. The sense of authenticity was enhanced by the initial note stating that the journal items were "*strictly fact,*" and by each incident being listed under the specific date on which it was alleged to have occurred.

Those apocryphal accounts were by no means the last examples of sensationalistic material published during the colonial era. In fact, the picture painted by these incidents of British soldiers abusing colonial citizens laid the groundwork for the next chapter in the journalistic trail toward revolution. For that new phase began where the "Journal of Occurrences" left off, raising the decibel level of emotional rhetoric even higher.

Boston Massacre: Not to Be Forgotten

When the Boston Massacre erupted on the commons on March 5, 1770, the accounts seethed with an anger rarely seen in the news reports disseminated today. One *Boston Gazette* article said of the British troops, "A mercenary, licentious rabble of banditti are encouraged to riot uncontrol'd, and tear the bowels and vitals of their brave but peaceable fellow subjects, and to wash the ground with a profusion of innocent blood." To ensure the message was fully communi-

cated to illiterate colonists who might see the paper but not be able to read it, the *Gazette* accompanied the account with woodcuts of coffins representing the five men killed by the British soldiers.¹⁴

Adams shrieked with outrage when the trial of the British officer and six of his men involved in the incident led only to light punishments. Adams wrote angrily in the *Gazette* under the pen name "Vindex the Avenger" when five of the men were released and the two others were ordered merely to have their hands branded. Adams labeled the British soldiers "barbarous & cruel, infamously mean & base" and peppered his lengthy accounts of the trial testimony with statements such as, "The Soldiers again loaded their guns and were then, ready to repeat the bloody 'action', and fire upon the people as they were taking care of the dead!"¹⁵

The most incendiary material about the massacre did not follow immediately after the incident or trial, however, but in the years after it. That rhetoric appeared primarily in the form of broadsides. These one-page communiqués were particularly well suited to radical voices because they could be produced more quickly than multipage pamphlets. Tacked at night on trees, posts, and the doors of neighborhood taverns or passed secretly from hand to hand, broadsides were read aloud to the groups who gathered around them the next day, and thus their influence spread far beyond the confines of the literate.

Typical were the histrionic words distributed widely on the second anniversary of the infamous event. One broadside began: "AMERICANS! Bear in Remembrance the HORRID MASSACRE!" It went on to describe the five victims as "Being basely and most INHUMANLY MURDERED! And SIX others badly wounded!" and continued to shriek:

May AMERICA be preserved,
From weak and wicked monarchs,
Tyrannical Ministers,
Abandoned Governors,
Their Underlings and Hirelings!
And may the
Machinations of Artful, DESIGNING wretches,
Who would ENSLAVE this People,
Come to an end,
Let their NAMES and MEMORIES
Be buried in eternal oblivion.

Such exclamations of rage not only kept the fight for liberty fresh in the consciousness of the citizenry but also fueled a public desire for revenge—challenging the colonists to avenge the murders.¹⁶

The publications recounting the murders on the Boston Commons were, in fact, forerunners of the atrocity stories published during later eras. Just as stories of Iraqi soldiers ripping Kuwaiti babies from their incubators helped Americans justify the Persian Gulf War, the telling and retelling of the taking of lives in the Boston Massacre prepared the colonists for the armed conflict that was to come.

In the words of David Ramsay, a soldier who fought in the American Revolution, the broadsides written in response to the Boston Massacre "administered fuel to the fire of liberty, and kept it burning with an incessant flame."¹⁷

Tom Paine: Voice of Inspiration

The final and most decisive phase of the pro-revolution media campaign began after armed hostilities had broken out in Lexington and Concord in April 1775 and was led by the most important writer of the colonial era, a penniless and somewhat disreputable newcomer to American shores: Thomas Paine.

After initial failure in the corset-making business in London, young Paine was hired to collect taxes on liquor and other items. When Paine began to agitate for higher pay for himself and his fellow workers, however, the British government discharged him. By happenstance, Paine met Benjamin Franklin, then at the height of his career as American spokesman in Europe. Franklin saw so much merit in Paine that he encouraged the fiery young agitator to go to America, providing a letter of introduction for him.

When Paine arrived in Philadelphia in November 1774, the thirty-seven-year-old Quaker came with the intent of founding an academy to educate young women. He veered from his course, however, when his connection to Franklin led to an offer to edit *Pennsylvania Magazine*. Although the magazine survived only eight months, Paine's writing in it was sufficient to gain him a reputation as an insightful commentator on the issues of the day.

Colonists came to know Paine as an independent thinker who wrote inspiring discourse on behalf of the masses. In the first issue of *Pennsylvania Magazine*, for example, he lambasted the "profligacy" in Britain while praising the "virtue" of the American colonies. His words published in another Philadelphia newspaper, *Pennsylvania Journal and the Weekly Advertiser*, demonstrated his willingness to support unpopular positions such as the abolition of slavery, an institution widely embraced by the colonists. He urged readers to consider the contradiction being displayed by colonial slaveholders: "They

complain so loudly of attempts to enslave them, while they hold so many hundred thousands of Africans in slavery."¹⁸

Common Sense Ignites a Nation

In January 1776, Paine wrote the material that secured him monumental fame as a revolutionary writer. *Common Sense* evolved after the youthful Benjamin Rush urged Paine to write an essay on the future of the American colonies "beyond the ordinary short and cold address of newspaper publication." That he did.¹⁹

Others had offered political and economic arguments, but Tom Paine advocated nothing short of social revolution. His pamphlet served as important a purpose as any piece of journalism in the history of this country: Its message has been credited with transforming thousands of mildly disillusioned colonists into defiant rebels fully prepared to fight for a utopian new world.

Before Paine published his pamphlet, most colonists aspired only for what they saw as their rights as English subjects. *Common Sense* argued that those men and women not only deserved, but were obligated as citizens of the human race, to demand much more. Paine's profound message was that the issues facing the colonists were neither insidious nor parochial, but timeless and universal. He wrote, "The use of America is in a great measure the cause of all mankind . . . the concern of every man to whom nature hath given the power of feeling." He returned to the theme repeatedly in later passages, appealing to his readers' sense of destiny: "The sun never shined on a cause of greater worth. 'Tis not the affair of a City, a County, a Province, or an Empire. 'Tis not the concern of a day, a year, or an age; posterity are actually involved in the contest, and will be affected even to the end of time."²⁰

Paine assaulted the contemporary embodiment of hereditary rule, labeling King George III "the Royal Brute of Great Britain" and the English constitution "the base remains of ancient tyrannies." He further struck out at the monarchy by boldly declaring, "Of more worth one honest man to society, and in the sight of God, than all the wretched ruffians that ever lived." Paine was the first writer in America to denounce the British monarchy and constitution so utterly.²¹

Only after dispensing with these institutions did Paine begin to discuss colonial independence—a concept so controversial that Rush had counseled Paine to avoid using the word "independence" in his pamphlet. Radicals such as Sam Adams had mentioned the concept occasionally, but most colonists still refused to consider such an extreme

COMMON SENSE;

ADDRESSED TO THE

INHABITANTS

OF

A M E R I C A,

On the following interesting

S U B J E C T S.

- 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.

Man knows no Master save creating HEAVEN.
Of those whom choice and common good ordain.

THOMSON.

PHILADELPHIA;

Printed, and Sold, by R. BELL, in Third-Street.

MDCC LXXVI.

After the pamphlet *Common Sense* appeared in January 1776, the concept of independence spread like wildfire through the American colonies. Reprinted by permission of the Library of Congress.

step. Paine, in contrast, presented separation from Britain as the only viable option for the colonies and then went on to sketch a breathtaking vision of what American independence could mean for all of humankind: "We have it in our power to begin the world over again. The birthday of a new world is at hand."²²

Paine managed to turn the struggle over the rights of the American colonists into a contest with ramifications of unparalleled dimension for all the world: "O! ye that love mankind! Ye that dare oppose not only the tyranny but the tyrant, stand forth! Every spot of the old world is overrun with oppression. Freedom hath been hunted round the Globe. Asia and Africa have long expelled her. Europe regards her like a stranger, and England hath given her warning to depart. O! receive the fugitive, and prepare in time an asylum for mankind."²³

Common Sense was not remarkable for its substance alone. Rather, much of the genius of Paine's pamphlet was the masterful way he packaged ideas—royal corruption, rights of the governed, vision of an American empire—into a comprehensive argument that related each of these ideas to the common experiences of the colonists.

With *Common Sense*, Paine pioneered a new style of political writing aimed at extending political discussion to all classes. Most writers of the eighteenth century believed that to write for a mass audience meant to sacrifice refinement for coarseness, to reject a lofty literary style in favor of a vulgar one. The American pamphleteers before Paine had come largely from the high social strata of lawyers, merchants, planters, and ministers; Paine, however, had sprung from that same mass audience that he was so successful at reaching.

Paine later wrote, "As it is my design to make those that can scarcely read understand, I shall therefore avoid every literary ornament and put it in language as plain as the alphabet." He eliminated the flowery language that might have impressed highly educated readers, and he provided translations for the few Latin phrases he used. The hallmarks of his writing were the same as those of journalism today—clarity, directness, force. His vocabulary and grammar were straightforward, and he carried his readers along with great care from one argument to the next. Paine's message, stated explicitly and reiterated by his tone and style, was that everyone could grasp the nature of—and play a role in—their own governance.²⁴

The response to *Common Sense* was astonishing. At a time when colonial newspapers were fortunate if they sold 2,000 copies and pamphlets were printed in one or two editions of a few thousand, more than 150,000 copies of *Common Sense* were sold within three months. And by year's end the pamphlet had gone through twenty-five separate editions.

Impact was not measured in numbers alone, for people were instantly affected by Paine's remarkable words, reading their simple message and overnight becoming committed to independence. In a matter of weeks, his passion had infected virtually every American colonist who was either literate or was in earshot of one of the hundreds of voices who read the inspirational words aloud in coffeehouses, taverns, and town squares from New England to Georgia.

In the most famous comment on the impact of Paine's words, General George Washington observed, "By private letters, which I have lately received from Virginia, I find 'Common Sense' is working a powerful change there in the minds of many men." Others agreed. Abigail Adams thanked her husband, John, for sending her a copy and gushed about its impact in Massachusetts: "Tis highly prized here and carries conviction wherever it is read. I have spread it as much as it lay in my power, every one assents to the weighty truths it contains." Thomas Jefferson observed, "No writer has exceeded Paine in ease and familiarity of style, in perspicuity of expression, happiness of elucidation, and in simple and unassuming language."²⁵

Perhaps even more important evidence of the pamphlet's impact came from comments by common citizens. In a letter to the *Connecticut Gazette*, a man spoke directly to Paine: "You have declared the sentiments of Millions. Your production may justly be compared to a land-flood that sweeps all before it. We were blind, but on reading these enlightening works the scales have fallen from our eyes. The doctrine of Independence hath been in times past, greatly disgusting; we abhorred the principle—it is now become our delightful theme, and commands our purest affection." A Philadelphia man attributed "the progress of the idea of Colonial independence in three weeks or a month" solely to *Common Sense*, adding that "tens of thousands of common farmers and tradesmen" were suddenly prepared "to part with the abominable chain."²⁶

The soldier David Ramsay lauded *Common Sense* as a publishing phenomenon that "produced surprising effects." Ramsay continued: "Many thousands were convinced, and were led to approve and long for a separation from the Mother Country. Though that measure, a few months before, was not only foreign from their wishes, but the object of their abhorrence, the current suddenly became so strong in its favour, that it bore down all opposition. The multitude was hurried down the stream."²⁷

Common Sense did not single-handedly cause the American Revolution or propel the authors of the Declaration of Independence to craft their historic document less than six months after Tom Paine wrote his extraordinary pamphlet. But there is no question that

Paine's words had significant impact. He articulated the larger meaning of the struggle with Britain to readers focused on attaining their rights as subjects of the British crown—and suddenly those same citizens embraced the concept of independence that previously had been anathema to them. Paine biographer Eric Foner wrote, "The success of *Common Sense* reflected the perfect conjunction of a man and his time, a writer and his audience, and it announced the emergence of Paine as the outstanding political pamphleteer of the Age of Revolution."²⁸

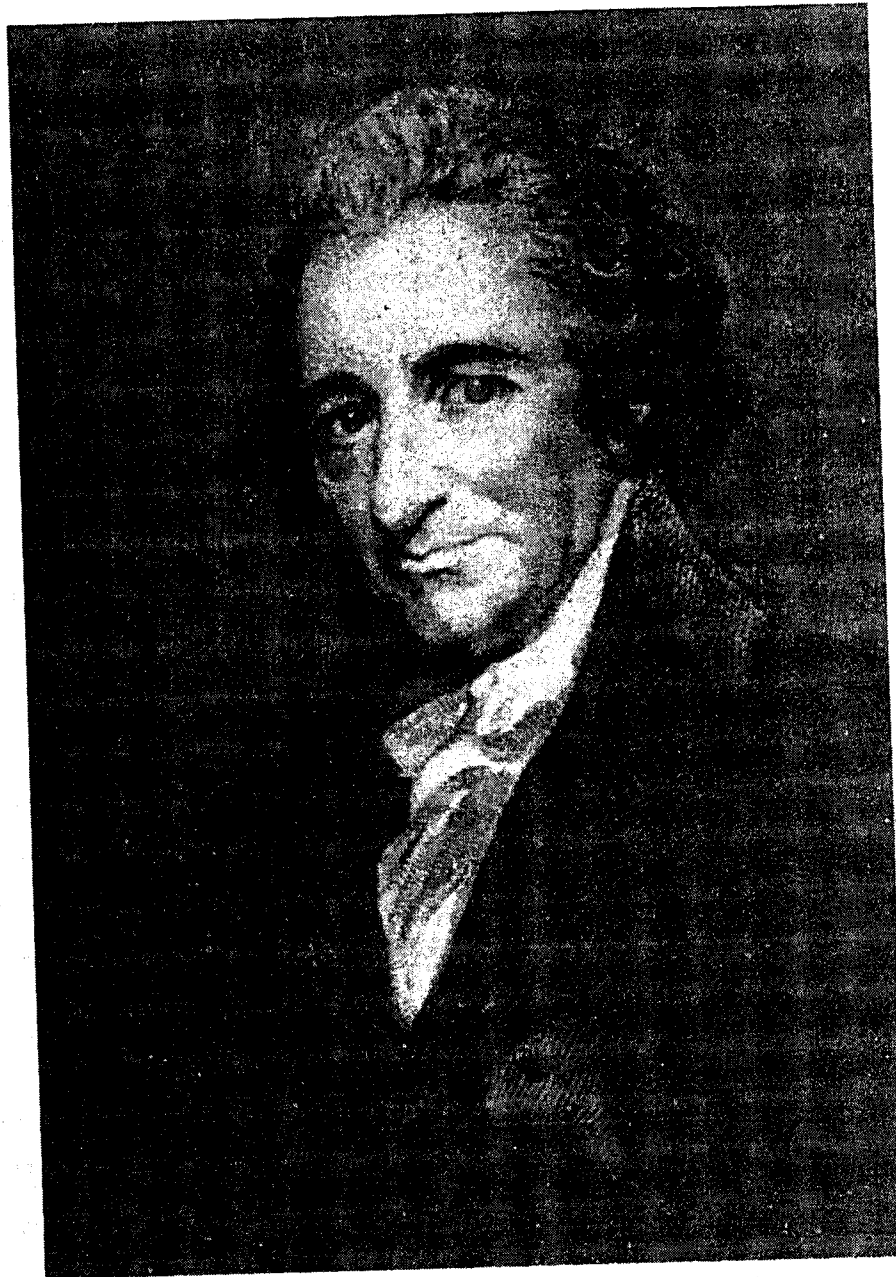
Crisis Essays Inspire an Army

Despite Paine's singular contribution to the revolutionary cause, his work as an inspirational writer had not yet ended. He joined the Continental army in August 1776 and, like his fellow soldiers, felt the weight of a well-armed and well-trained British army. As the summer gave way to winter, companies began breaking up. The British cut the Americans to pieces in numerous battles, and Paine saw hundreds of his adopted countrymen die.

Making his way to Washington's headquarters, Paine saw the defeated Americans preparing to retreat across the Delaware River. Legend has it that Paine wrote his *Crisis* essays at Washington's request. The general could see that the winter cold, combined with poor food and inadequate uniforms, was taking a severe toll on his soldiers; he called on Paine to write words that would inspire the men to continue fighting. Legend also has it that Paine wrote his moving words by candlelight on a drum head. Although these stories can be disputed, there is no doubt that Paine wrote under pressure and from the soul.

In December 1776, the first installment of the *Crisis* papers went to print in the *Pennsylvania Journal* and was immediately reprinted in pamphlet form. Washington had the essay read to his suffering and dispirited troops, and a week later they won a crucial victory at Trenton.

That first essay began with the line that was to be remembered by future generations as Paine's most famous: "These are the times that try men's souls." For more than two centuries, literature classes have struggled to understand the power of that alliterative phrasing. Paine continued, "The summer soldier and the sunshine patriot will, in this crisis, shrink from the service of their country; but he that stands it out, deserves the love and thanks of man and woman. Tyranny, like hell, is not easily conquered; yet we have this consolation with us, that the harder the conflict, the more glorious the triumph."²⁹



Historians credit essay writer Tom Paine with helping to transform lukewarm patriots into fiery revolutionaries. Reprinted by permission of the Library of Congress.

Other *Crisis* papers appeared as the need demanded, with twelve being published by December 1783. Each burst with a new flurry of inspiration: "The heart that feels not now, is dead: the blood of his children will curse his cowardice, who shrinks back at a time a little might have saved the whole" and "Let it be told to the future world, that in the depth of winter, when nothing but hope and virtue could survive, that the city and the country, alarmed at one common danger, came forth to meet it and to repulse it."³⁰

Despite Tom Paine's seminal contribution to both American journalism and American history, his adopted countrymen rejected him for his radicalism. After inspiring the colonists to seek independence and later fighting in both the American and French Revolutions, Paine died ignored in 1809. His tombstone listed his most important contribution as creating *Common Sense*.

Stunning Impact

Just as the American Revolution stands as a unique event in the history of the United States, colonial American journalism provides a stunning example of the impact the news media have had on shaping American history. For the series of publications produced in the colonies during the 1760s and 1770s helped lead the colonists toward political and social revolution. "That rebellion," one historian wrote, "would have been impossible without the spur of the press."³¹

The early phase of the apocalyptic campaign began in 1768 and was orchestrated by political firebrand Sam Adams. Through the "Journal of Occurrences," he and his radical associates artfully mobilized colonial public opinion against the British troops stationed in Boston and, therefore, against the crown. Their sensationalistic reports of British soldiers mistreating the good people of Boston spawned strong negative reaction that, in turn, helped persuade British officials to withdraw the troops—providing the colonists with a victory that propelled them toward further action.

Colonial resentment toward the British grew even stronger during the 1770s. Radical patriots not only reported the brutality of the Boston Massacre immediately after the episode but again employed sensationalism through an incessant flow of commemorative broadsides. Those hysterical retellings of the events on Boston Commons kept the massacre fresh in the minds and hearts of the colonists, helping to push those men and women closer and closer to their breaking point.

Despite their importance, these early publications were mere prelude to Tom Paine's remarkable work. In the early months of 1776,

Common Sense became the *magnum opus* that not only helped arouse the colonists to the revolutionary concept of independence but also thrust them toward open rebellion. *Common Sense* played a singular role in transforming mildly discontented subjects of the British crown into political insurgents fully committed to social mutiny, to fighting for their freedom, and, ultimately, to changing the course of human history in the second millennium.