

WHAT SO ★ PROUDLY ★ WE HAIL

The American Soul in Story, Speech, and Song

The Crisis, No. 1

THOMAS PAINE

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In retrospect, especially looking from the perspective of today, 230 years after the end of the War of Independence, it is easy to forget how uncertain was the revolutionary cause, how perilous the risk of failure, and, especially, how divided were the colonists on the rightness of the revolt and the wisdom of joining what seemed at first to be the losing side. Allow, therefore, the fiery words of Thomas Paine (1737–1809) to recreate for you the situation that faced Washington and the revolution as the campaign moved, in late 1776, into the mid-Atlantic states of Pennsylvania and New Jersey. In 1776, Paine, influential essayist and editor of the Pennsylvania Magazine in Philadelphia, had already written Common Sense, an immensely influential pamphlet that made the case for declaring independence from Britain. His The American Crisis was a series of essays, published between the end of 1776 and 1783, in which Paine addressed the many crises faced by the revolution and the fledgling nation struggling to be born alive. George Washington found this, the first of those essays (published December 23, 1776), with its famous opening lines, so inspiring that he ordered it read aloud to his troops at Valley Forge, just days before the treacherous Christmas Day crossing of the Delaware River and their subsequent morale-boosting triumph in the Battle of Trenton.

Read the essay slowly and carefully, trying to state the point of each paragraph and the overall argument. What is Paine’s purpose in this essay? To which groups is he most trying to appeal, and why might they need to be addressed in the manner he chooses? What, exactly, is “the crisis” of the day? How, and to what end, does Paine use references to God? What is Paine’s case against the Tories? What is his argument and appeal to the neutrals, who just want to be left alone to live in peace? How does Paine justify the revolution? Why does he claim that it will succeed? Were you to have been a peace-loving farmer or shopkeeper or merchant—with spouse, children, and an income that depended in no small part on commerce with the British—do you think that you would have been moved by the essay? Which arguments would have persuaded or inspired you to join the revolutionary cause and fight?

These are the times that try men’s souls. The summer-soldier and the sun-shine patriot will, in this crisis, shrink from the service of their country; but he that stands by it now, deserves the love and thanks of man and woman. Tyranny, like hell, is not easily

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conquered; yet we have this consolation with us, that the harder the conflict, the more glorious the triumph. What we obtain too cheaply, we esteem too lightly: it is dearness only that gives every thing its value. Heaven knows how to put a proper price upon its goods; and it would be strange indeed, if so celestial an article as FREEDOM should not be highly rated. Britain, with an army to enforce her tyranny, has declared that she has a right not only to TAX but “to BIND us in ALL CASES WHATSOEVER;” and if being bound in that manner is not slavery, there is no such a thing as slavery upon earth. Even the expression is impious; for so unlimited a power can belong only to God.

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Whether the independence of the continent was declared too soon, or delayed too long, I will not now enter into as an argument; my own simple opinion is, that had it been eight months earlier, it would have been much better. We did not make a proper use of last winter, neither could we, while we were in a dependent situation. However, the fault, if it were one, was all our own. But no great deal is lost yet. All that [General Sir William] Howe¹ has been doing for this month past, is rather a ravage than a conquest, which the spirit of the Jerseys, a year ago, would have quickly repulsed, and which time and a little resolution will soon recover.

I have as little superstition in me as any man living; but my secret opinion has ever been, and still is, that God will not give up a people to military destruction, or leave them unsupportedly to perish, who had so earnestly and so repeatedly sought to avoid the calamities of war, by every decent method which wisdom could invent. Neither have I so much of the infidel in me, as to suppose that He has relinquished the government of the world, and given us up to the care of devils; and as I do not, I cannot see on what grounds the King can look up to heaven for help against us: a common murderer or highwayman has as good a pretence as he.

It is surprising to see how rapidly a panic will sometimes run through a country. All Nations and ages have been subject to them. Britain has trembled like an ague² at the report of a French fleet of flat-bottomed boats; and in the fourteenth century, the whole English army, after ravaging the Kingdom of France, was driven back, like men petrified with fear; and this brave exploit was performed by a few broken forces, collected and headed by a woman, Joan of Arc. Would that heaven might inspire some Jersey maid to spirit up her countrymen, and save her fair fellow sufferers from ravage and ravishment! Yet panics, in some cases, have their uses: they produce as much good as hurt. Their

¹ *Commander in chief of the British forces in America.*

² *A fever marked by fits of shivering.*

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duration is always short: the mind soon grows through them, and acquires a firmer habit than before. But their peculiar advantage is, that they are the touchstones of sincerity and hypocrisy, and bring things and men to light, which might otherwise have lain forever undiscovered. In fact, they have the same effect on secret traitors, which an imaginary apparition would have upon a private murderer. They sift out the hidden thoughts of man, and hold them up in public to the world. Many a disguised Tory has lately shown his head, that shall penitentially solemnize with curses the day on which Howe arrived upon the Delaware. . . .

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I shall not now attempt to give all the particulars of our retreat to the Delaware. Suffice it, for the present, to say, that both officers and men, though greatly harassed and fatigued, frequently without rest, covering, or provision, the inevitable consequences of a long retreat, bore it with a manly and martial spirit. All their wishes were one; which was, that the country would turn out, and help them to drive the enemy back. Voltaire has remarked that King William never appeared to full advantage, but in difficulties and in action. The same remark may be made on General Washington, for the character fits him. There is a natural firmness in some minds, which cannot be unlocked by trifles, but which, when unlocked, discovers a cabinet of fortitude; and I reckon it among those kind of public blessings which we do not immediately see, that God hath blessed him with uninterrupted health, and given him a mind that can even flourish upon care.

I shall conclude this paper with some miscellaneous remarks on the state of our affairs; and shall begin with asking the following question. Why is it that the enemy hath left the New England provinces, and made these middle ones the seat of war? The answer is easy. New England is not infested with Tories, and we are. I have been tender in raising the cry against these men, and used numberless arguments to show them their danger: but it will not do to sacrifice a world either to their folly or their baseness. The period is now arrived, in which either they or we must change our sentiments, or one or both must fall. And what is a Tory? Good God! what is he? I should not be afraid to go with an hundred Whigs against a thousand Tories, were they to attempt to get into arms. Every Tory is a coward: for servile, slavish, self-interested fear is the foundation of Toryism: and a man under such influence, though he may be cruel, never can be brave.

But, before the line of irrecoverable separation may be drawn between us, let us reason the matter together. Your conduct is an invitation to the enemy; yet not one in a thousand of you has heart enough to join him. Howe is as much deceived by you, as the American cause is injured by you. He expects you will all take up arms, and flock to his

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standard with muskets on your shoulders. Your opinions are of no use to him, unless you support him personally; for it is soldiers, and not Tories, that he wants.

I once felt all that kind of anger which a man ought to feel against the mean principles that are held by the Tories. A noted one, who kept a tavern at Amboy, was standing at his door, with as pretty a child in his hand, about eight or nine months old, as I ever saw; and after speaking his mind as freely as he thought was prudent, finished with the unfatherly expression, "Well, give me peace in my days." Not a man lives on the continent, but fully believes that separation must some time or other finally take place, and a generous parent would have said, "If there must be trouble, let it be in my days, that my child may have peace;" and this single reflection, well applied, is sufficient to awaken every man to duty. Not a place upon earth might be so happy as America. Her situation is remote from all the wrangling world, and she has nothing to do but to trade with them. A man may easily distinguish in himself between temper and principle, and I am as confident, as I am that God governs the world, that America will never be happy till she gets clear of foreign dominion. Wars, without ceasing, will break out till that period arrives, and the continent must, in the end, be conqueror; for though the flame of liberty may sometimes cease to shine, the coal can never expire.

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America did not, nor does not want [lack] force; but she wanted a proper application of that force. Wisdom is not the purchase of a day, and it is no wonder that we should err at first setting off. From an excess of tenderness, we were unwilling to raise an army, and trusted our cause to the temporary defence of a well-meaning militia. A summer's experience has now taught us better; yet with those troops, while they were collected, we were able to set bounds to the progress of the enemy; and, thank God, they are again assembling. I always considered militia as the best troops in the world for a sudden exertion, but they will not do for a long campaign. Howe, it is probable, will make an attempt on this city [Philadelphia]; should he fail on this side of the Delaware, he is ruined; if he succeeds, our cause is not ruined. He stakes all on his side against a part on ours; admitting he succeeds, the consequence will be, that armies from both ends of the continent will march to assist their suffering friends in the middle states; for he cannot go every where: it is impossible. I consider Howe as the greatest enemy the Tories have; he is bringing a war into their country, which, had it not been for him, and partly for themselves, they had been clear of. Should he now be expelled, I wish, with all the devotion of a Christian, that the names of Whig and Tory may never more be mentioned; but should the Tories give him encouragement to come, or assistance if he come, I as sincerely wish that our next year's arms may expel them from the continent, and the

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Congress appropriate their possessions to the relief of those who have suffered in well-doing. A single successful battle next year will settle the whole. America could carry on a two-years war by the confiscation of the property of disaffected persons, and be made happy by their expulsion. Say not that this is revenge; call it rather the soft resentment of a suffering people, who, having no object in view but the good of all, have staked their own all upon a seemingly doubtful event. Yet it is folly to argue against determined hardness. Eloquence may strike the ear, and the language of sorrow draw forth the tear of compassion, but nothing can reach the heart that is steeled with prejudice.

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Quitting this class of men, I turn, with the warm ardor of a friend, to those who have nobly stood, and are yet determined, to stand the matter out: I call not upon a few, but upon all: not on this state or that state, but on every state. Up and help us. Lay your shoulders to the wheel. Better have too much force than too little, when so great an object is at stake. 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 and to repulse it. Say not that thousands are gone: turn out your tens of thousands: throw not the burden of the day upon Providence, but show your faith by your good works, that God may bless you. It matters not where you live, or what rank of life you hold; the evil or the blessing will reach you all. The far and the near, the home counties and the back, the rich and the poor, shall suffer or rejoice alike. The heart that feels not now is dead. The blood of his children will curse his cowardice, who shrinks back at a time when a little might have saved the whole, and made them happy. I love the man that can smile in trouble—that can gather strength from distress, and grow brave by reflection. It is the business of little minds to shrink; but he, whose heart is firm, and whose conscience approves his conduct, will pursue his principles unto death. My own line of reasoning is to myself, as straight and clear as a ray of light. Not all the treasures of the world, so far as I believe, could have induced me to support an offensive war, for I think it murder; but if a thief breaks into my house—burn and destroy my property, and kill, or threaten to kill me and those that are in it, and to “bind me in all cases whatsoever,” to his absolute will, am I to suffer it? What signifies it to me, whether he who does it is a King or a common man; my countryman, or not my countryman; whether it be done by an individual villain, or an army of men? If we reason to the root of things we shall find no difference; neither can any just cause be assigned, why we should punish in the one case, and pardon in the other. Let them call me rebel, and welcome; I feel no concern from it; but I should suffer the misery of devils, were I to make a whore of my soul, by swearing allegiance to one whose character is that of a sottish, stupid, stubborn, worthless, brutish man. I conceive, likewise, a horrid idea in receiving mercy

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from a being who, at the last day, shall be shrieking to the rocks and mountains to cover him, and fleeing with terror from the orphan, the widow, and the slain of America.

There are cases which cannot be overdone by language; and this is one. There are persons too, who see not the full extent of the evil which threatens them. They solace themselves with hopes, that the enemy, if they succeed, will be merciful. It is the madness of folly, to expect mercy from those who have refused to do justice; and even mercy, where conquest is the object, is only a trick of war. The cunning of the fox is as murderous as the violence of the wolf, and we ought to guard equally against both. Howe's first object is partly by threats, and partly by promises, to terrify or seduce the people to deliver up their arms, and receive mercy. The Ministry recommended the same plan to Gage, and this is what the Tories call making their peace—"a peace which passeth all understanding" indeed. A peace which would be the immediate forerunner of a worse ruin than any we have yet thought of. Ye men of Pennsylvania, do reason upon these things! Were the back counties to give up their arms, they would fall an easy prey to the Indians, who are all armed. This, perhaps, is what some Tories would not be sorry for. Were the home counties to deliver up their arms, they would be exposed to the resentment of the back counties, who would then have it in their power to chastise their defection at pleasure. And were any one state to give up its arms, that state must be garrisoned by all Howe's army of Britons and Hessians, to preserve it from the anger of the rest. Mutual fear is the principal link in the chain of mutual love, and woe be to that state that breaks the compact. Howe is mercifully inviting you to barbarous destruction, and men must be either rogues or fools that will not see it. I dwell not upon the vapors of imagination; I bring reason to your ears, and, in language as plain as A, B, C, hold up truth to your eyes.

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I thank God, that I fear not. I see no real cause for fear. I know our situation well, and can see the way out of it. While our army was collected, Howe dared not risk a battle; and it is no credit to him that he decamped from the White Plains, and waited a mean opportunity to ravage the defenceless Jerseys; but it is great credit to us, that, with a handful of men, we sustained an orderly retreat, for near an hundred miles, brought off our ammunition, all our field pieces, the greatest part of our stores, and had four rivers to pass. None can say, that our retreat was precipitate; for we were near three weeks in performing it, that the country might have time to come in. Twice we marched back to meet the enemy, and remained out till dark. The sign of fear was not seen in our camp; and had not some of the cowardly and disaffected inhabitants spread false alarms through the country, the Jerseys had never been ravaged. Once more, we are again collected and

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collecting. Our new army, at both ends of the continent, is recruiting fast; and we shall be able to open the next campaign with sixty thousand men, well armed and clothed. This is our situation—and who will, may know it. By perseverance and fortitude we have the prospect of a glorious issue; by cowardice and submission, the sad choice of a variety of evils—a ravaged country—a depopulated city—habitations without safety—and slavery without hope—our homes turned into barracks and bawdyhouses for Hessians—and a future race to provide for, whose fathers we shall doubt of! Look on this picture, and weep over it! and if there yet remains one thoughtless wretch, who believes it not, let him suffer it unlamented.

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