

Historiography Activity- Common Sense

Historical interpretations give an ideological focus to any historical theme. They are based on the facts, as they present themselves, as well as the worldview of the evaluator. It is valuable to read the opinions of a variety of historians with distinct viewpoints. The different perspectives can be based on differences in emphasis, when reviewing the available data, statistics and information on the events of the time, as well as the way information is organized.

Here is an example of how contemporary historians Howard Zinn uses Thomas Paine's pamphlet *Common Sense* (1776) to support his analysis.

Thomas Paine's *Common Sense*, which appeared in early 1776 and became the most popular pamphlet in the American colonies... made the first bold argument for independence in words that any fairly literate person could understand.

Society in every state is a blessing, but Government even in its best state is but a necessary evil.

Thomas Paine dealt with the practical advantages of sticking to England or being separated; he knew the importance of economics:

I challenge the warmest advocate for reconciliation to show a single advantage that this continent can reap by being connected with Great Britain. I repeat the challenge; not a single advantage is derived. Our corn will fetch its price in any market in Europe, and our imported goods must be paid for by them where we will.

As for the bad effects of the connection with England. Paine appealed to the colonists' memory of all the wars in which England had involved them, wars costly in lives and money:

But the injuries and disadvantages which we sustain by the connection are without number...any submission to, or dependence on, Great Britain, tends directly to involve this Continent in European wars and quarrels, and set us at variance with nations who would otherwise seek our friendship.

He built slowly to an emotional pitch:

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

In addition, here is an extract in which Howard Zinn explains how *Common Sense* was received by the élites in British North America:

[Thomas] Paine's pamphlet appealed to a wide range of colonial opinion angered by England. But it caused some tremors in aristocrats like John Adams who were with the patriot causes but wanted to make sure they didn't go too far in the direction of democracy. Paine denounced the so-called balanced government of Lords and Commons [in Britain] as a deception and called for single-chamber representative bodies where the people could be represented. Adams denounced Paine's plan as "so democratical, without any restraint or even an attempt at any equilibrium."

Source: Zinn, Howard. 1980. *A People's History of the United States*. Harper & Row.

Questions for discussion:

1. What do you think that Common Sense is about, based on this text?
2. How does Zinn summarize the main ideas of Paine's text? What do you think is his opinion of the pamphlet?
3. What is your impression of John Adams, based solely on this reading?
4. Do you believe Zinn's interpretation? Why or why not?
5. Is Zinn a valuable source for studying? Why or why not?