In the winter of 1776, John Adams read *Common Sense*, an anonymous, fanatical, and brutally brilliant forty-six-page pamphlet that would convince the American people of what more than a decade of taxes and nearly a year of war had not: that it was nothing less than their destiny to declare independence from Britain. "The cause of America is in a great measure the cause of all mankind" was *Common Sense*’s astonishing and inspiring claim about the fate of thirteen infant colonies on the edge of the world. "The sun never shone on a cause of greater worth. 'Tis not the affair of a city, a county, a province, or a kingdom; but of a continent--of at least one-eighth part of the habitable globe. 'Tis not the concern of a day, a year, or an age; posterity are virtually involved in the contest, and will be more or less affected even to the end of time, by the proceedings now." Whether these words were preposterous or prophetic only time would tell, but meanwhile everyone wondered: Who could have written such stirring stuff?

"People Speak of it in rapturous praise," a friend wrote Adams. "Some make Dr. Franklin the Author," hinted another. "I think I see strong marks of your pen in it," speculated a third. More miffed than flattered, Adams admitted to his wife, Abigail, "I could not have written any Thing in so manly and striking a style." Who, then? Adams found out: "His Name is Paine."
Thomas Pain was born in Thetford, England, in 1737 (he added the *e* later and was called "Tom" only by his enemies), the son of a Quaker journeyman who sewed the bones of whales into stays\(^1\) for ladies’ corsets. He left the local grammar school at the age of twelve, to serve as his father’s apprentice. At twenty he went to sea on a privateer. In 1759 he opened his own stay-making shop and married a servant girl, but the next year both she and their child died in childbirth. For a decade Pain struggled to make a life for himself. He taught school, collected taxes, and in 1771 married a grocer’s daughter. Three years later he was fired from his job with the excise office\(^2\); his unhappy and childless second marriage fell apart; and everything he owned was sold at auction to pay off his debts. At the age of thirty-seven, Thomas Pain was ruined. He therefore did what every ruined Englishman did, if he possibly could: he sailed to America. Sickened with typhus during the journey, Pain arrived in Philadelphia in December 1774 so weak he had to be carried off the ship. What saved his life was a letter found in his pocket: "The bearer Mr. Thomas Pain is very well recommended to me as an ingenious worthy young man." It was signed by Benjamin Franklin. It was better than a bag of gold.

How an unknown Englishman who had been in the colonies for little more than a year came to write the most influential essay of the American Revolution--no matter that he had once caught Franklin’s eye during a chance meeting in London--is a mystery not easily solved. Paine is a puzzle. Lockean liberalism, classical republicanism, and Leveller radicalism\(^3\) all can be found in his work, though whether he ever read Locke, or anyone else, is probably impossible to discover. His love for equality has been traced to Quakerism,

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\(^1\) These are “ribs” of a corset.
\(^2\) Tax collector’s office
\(^3\) Levellers were a political movement that sprang up in the English Civil War. They believed in expanding the vote to non-landowners, equality before the law and religious tolerance.
his hatred of injustice to growing up next door to a gallows. Guesses, but guesses all the same.

"I offer nothing more than simple facts, plain arguments, and common sense," Paine wrote, but this was coyness itself: _Common Sense_ stood every argument against American independence on its head. "There is something absurd in supposing a continent to be perpetually governed by an island," he insisted. As to the colonies' dependence on England, "We may as well assert that because a child has thrived upon milk, that it is never to have meat." And hereditary monarchy? "Nature disapproves it, otherwise she would not so frequently turn it into ridicule by giving mankind an ass for a lion."

Adams, who had been the colonies' most ardent advocate for independence, refused to accept that Paine deserved any credit for _Common Sense_. "He is a keen Writer," Adams granted, but he'd offered nothing more than "a tolerable summary of the argument which I had been repeating again and again in Congress for nine months." The longer John Adams lived, the more he hated Thomas Paine, and the more worthless he considered that forty-six-page pamphlet. Adams believed, with many of his contemporaries, that democracy was dangerous and that the rule of the mob was one step away from anarchy\(^4\); the rabble must be checked. Paine's notion of common sense, he believed, was "democratical without any restraint." By the end of his life, the aging and ill-tempered ex-president would call _Common Sense_ "a poor, ignorant, Malicious, short-sighted, Crapulous Mass."

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\(^4\) Oh boy, let me explain this as best I can. Most of the Founding Fathers believed that the right to vote should be restricted to only a certain group of people, mainly white, male landowners. The fear is that allowing everyone to vote would cause large groups of people to vote in their own short term narrow self-interest, hence the saying, "Democracy is two wolves and a sheep voting for what's for dinner."
Thomas Paine is, at best, a lesser founder. In the comic-book version of history that serves as our national heritage, where the Founding Fathers are like the Hanna-Barbera SuperFriends, Paine is Aquaman to Washington’s Superman and Jefferson’s Batman; we never find out how he got his superpowers, and he shows up only when they need someone who can swim. That this should be the case—that Americans have proven ambivalent about Paine—seems, at first, surprising, since Paine’s contributions to the nation’s founding would be hard to overstate. *Common Sense* made declaring independence possible. "Without the pen of the author of *Common Sense*, the sword of Washington would have been raised in vain," Adams wrote. But Paine lifted his sword too and emptied his purse. Despite his poverty—he was by far the poorest of the founders—he donated his share of the profits from *Common Sense* to buy supplies for the Continental Army, in which he also served. His chief contribution to the war was a series of essays known as the *American Crisis*. He wrote the first of these essays by the light of a campfire during Washington’s desperate retreat across New Jersey, in December 1776. Making ready to cross the frozen Delaware River—at night, in a blizzard—to launch a surprise attack on Trenton, Washington ordered Paine’s words read to his exhausted, frostbitten troops: "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 their country; but he that stands it now, 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." The next morning the Continentals fought to a stunning, pivotal victory.

It’s hard to believe anyone thought Adams could have written lines like these; Paine wrote like no one else: he wrote for everyone. "As it is my design to make those that can
scarcely read understand," he explained, "I shall therefore avoid every literary ornament and put it in language as plain as the alphabet." So gripping was Paine’s prose, and so vast was its reach, that Adams once complained to Jefferson, "History is to ascribe the American Revolution to Thomas Paine." But history has not been kind to Paine, who forfeited his chance to glorify his role, or at least to document it: at the end of the war, Congress asked him to write the history of the Revolution, but he declined. And the person who did write that history, John and Abigail Adams's close friend, the Massachusetts poet and playwright Mercy Otis Warren, relegated Paine to a footnote—literally—in her magisterial 1805 History of the Rise, Progress, and Termination of the American Revolution.5 By the time Paine died in 1809, all of the surviving founders had renounced him. (Jefferson even refused to allow his correspondence with Paine to be printed. "No, my dear sir, not for this world," he told an inquirer. "Into what a hornet’s nest would it thrust my head!") And nearly no one showed up to see him buried. As Paul Collins observed in The Trouble with Tom: The Strange Afterlife and Times of Thomas Paine, "There were twenty thousand mourners at Franklin's funeral. Tom Paine’s had six."

Disavowed by his contemporaries, Paine left little behind in his own defense; the bulk of his papers, including notes for an autobiography, were destroyed in a fire. (Even his bones have been lost; they were stolen, stashed, smashed, and finally probably thrown out with the rubbish6.) Paine enjoyed a brief revival in the 1940s, after FDR quoted the

5 The strange thing is that Adams hated Warren’s portrayal of him in her book. After its publication in 1805, they exchanged a series of rather bitchy letters back and forth until shortly before Warren’s death in 1814.
6 Paine was buried in 1809, dug up in 1819 to be reburied to England; that never happened. The last
American Crisis--"These are the times that try men’s souls"--in a fireside chat in 1942, three months after the attack on Pearl Harbor; and an excellent two-volume set, The Complete Writings of Thomas Paine, was published in 1945, edited by Philip Foner. But Paine has never much enjoyed the esteem of academics who, on the whole, have shared John Adams's view of him, whatever the rest of America might think. The eminent early American literary scholar Perry Miller believed that Paine's obscurity was well deserved. In a review of The Complete Writings in The Nation in 1945, Miller sneered, "The price of popularizing for contemporaries is temporary popularity." In 1980 Ronald Reagan inaugurated a second Paine revival when, accepting the Republican Party nomination for president, he quoted Common Sense: "We have it in our power to begin the world over again." In the wake of that revival, Princeton historian Sean Wilentz agreed with Miller's assessment; in The New Republic in 1995, Wilentz called Paine "hopelessly naive." Gordon Wood finds him to be merely "a man out of joint with his times," but Paine emerges in most academic accounts as a kind of idiot savant: savvy about adjectives but idiotic about politics. Common Sense is "a work of genius," Bernard Bailyn concluded in 1990, but next to men like Adams, Jefferson, and Madison, Paine was "an ignoramus."

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Thomas Paine left the United States in 1787. "Where liberty is, there is my country," Franklin once said, to which Paine replied, "Wherever liberty is not, there is my country." In England in 1791 he wrote the first part of Rights of Man, a work he considered an English version of Common Sense. Defending the French Revolution from English critics, he argued

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known location of his bones was in the inventory of the estate William Cobbett in 1839. Since then, nothing else is known of them.
that France had "outgrown the baby clothes of count and duke, and breeched itself in manhood." Americans had weaned themselves of milk, and the French had put on pants; now it was time for the British to grow beards. "It is an age of revolutions, in which everything may be looked for." The next year Paine wrote *Rights of Man, Part the Second*, his most important statement of political principles, in which he explained and insisted on natural rights, equality, and popular sovereignty. He went further: "When, in countries that are called civilized, we see age going to the work-house and youth to the gallows, something must be wrong in the system of government." By way of remedy, Paine proposed the framework for a welfare state, providing tax tables calculated down to the last shilling.

The first part of *Rights of Man* sold fifty thousand copies in just three months. The second part was outsold only by the Bible. But British conservatives didn't want to follow France, especially as the news from Paris grew more gruesome. Paine was charged with seditious libel, and, everywhere, his ideas were suppressed and his followers persecuted. "I am for equality. Why, no kings!" one Londoner shouted in a coffeehouse, and was promptly sent to prison for a year and a half. Meanwhile, William Pitt's government hired hack writers to conduct a smear campaign, which asserted, among other things, that Paine—horribly ugly, smelly, rude, and relentlessly cruel, even as a child—had committed fraud, defrauded his creditors, caused his first wife's death by beating her while she was pregnant, and abused his second wife almost as badly, except that she wasn't really his wife because he never consummated that marriage, preferring instead to have sex with cats.

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7 Translation: it's time for England to grow up. How? By dumping the monarchy.  
8 Paine did this in *Common Sense* as well in the discussions of how much it would cost America to build and maintain its' own navy. The man is a wonk for numbers.
"It is earnestly recommended to Mad Tom that he should embark for France and there be naturalized into the regular confusion of democracy," the London Times urged. In September 1792, that's just what Paine did, fleeing to Paris, where he had already been elected a member of the National Assembly, in honor of his authorship of Rights of Man. In France he faltered and fell, not least because he spoke almost no French but mostly because he argued against executing Louis XVI, suggesting instead that he be exiled to the United States, where, "far removed from the miseries and crimes of royalty, he may learn, from the constant public prosperity, that the true system of government consists not in kings, but in fair, equal, and honorable representation."

Back in England, Paine's trial for Rights of Man went on without him; he was found guilty and outlawed. "If the French kill their King, it will be a signal for my departure," Paine had pledged before he left for France, but now he had no choice: not only could he not return to England, he couldn't venture an Atlantic crossing to the United States, for fear of being captured by a British warship. Instead, he stayed in his rooms in Paris and waited for the worst. As the Reign of Terror unfolded, he drafted the first part of The Age of Reason. In December 1793, when the police knocked at his door, he handed a stash of papers to his friend, the American poet and statesman Joel Barlow. Barlow carried the manuscript to the printers; the police carried Paine to an eight-by-ten-foot cell on the ground floor of a prison that had once been a palace. There he would write most of the second part of The Age of Reason as he watched his fellow inmates go daily to their deaths. (In six weeks in the summer of 1794, more than thirteen hundred people were executed.)

When the U.S. government failed to secure his release, Paine at first despaired. Then he raged, writing to the American ambassador, James Monroe, "I should be tempted to
curse the day I knew America. By contributing to her liberty I have lost my own." Finally, after ten months, he was freed. But he left prison an invalid. Ravaged by typhus, gout, recurring fevers, and a suppurating wound on his belly, he would never really recover. He convalesced at Monroe's home in Paris and, for years, at the homes of a succession of supporters. After Jefferson defeated Adams in the election of 1800, the new president invited Paine to return to the United States. He sailed in 1802.

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"The questions central to an understanding of Paine's career do not lend themselves to exploration within the confines of conventional biography," Eric Foner argued in 1976, in *Tom Paine and Revolutionary America*. You can say that again. What with the burned papers, the lost bones, and Paine's role in three revolutions, not to mention tabloid allegations of wife-beating, it's hard to know how to write about Paine. What Foner called "The Problem of Thomas Paine" has a lot to do with the very thing about him that contributed most to his obscurity in the first place: his uncompromising condemnation of all of the world's religions. In *The Age of Reason*, published in 1794 and 1795, Paine wrote: "All national institutions of churches, whether Jewish, Christian, or Turkish, appear to me no other than human inventions, set up to terrify and enslave mankind, and monopolize power and profit. Each of those churches accuses the other of unbelief; and for my own part, I disbelieve them all." Theodore Roosevelt once called Paine a "filthy little atheist," but as Paine was at pains to point out, he did believe in God; he just didn't believe in the Bible, or the Koran, or the Torah; these he considered hearsay, lies, fables, and frauds that served to wreak havoc with humanity while hiding the beauty of God's creation, the evidence for
which was everywhere obvious in "the universe we behold." In *The Age of Reason*, Paine offered his own creed:

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 endeavoring to make our fellow creatures happy. But...I do not believe in the creed professed by the Jewish Church, by the Roman Church, by the Greek Church, by the Turkish Church, by the Protestant Church, nor by any church that I know of. My own mind is my own church.

"Paine's religious opinions were those of three-fourths of the men of letters of the last age," Joel Barlow observed, probably overstating the case only slightly. Paine's views were hardly original; what was new was his audience. Not for nothing did Sean Wilentz call *The Age of Reason* a "*Reader's Digest* rendering" of the Enlightenment. But while other Enlightenment writers wrote for one another, Paine wrote, as always, for everyone. To say that Paine was vilified for doing this is to miss the point. He was destroyed.

Mark Twain once said, "It took a brave man before the Civil War to confess he had read the *Age of Reason.*" But that didn't mean it wasn't read. In Britain, sales of *The Age of Reason* outpaced even those of *Rights of Man*, though, since it was banned as blasphemous, it's impossible to know how many copies were actually sold. London printer Richard Carlisle, who called his bookstore The Temple of Reason, was fined a thousand pounds for selling it and sentenced to two years in jail. (During an earlier trial on similar charges, Carlisle had read aloud from *Rights of Man*, a ploy that allowed him to publish it again, as a courtroom transcript.) After Carlisle's wife fell into the trap of selling *The Age of Reason* to a government agent posing as a bookstore browser, she--and her newborn baby--followed her husband to prison. Eventually, in order to avoid exposing anyone inside the bookstore
to further prosecution, there appeared outside The Temple of Reason an "invisible shopman," a machine into which customers could drop coins and take out a book.

But *The Age of Reason* cost Paine dearly. He lost, among other things, the friendship of Samuel Adams, who seethed, "Do you think that your pen, or the pen of any other man, can unchristianize the mass of our citizens?" Even before Paine returned to the United States in 1802, Federalists used him as a weapon against Jefferson, damning the "two Toms" as infidels while calling Paine "a loathsome reptile." Ministers and their congregants, caught up in the early stages of a religious revival now known as the Second Great Awakening, gloried in news of Paine's physical and mental decline, conjuring up a drunk, unshaven, and decrepit Paine, writhing in pain, begging, "Oh Lord help me! Oh, Christ help me!"

Some of that fantasy was founded in fact. Even at his best, Paine was rough and unpolished-and a mean drunk in his tortured final years, living in New Rochelle and New York City, he displayed signs of dementia. (Scurrilous rumors about cats aside, Paine's behavior throughout his life appears erratic enough that Eric Foner wondered if he suffered from crippling bouts of depression, while Nelson offers a tentative diagnosis of bipolar disorder.) At home he was besieged by visitors who came either to save his soul or to damn it. He told all of them to go to hell. When an old woman announced, "I come from Almighty God to tell you that if you do not repent of your sins and believe in our blessed Savior Jesus Christ, you will be damned," Paine replied, "Pshaw. God would not send such a foolish ugly old woman as you."

Admirers of Paine's political pamphlets have long tried to ignore his religious convictions. In 1800 a New York Republican Society resolved: "May his *Rights of Man* be
handed down to our latest posterity, but may his *Age of Reason* never live to see the rising generation.” That’s more or less how things have turned out. So wholly has *The Age of Reason* been forgotten that Paine’s mantle has been claimed not only by Ronald Reagan but also by the Christian Coalition’s Ralph Reed, who has quoted him, and North Carolina senator Jesse Helms, who in 1992 supported a proposal to erect a Paine monument in Washington, D.C. Nor have liberals who embrace Paine, including the editors of TomPaine.com, and Barack Obama, who quoted him—without mentioning him by name—in his 2009 inaugural address, had much interest in the latter years of his career. Maybe that’s what it means to be a lesser SuperFriend: no one cares about your secret identity. They just like your costume.

Historians too have tried to dismiss *The Age of Reason*, writing it off as simplistic and suggesting either that Paine wrote it to please his French jailers or that, in prison, he went mad. This interpretation began with Mercy Otis Warren, who called *The Age of Reason* “jejune,” explained that Paine wrote it while “trembling under the terrors of the guillotine,” and concluded that, “imprisoned, he endeavored to ingratiate himself.” But Paine himself considered his lifelong views on religion inseparable from his thoughts on government. “It has been the scheme of the Christian Church, and of all other invented systems of religion, to hold man in ignorance of the Creator, as it is of Governments to hold man in ignorance of his rights.” Writing about kings and lords in *Common Sense*, he wondered “how a race of men came into the world so exalted above the rest, and distinguished like some new species.” In *The Age of Reason* he used much the same language to write about priests and prophets: “The Jews have their Moses; the Christians

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9 Naïve, simplistic, superficial, dull, boring.
have their Jesus Christ, their apostles and saints; and the Turks their Mahomet, as if the
way to God was not open to every man alike." He wrote *Common Sense*, *Rights of Man*, and
*Age of Reason* as a trilogy. "Soon after I had published the pamphlet 'Common Sense,' in
America," he explained, "I saw the exceeding probability that a revolution in the system of
government would be followed by a revolution in the system of religion."

That Paine was wrong about the coming of that revolution, oh, so very wrong,
doesn't mean we ought to forget that he yearned for it. In 1806 John Adams railed that the
latter part of the eighteenth century had come to be called "The Age of Reason": "I am
willing you should call this the Age of Frivolity, and would not object if you had named it
the Age of Folly, Vice, Frenzy, Brutality, Daemons, Buonaparte, Tom Paine, or the Age of the
Burning Brand from the Bottomless Pit, or anything but the Age of Reason." But not even
Adams would have wished that so much of Paine's work--however much he disagreed with
it--would be so willfully excised from memory. "I know not whether any man in the world
has had more influence on its inhabitants or affairs for the last thirty years than Tom
Paine," Adams admitted, adding, with irony worthy of the author of *Common Sense*, "Call it
then the Age of Paine."

Adams wrote those words in 1806 as if Paine were already dead. He was not. That
year a neighbor of Paine's came across the old man himself, in a tavern in New York, so
drunk and disoriented and unwashed and unkempt that his toenails had grown over his
toes, like bird's claws. While Adams, at his home in Quincy, busied himself reflecting on the
Age of Paine, Paine hobbled to the polls in New Rochelle to cast his vote in a local election.
He was told that he was not an American citizen and was turned away. So much *for* the
rights of man. Three years later, as the seventy-two-year-old Paine lay, dying in a house in
Greenwich Village, his doctor pressed him, "Do you wish to believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God?" Paine paused, then whispered, "I have no wish to believe on that subject."

FOR FURTHER READING