

Th: Jefferson

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JEFFERSON AND PAINE

A relationship beyond 'Common Sense'

By Gaye Wilson

THOMAS JEFFERSON was settled into retirement in 1813 when he received a request related to his long association and friendship with the notorious Thomas Paine.

The letter was from Margaret Brazier Bonneville, who had cared for the famous pamphleteer during his final illness and had been rewarded with his papers. She wished to publish the correspondence between Paine and Jefferson. The answer was negative; Jefferson requested that the letters not be published during his lifetime. At age 70, he desired "tranquility" and did not want to risk arousing old political animosities. Jefferson's response to Mme. Bonneville provides insight into his feelings toward Paine: "While he lived I thought it a duty, as well as a test of my own political principles, to support him against the persecutions of an unprincipled faction."

Jefferson's feelings for Paine, who had migrated to America from England in 1774, stemmed from his pro-independence writings during the American Revolution. Many had responded to Paine's stirring words in *The Crisis*—"These are the times that try men's souls"—and Jefferson continually lauded Paine as the author of *Common Sense*, published in 1776.

Following the revolution, Paine moved back across the Atlantic and by 1791 was busy publishing a new, politi-



This miniature portrait of Thomas Paine was painted in London in 1788 by John Trumbull, who sent it to Jefferson as a present. T:JF

cally-charged pamphlet in London that upon reaching America would link the names of Jefferson and Paine.

While serving as secretary of state in George Washington's administration, Jefferson began to worry that under the influence of those he believed to be "monarchists"—from his old friend John Adams to his archrival Alexander Hamilton—the young United States would drift toward the British form of government and perhaps some form of an aristocracy. When Jefferson read a copy of Paine's new pamphlet, *The Rights of Man*, recently arrived from London, he was excited by its support for the French Revolution and its questioning

of the role of king and aristocracy. But he had no intention of publicly endorsing Paine's new work.

In sending the copy of the pamphlet to the Philadelphia publisher who was to produce the American edition, Jefferson felt it only cordial to attach a brief note expressing his pleasure "that something is at length to be publicly said against the political heresies which have sprung up among us. I have no doubt our citizens will rally a second time round the standard of *Common Sense*."

The publisher saw Jefferson's comments as an ideal endorsement for the pamphlet and added most of his note as a "prefix" to the American edition. Once it was published, Jefferson admitted that he had not anticipated "the dust Paine's pamphlet has kicked up here," and felt compelled to write letters of explanation to President Washington and to Vice President Adams, as it was widely accepted that the "political heresies" Jefferson referred to were points made in recent newspaper essays known to have been penned by Adams.

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Thomas Paine

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Jefferson ally James Monroe wrote from Virginia that “whilst the fever was at its height” it was debated whether Jefferson should be called to publicly explain his actions. The controversy eventually cooled, and Monroe felt some good had come of it. If any had doubted Jefferson’s political ideology before, Monroe reasoned, Jefferson’s unintended endorsement of Paine’s tract had made his sentiments clear. Like it or not, his support of Paine had thrown Jefferson into the crucible of American politics and made him an identifiable leader of those who favored a strongly republican form of government. With a lesson learned, Jefferson would be much more careful in the future.

Paine fled London for revolutionary France when faced with charges of sedition provoked by his call for a radical program of social legislation in Part II of *The Rights of Man*. Caught up in the power struggles there, he was imprisoned in late 1793 and knew he could be guillotined on any day. He spent nearly 10 months in prison, growing embittered that his claims to American citizenship were initially ignored. Following his eventual release to the care of the new U.S. minister to France, Monroe, he lashed out with an open letter to President Washington. Many Americans were outraged at Paine’s condemnation of Washington’s leadership abilities and

integrity. More outrage followed Paine’s next work, *The Age of Reason*, written while he was in prison, as it attacked organized religion, the authority of the Bible, and the divinity of Jesus. Jefferson remained silent on these latest publications by Paine.

As the newly inaugurated U.S. president, however, Jefferson did risk the controversy he knew would follow by offering to assist Paine in his wish to return to the United States. Upon Paine’s arrival in Baltimore in October 1802, political opponents once again linked Jefferson and Paine, whom they had labeled “the Infidel.” To the dismay of many, Paine was welcomed to dinner at the President’s House, but apparently he did not become as privy to governmental decisions as he had hoped. Before leaving Washington, he wrote a brief note to Jefferson accusing him of “shyness” in the face of the political opposition. Jefferson quickly denied this charge, and he and Paine continued to correspond. Paine openly supported Jefferson in the presidential election of 1804, though the benefits of his endorsement were questionable.

Jefferson won that election and served as president through March 1809. Paine,

‘... never a man less beloved’

By all accounts, Thomas Paine was not the easiest man to get along with. Despite the popularity of his pro-independence writings, Paine began to irritate many Americans even before the American Revolution had ended. In January 1781, Sarah Franklin Bache wrote from Philadelphia to her father, Benjamin Franklin, then in Paris:

“There was never a man less beloved in a place than Paine is in this, having at different times disputed with everybody. The most rational thing he could have done would have been to have died the instant he had finished his *Common Sense*, for he never again will have it in his power to leave the world with so much credit.”

poor and largely shunned, died in New York that June.

Though Jefferson was unwilling to publicly link his name with Paine’s as requested by Mme. Bonneville, he responded positively to a query about Paine from his own grandson, Francis Eppes, in 1821. Jefferson identified Paine as an advocate of human liberty and praised his style of writing, but concluded his letter with a request for confidence: “Remember, that I am old, that I wish not to make new enemies.”

More than a decade after his death, Tom Paine was still notorious.

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