

Thomas Paine vs. Edmund Burke
on the Nature of the American Colonial Relationship

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When approaching the American Revolution, we as Americans 235 years after the major events thereof, are inclined to view the attitudes of the people involved through a certain subjective filter colored by our knowledge of the outcome. That filter does us a great disservice, inasmuch as it lionizes the actions of what we perceive as patriotic freedom-loving Americans, which some of the principles certainly were, while demonizing the actions of the “oppressive, restrictive” British with their ridiculous and entitled King trying to “push us around.” In truth, things are never this simple, and nowhere is this better illustrated than in the comparison of primary documents from Edmund Burke (his March 22nd speech to Parliament) and Thomas Paine (from the rather more famous pamphlet “Common Sense”) from the period of 1775-1776 (Johnson, 117-126).

Careful analysis will show that both men had valid points about liberty and the role of the colonies in the world when taken within the framework of historical and legal context, and that; indeed, both men were striving to maintain what they saw as the practical, day-to-day status quo. Rarely in history can a conflict between two parties be accurately painted only in black and white, and that is most assuredly the case here.

Edmund Burke was a member of the House of Commons of the British Parliament for fifteen years, from 1765 to 1780, and is widely regarded as the intellectual father of modern conservatism as we understand it in America today. The attitudes that personify this way of looking at the world – Burke’s paternalism & his famous “salutary neglect” – certainly provide a foundation for this kind of contemporary thinking, and further make it easy to grasp the approach he suggests taking in his speech to Parliament.

Burke is beginning with the premise that the colonies are like a child of Britain. He begins by stating that the colonies are worth fighting for, but also urges that coercion and over-correction are misguided attempts to bring them to bear. He urges peace through compromise, like someone struggling to heal a family rift. Also like a parent, he points out that the basic positive qualities of America – her industry, studiousness, desire for liberty and strength – are straight out of the British DNA brought by “our people,” while also acknowledging that through the influences of distance and Protestantism, something more has been allowed to foster, and that while different, this “American spirit” of active freedom and resistance, even dissidence is something that is not necessarily negative if it can be contained and managed.

But it’s not all about family. Burke is clear on the point that as a part of the British Empire, America is an indispensable trading partner, containing 2 million people and constituting a 3rd of the overall British trade at the time. Again, he urges that America is “worth fighting for” but recognizes that if that fight becomes violent, there is perhaps more to be lost than won. Pushing for management over force, he sees a dual benefit if this thing can be contained and dealt with. Taxes will not work on their own, he says, because they denigrate self-government, and self-government is an “English born” principle. He would famously be less supportive of the later French Revolution, and was not a fan of street level democracy unless it stemmed from Englishness, it seems (Bowers, 83). ‘These are our people,’ he seems to say, ‘let’s bring them closer to home, exert control and influence, but let’s not fight, because that causes rifts that cannot be healed.’ He seeks to maintain the overall status quo as interpreted from a traditional and legal standpoint, with only adjustments and tweaks in managerial approach.

Thomas Paine, likewise, sees himself as arguing for the status quo but in a more pragmatic sense rather than traditional. Paine was an inventor and author, someone whose life would not have been possible without the adventurous atmosphere of Enlightenment America. The American colonies had been allowed to thrive while not being well supervised, and once someone enjoys freedom, it's always much harder to control them in a restrictive way. The colonists had made money, controlled their own affairs, and felt the freedom of self-determination for so long that it's possible that they had emotionally "forgotten" about the overarching control over their destinies that was always out there in the form of Britain.

Paine makes the Enlightenment argument that there is no "natural reason" for men to be separated into commoners and Kings (curiously, without expanding it to women and minorities) and thus questions the paternalistic authority by which Britain seeks to control them, asserting that it is further the natural right of men to self-govern. He even questions the parentage itself, asserting that there are people in America from all over the world, so how does Britain still claim the rights inherent in parentage? (Paine, 96)

Declaring the need to break away from the "parent" country in his anonymous monograph, Paine makes excellent points that constitute "irreconcilable differences" when raised in a contemporary court of law, and constitute legal grounds for permanent separation. He asserts that America cannot flourish while being ruled from overseas, as oversight from 3000 miles away can only be ineffective, uninformed and delayed. He expresses the desire not to be enmeshed in business that has nothing to do with the colonies, as would happen if Britain got itself into a war in Europe. This is so distant from colonial life they want nothing to do with it. Finally, he declares that there is no way for America to get over what has been done to it already

at the hands of British troops and tax men, the death and mayhem, destruction of property and general malfeasance and mistreatment.

They, the colonists, are freer now than ever they have been. They haven't listened to or felt they needed the King in more than a century, and so the current status quo for them is a high functioning society with an active public sphere and a flourishing economy where people do what they wish and the law is King. Many of these men venerate the law, and are lawyers themselves, used to constructing their own arguments for what is and is not right under the law (Henretta & Brody, 141).

I approach this, then from dual perspectives: Burke sees the current status quo as America, the colony of Britain, which must be finessed and maintained, lest a brutal and pointless war break out and destroy what's beneficial for everyone in this equation. He himself makes clear that the spirit of rebellion in the country runs deep (deeper in the South, swelled with the arrogance of ownership of slaves, and among non-adherents to the Church of England, with their protestant nature, than elsewhere) and that coercion would likely lead to armed conflict. Paine, on the other hand, agitates for revolution also to maintain *his* status quo – that state of affairs where America is largely self-governed, and revolution is only a tool to push British influence back across the Atlantic where it belongs.

Further and better communication between these two men and their peers on both sides of the Atlantic could possibly have led to diplomacy, a smoother transition, or even an entirely different state of affairs – it is rash to say that revolution was the best path, or a foregone conclusion, which is how many Americans regard it today. Careful analysis of both of these points of view reveals that in their motivations, they are not all that different – Burke makes the point that they all come from the same intellectual tradition – and that the difference lies in what

they sought to protect and preserve. You could make the argument that Burke was behind the curve, unable to properly see what had changed in America, or you could say that the rash actions of the colonists, fomenting revolution over diplomacy based on what they saw as aggressive acts, was premature and misplaced, but in order to accurately discern the course of events, one must consider the grey areas of conflict, and that is what is encapsulated here in the comparison of the writings of Burke and Paine.

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