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978-1-108-04545-2 - Rights of Man: Being an Answer to Mr. Burke's Attack on the French Revolution

Thomas Paine

Frontmatter

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Rights of Man

A major actor in the American Revolution, English intellectual Thomas Paine (1737–1809) is remembered especially for his pamphlet *Common Sense* (1776; also reissued in this series), which advocates America's independence from Great Britain. An immediate best-seller, it sold over 100,000 copies in three months. Paine was a dedicated reformer who also lent his support to the French Revolution. First published in 1791, this book was sparked by the publication of Edmund Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790), a direct condemnation of the French uprising; and the fourth edition of this remarkable contribution to political philosophy is reissued here. In a passionate rebuttal of Burke's position, Paine argues that revolution is legitimate against a government that fails to protect its people and their essential rights. Extremely influential in its own day, this book develops a critique of authoritarian governments that remains relevant today.

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Rights of Man

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RIGHTS OF MAN:

BEING AN

ANSWER TO MR. BURKE'S ATTACK

ON THE

FRENCH REVOLUTION.

FOURTH EDITION.

BY

THOMAS PAINE,

SECRETARY FOR FOREIGN AFFAIRS TO CONGRESS IN THE
AMERICAN WAR, AND

AUTHOR OF THE WORKS INTITLED "*COMMON SENSE*,"
AND "*A LETTER TO THE ABBE RAYNAL*."

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TO

GEORGE WASHINGTON,

PRESIDENT OF THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA.

S I R,

I PRESENT you a small Treatise in defence of those Principles of Freedom which your exemplary Virtue hath so eminently contributed to establish.—That the Rights of Man may become as universal as your Benevolence can wish, and that you may enjoy the Happiness of seeing the New World regenerate the Old, is the Prayer of

S I R,

Your much obliged, and

Obedient humble Servant,

THOMAS PAINE.

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P R E F A C E
TO THE
E N G L I S H E D I T I O N .

FROM the part Mr. Burke took in the American Revolution, it was natural that I should consider him a friend to mankind; and as our acquaintance commenced on that ground, it would have been more agreeable to me to have had cause to continue in that opinion, than to change it.

At the time Mr. Burke made his violent speech last winter in the English Parliament against the French Revolution and the National Assembly, I was in Paris, and had written him, but a short time before, to inform him how prosperously matters were going on. Soon after this, I saw his advertisement of the Pamphlet he intended to publish: As the attack was to be made in a language but little studied, and less understood, in France, and as every thing suffers by translation, I promised some of the friends of the Revolution in that country, that whenever Mr. Burke's Pamphlet came forth, I would

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would answer it. This appeared to me the more necessary to be done, when I saw the flagrant misrepresentations which Mr. Burke's Pamphlet contains; and that while it is an outrageous abuse on the French Revolution, and the principles of Liberty, it is an imposition on the rest of the world.

I am the more astonished and disappointed at this conduct in Mr. Burke, as (from the circumstance I am going to mention), I had formed other expectations.

I had seen enough of the miseries of war, to wish it might never more have existence in the world, and that some other mode might be found out to settle the differences that should occasionally arise in the neighbourhood of nations. This certainly might be done if Courts were disposed to set honestly about it, or if countries were enlightened enough not to be made the dupes of Courts. The people of America had been bred up in the same prejudices against France, which at that time characterized the people of England; but experience and an acquaintance with the French Nation have most effectually shown to the Americans the falsehood of those prejudices; and I do not believe that a more cordial and confidential intercourse exists between any two countries than between America and France.

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When I came to France in the Spring of 1787, the Archbishop of Thoulouſe was then Miniſter, and at that time highly eſteemed. I became much acquainted with the private Secretary of that Miniſter, a man of an enlarged benevolent heart ; and found, that his ſentiments and my own perfectly agreed with reſpect to the madneſs of war, and the wretched impolicy of two nations, like England and France, continually worrying each other, to no other end than that of a mutual increaſe of burdens and taxes. That I might be aſſured I had not miſunderſtood him, nor he me, I put the ſubſtance of our opinions into writing, and ſent it to him ; ſubjoining a requeſt, that if I ſhould ſee among the people of England, any diſpoſition to cultivate a better underſtanding between the two nations than had hitherto prevailed, how far I might be authorized to ſay that the ſame diſpoſition prevailed on the part of France ? He answered me by letter in the moſt unreſerved manner, and that not for himſelf only, but for the Miniſter, with whoſe knowledge the letter was declared to be written.

I put this letter into the hands of Mr. Burke almoſt three years ago, and left it with him, where it ſtill remains ; hoping, and at the ſame time naturally expecting, from the opinion

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nion I had conceived of him, that he would find some opportunity of making a good use of it, for the purpose of removing those errors and prejudices, which two neighbouring nations, from the want of knowing each other, had entertained, to the injury of both.

When the French Revolution broke out, it certainly afforded to Mr. Burke an opportunity of doing some good, had he been disposed to it; instead of which, no sooner did he see the old prejudices wearing away, than he immediately began sowing the seeds of a new inveteracy, as if he were afraid that England and France would cease to be enemies. That there are men in all countries who get their living by war, and by keeping up the quarrels of Nations, is as shocking as it is true; but when those who are concerned in the government of a country, make it their study to sow discord, and cultivate prejudices between Nations, it becomes the more unpardonable.

With respect to a paragraph in this Work alluding to Mr. Burke's having a pension, the report has been some time in circulation, at least two months; and as a person is often the last to hear what concerns him the most to know, I have mentioned it, that Mr. Burke may have an opportunity of contradicting the rumour, if he thinks proper.

THOMAS PAINE.