

OUTLINE FOR TV SHOW ON
“THOMAS PAINE AND THE PROMISE OF AMERICA”

1. Why did you write a biography of Tom Paine? What about him, his career, and his writings moved you to do so?
2. You are a self described man of the left. Do you see Paine as a sort of guide or symbol for the left side of American politics, social thinking and action throughout American history? Does Paine represent the question of living up to our ideals?
3. Yet Paine has been adopted and used by people on the right in American politics too. Explain this.
4. Discuss FDR’s use of Paine in his speech of February 1942. (P. 194.)
5. Describe Paine’s initial working class background in England.
6. Explain how and why Paine initially came to America -- his connection with Franklin -- and what he initially did here.
7. How did he come to write *Common Sense*, what were its major points, especially regarding the ties between Britain and America and the fact that inequality and oppression were built into the English system, what was its impact on independence, how many copies did it sell and what would that translate to in terms of today’s 300 million population, and who did people think it was written by?
8. What were The American Crisis Papers, especially the first one? Describe the circumstances under which the first one was written, its impact, the numbers of people who read it, the use Washington made of it, and its unforgettable opening language, which appears on the screen.
9. What did Paine do in America after writing the first of The American Crisis papers?
- 10(a). Describe Paine’s views of the common man and what he is capable of.
 - (b). Explain the difference in views, motivating forces and leadership between 1776

(the Declaration of Independence) and 1787-88 (the Constitution).

A. Explain Lincoln's view of this difference and of the Declaration being our true founding document.

B. Describe the similarities in views and writing styles of Paine and Lincoln, especially their views on such matters as the labor theory of value, egalitarianism, commercial development and a vision of continuous progress.

(c). Was Jefferson the founder whose views were closest to Paine's, even though Jefferson too thought the aristocrats would rule? (The few versus the many.) Contrast Paine with Hamilton and Adams.

A. Describe the meaning and impact of the election of 1800.

B. Is there a sense, in your opinion, in which America has always been divided into two classes, despite all our talk of a classless society?

11(a). Describe Paine's religious views, his deism. Tell what deism is.

A. Being a deist was regarded in those days as in effect being an atheist, wasn't it?

(b). Who else in America held such views at the time? And who among the prominent, if anyone, dared to express them openly?

(c). Was Lincoln a deist? If so, why did he not write or speak about it?

(d). Explain the power of religion and of the long existing churches at the time. They held this power despite the "non-believism" of various founders, right?

A. Explain the more democratic views in those days of the "new" religions, like the Methodists and the Baptists.

i. One gets the feeling that much of the argument and debate of the time, including the political argument and debate, were fought out in terms of religion. Is that to any extent accurate?

(e). What were the major point or points that Paine made in *The Age of Reason* (which,

I gather, became a best seller in the United States, as had *Common Sense* and *The American Crisis*). (How did he come to write it?)

A. It was this, his major work on religion, that caused Paine to be shunned and ignored for 100 years of history, wasn't it? This further shows the (hypocritical?) grip of "Godism" in American life, does it not?

i. For a long time people did not differentiate, did they, between Paine's works on politics and his works on religion? Yet both were united, weren't they, by a fundamental rejection of authoritarianism, unthinking acceptance of received wisdom, and rejection of the prevailing powers that be.

12(a). Because of his works on politics, there have been those who said -- including John Adams, right? -- that Paine's was the single most influential voice of the Revolutionary era, right? To what extent do you agree?

(b). Even though his views on religion caused Paine to largely be pushed aside for 100 years or so, at least by the powers that be (who sometimes would use his ideas but would not mention his name (explain this)), there were always those who looked to Paine's writings for inspiration. Briefly explain this -- briefly explain how labor unions, antislavery people, suffrage groups, new town groups (e.g., New Harmony, Neshoba) would look to Paine.

13(a). Explain why Paine went back to England and France, i.e., his attempt to raise money for an iron bridge.

(b). Explain how and why he got involved with the French Revolution. (The oppression in Great Britain and France, etc.). He saw the French Revolution, didn't he, as carrying on the work, the world-altering revolution in human affairs, begun by the American Revolution (and once wrote George Washington that having a share in two revolutions is to have lived to some purpose)?

(c). Explain how he wrote *The Rights of Man* as a reply to Edmund Burke. Explain why Burke came to write his great tract, and what it has represented historically. Explain what Paine said in rebuttal. Explain how many people read what Paine said and what this number would be in modern terms.

(d). Describe Paine's political "career" in France: e.g., his becoming a member of the legislature, what he said about executing the king, how and why he fell into bad

odor but was afraid to leave for America because of the possibility that he would be captured by a Royal Navy ship and taken to England where he was a wanted man, how he escaped the guillotine only by freakish luck, Jefferson's later offer of passage on an American naval vessel.

14. Describe what Paine's life was like after he came back to the United States, his death in 1809, what ultimately happened to his body (how it got lost), and the still unfulfilled Congressional Resolution of 1992 to build a memorial to him.
- A. If there were to be such a memorial, it should, like Lincoln's and Jefferson's, have inscriptions of some of his greatest words, shouldn't it? They would likely include some of the following, which we are putting up on the screen. Explain the meaning, reasons behind, circumstances of each:
- i. "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. What we obtain too cheap, we esteem too lightly -- 'Tis dearness only that gives everything its value." (pp. 57-58)
 - ii. "The cause of America is in a great measure the cause of all mankind . . . We have it in our power to begin the world over again. The birth-day of a new world is at hand." (P. 50)
 - iii. "The sun never shined on a greater cause." (P. 42)
 - iv. "I call not upon a few, but upon all . . . Say not that thousands are gone, turn out your tens of thousands; throw not the burden of the day upon Providence, but *show your works*, that God may bless you." (Pp. 58-59)
 - v. "My country is the world. To do good is my religion." (P. 204)
 - vi. "Let them call me rebel." (P. 59)
 - vii. "Those who expect to reap the blessings of liberty, must like men, undergo the fatigues of supporting it." (P. 60)
 - viii. "I look through the present trouble to a time of tranquility when we

shall have it in our power to set an example to the world.” (P. 60)

15. Paine was ahead of himself, sometimes hundreds of years ahead of himself, on a whole variety of subjects, wasn't he? E.g., public education, a welfare system, the worldwide triumph of democracy, the rejection of ecclesiastical authority.
16. You feel that over the course of years Paine's views have often, even generally, not carried the day in the United States. Rather, conservative views have prevailed. Why do you think that has occurred? Why have people preferred conservatism as a general rule?
17. What do you yourself think Paine's views would require us to do today?
18. It is said that, when asked what he thought was the effect of the French Revolution, Chou En Lai replied that it was still too early to tell. Do you feel that way about the American Revolution? About both the American *and* French Revolutions? About Paine's views?
19. What would be your view of a claim that *Common Sense* and *Uncle Tom's Cabin* were the two American writings with the greatest impact of any in our history?
20. There are a whole slew of additional facts, ideas, questions, etc. that could be fitted into the foregoing questions and/or their answers. To the extent you feel it desirable, you might want to bring them up (or bring up other, similar points). They include:
 - A. It is often said by conservatives that religion is essential in order for people to be honest and moral. Do you agree? Why should it be so?
 - B. Explain the difference between Webster and Lincoln in terms of 1776 versus 1787-88 in terms of a new beginning as opposed to calcification or ancestor worship.
 - C. The effect in America of the Paris Commune of 1871 (and what the Commune was).
 - D. Your view -- and the reasons underlying it -- that America has never lost its radicalism. (Isn't that sort of a hard view to sustain?)
 - E. Your view that American socialists owe more to the radicals of 1776 than

to European thinkers and doers.

- F. The American plutocracy.
- G. The survival of the fittest doctrine. (It is odd, isn't it, that the concept of the fittest seems never to have included the most honest, the most moral, the most reasonable, the most pacific?)
- H. Paine's giving away of his royalties.
- I. The English tradition of crowd actions, which served as a check on the power of the aristocratic class.
- J. The class structure of the colonies, and the fact that the issue of rule by Great Britain versus home rule also implicated the question of who would rule at home.
- K. Did John Adams say, before Paine, some of the things that Paine later said far more beautifully?
- L. The idea that the American Revolution was one from below, and American aristocrats eventually had to go along, even lead, or else lose power altogether.
- M. Paine was *in favor* of commercial development and of some of the instrumentalities needed for it, e.g., banks, immigration.
- N. Paine's belief that it is government which produces inequality, and what I take to be your belief that it is the market which does so.
- O. Explain who James Cheetham was and what he did.
- P. The effect of the Silas Doane affair.
- Q. The hope Paine provided to generations of European radicals.
- R. The incredible disparities that had arisen in American life by the 1890s.