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COMMON SENSE

2027

ADDRESSED TO THE

INHABITANTS OF AMERICA,

On the following interesting
SUBJECTS.

I. Of the Origin and Design of Government in General, with concise Remarks on the Present Arrangement.

II. Of Corruptors, Self-Dealers and Hereditary Succession.

III. Thoughts on the Present State of American Affairs.

IV. Of the Present Ability of America, with some miscellaneous Reflections.

Man knows no Master save creating HEAVEN,
Or those whom choice and common good ordain.
— James Thomson, as quoted on Paine's title page, 1776

Written by a Common Citizen

A citizens' paraphrase of Thomas Paine's Common Sense (1776),
in which the King and the Crown are replaced by the Corruptors and Self-Dealers.

#NoThirdButton

On corruption, there is no third button. Take a stand.

Every member of Congress votes with three buttons: Yea, Nay or Present. On corruption, "Present" isn't an answer.

nothirdbutton.org | November 25, 2026

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A Note Before Reading

In January 1776, Thomas Paine published a short pamphlet that persuaded ordinary colonists of something their leaders had not yet dared to say. The problem was not one bad minister or one bad law, but a power that sat above the law itself. No amount of petitioning would ever put it back under the law.

This paraphrase follows Paine's four sections and his line of argument, in modern language. Wherever Paine wrote "the King," "the Crown" or "monarchy," this edition reads the Corruptors and Self-Dealers: the two sides of every corrupt bargain. A few of Paine's own lines are kept word for word and marked as his.

Who the Corruptors are. Anyone who pays a public official to get something from the public: the contractor who wants the contract, the regulated interest that wants the rule changed, the party who wants a case dropped or a pardon granted, the foreign government that wants a favor, and the future employer who rewards the official afterward with a lucrative job. They seldom pay directly. They pay through relatives, consultants, nonprofits and shell companies, and they call the payment a gift, a fee or an investment.

Who the Self-Dealers are. Officials who use public office for private gain: the one who trades stocks on what he knows or decides, accepts gifts from those with business before him, takes foreign money or cashes in on the way out the door. The Self-Dealer needs no Corruptor at all. He pays himself.

Who the Go-Betweens are. The fixers, middlemen and front groups who arrange, carry or hide the payment: the shell company, the PAC or nonprofit used as a conduit, the lobbyist or lawyer who makes sure no fingerprints are left. They let the Corruptor pay and the Self-Dealer collect while everyone claims clean hands.

Who they are not. Not the wealthy, not business, not the citizen who argues openly for a cause or gives to a candidate she believes in. The Corruptors and Self-Dealers belong to no party, industry or branch. They are found wherever the rules let them in.

What this is not. It is not an attack on any person, party or branch. Paine named his king; this pamphlet names no person, because the arrangement, not any individual, is the problem. On corruption, there is no third button.

Introduction

Perhaps the ideas in these pages are not yet popular enough to be welcomed. A long habit of not thinking a thing wrong gives it the look of being right, and at first it raises a loud cry in defense of custom. But the uproar soon passes. Time makes more converts than reason.

> *"...a long habit of not thinking a thing wrong, gives it a superficial appearance of being right..."* — Paine, 1776

We have lived so long with officials trading stocks they regulate, accepting gifts from people with business before them and cashing in when they leave office that many of us have stopped seeing it. We call it "how Washington works," as the colonists once called the Crown "how the world works." When people are pushed by the abuse into asking whether the arrangement is legitimate at all, they have every right to ask. The question does not belong to the powerful. It belongs to the citizens who pay for the government and live under it.

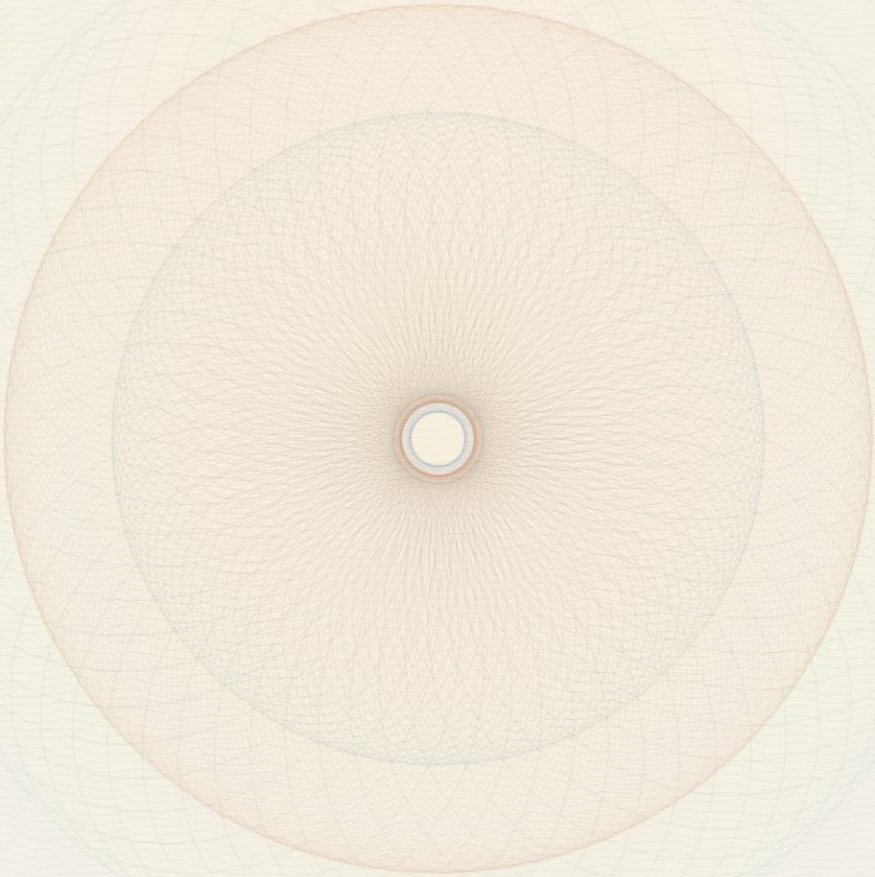
The bill comes to your kitchen table. Do not mistake this for a quarrel in Washington that never reaches your door. Corruption is a tax no one voted for, and every family pays it. You pay it at the checkout, when contracts, exemptions and rules are sold and the cost of the favor is built into the price. Around the world, an estimated 10 to 25 percent of a public contract's value is lost to corruption. You pay it at tax time, when rigged contracts and favors for the connected are paid for with your money. Federal auditors estimate Washington loses $233 billion to $521 billion a year to fraud, 3 to 7 cents of every dollar it spends. You pay it in your premiums and at the pharmacy, when the officials who write the rules own a stake in the companies they regulate. You pay it on Main Street, when honest businesses lose to those who pay for access. You pay it in your safety, when rules can be bought off. And you pay it at the ballot box, when a check counts for more than your vote. Republican, Democrat or independent, the bill comes to the same kitchen table.

And it costs all of us. The deeper cost is shared by everyone. Corruption drains our faith in government: when people believe officials are for sale, they stop trusting that any law, ruling or election result is honest. It kills the belief that hard work pays: when connections beat performance, people stop believing that excellence is rewarded, and many stop trying. It teaches contempt for the law: if those at the top do not follow the rules, why should anyone, and so cheating spreads downward, in taxes, in business, everywhere. And it divides us: cynicism feeds anger, and each side assumes the other is the corrupt one. One set of rules for everyone is the ground on which both sides can stand.

In the following pages the author has avoided everything personal. No official, party or donor is singled out for praise or blame. The worthy need no flattery, and those who profit from the present arrangement will not be changed by insults. The cause of America is, in great

measure, the cause of all who want a government that cannot be bought. Everyone who loves fairness has a stake in it, whatever their party.

Who wrote this matters little. What matters is whether it is true.



I. Of the Origin and Design of Government in General, with Concise Remarks on the Present Arrangement

Some writers have so confused society with government that they leave little or no distinction between them. But they are different things with different origins. Society is produced by our wants, and government by our wickedness. Society promotes our happiness by uniting our affections. Government restrains our vices. One encourages, the other punishes. Society in every state is a blessing. Government, even in its best state, is a necessary evil, and in its worst an intolerable one.

Picture a small number of people settled in a remote place, unconnected with the rest of the world. They soon find they need each other, and form a society. As their numbers grow, they choose some of their own number to manage the common business, trusting them to act as the whole would act if all could be present. And the wise settlers set one rule above all others: those who are chosen serve the common good, not themselves. A steward who sells the village's interests for private gain has broken the only promise that made him a steward.

Here is the origin and the purpose of government: to secure freedom and safety, with the least expense and the greatest benefit. And here is the test of any government: does it serve those who chose it, or those who pay it on the side?

Now apply that test to the present arrangement.

Our Constitution is a far better design than the English one Paine dissected. It has three branches, each meant to check the others, and all answerable at last to the law. In design, it is sound. But in practice a fourth power has seated itself above all three, written into no article and elected by no one. That power belongs to the Corruptors and the Self-Dealers: those who pay officials, and officials who pay themselves.

Consider the plainest fact of all. The criminal law that stops roughly two million ordinary federal employees from acting on their own financial interests does not reach the President, the Vice President, Members of Congress or federal judges. A clerk cannot accept a $25 lunch from a contractor, while the people at the very top live under far looser gift rules, riddled with exceptions. A clerk's stock holdings are restricted where they conflict with the job; Members of Congress may trade individual stocks and need only report it, and many report late. The Supreme Court adopted a code of conduct in 2023 with no means of enforcing it. And recent Supreme Court decisions have narrowed the federal bribery laws, so that some payments made after an official act, and favors that stop short of a formal decision, are no longer clearly crimes.

Paine observed that the King of England was placed above the law that bound his subjects, and that this alone was enough to condemn the arrangement. We have rebuilt the same

arrangement in miniature. Those who make, enforce and interpret the law live by looser rules than those who merely carry it out.

We are told that the branches check one another: that Congress checks the President, the courts check Congress and the ethics offices check them all. But a check is only as strong as the one who holds it. When every branch is exempt from the rules, when each polices only itself, and when the corruptor faces no penalty at all, the checks are written by the party being checked. Paine laughed at the claim that the English Commons checked the King, when the King could buy the very men meant to check him. The same joke applies today.

The simpler a thing is, the less likely it is to be disordered, and the easier to repair. Our ethics rules are a patchwork, branch by branch and exception by exception, so complex that when something goes wrong no one can say whose rule applies. That confusion is not an accident. It is where corruption lives.

II. Of Corruptors, Self-Dealers and Hereditary Succession

All citizens are equal in the eye of the law. That is the founding promise of the republic, and it can be disturbed only by some later circumstance. Some are richer and some poorer, through thrift and luck, effort and misfortune. Wealth is not, in itself, the problem.

But there is another and greater distinction for which no natural or moral reason can be given: the division of Americans into those who are bound by the law and those who stand above it. How a class of officials came to be exempt from rules that bind their own clerks, as if they were a separate species, is worth asking. So is whether that exemption is good for the country or bad for it.

Ask how the Corruptors and Self-Dealers first acquired their throne. Not by any vote of the people. Not by merit. It was purchased, one favor at a time, and then the purchase was given gentler names: a gift, a speaking fee, a consulting arrangement, an investment, a job offer. If we could strip away the covering of custom and trace any corrupt bargain back to its first beginning, we would find it was struck in a quiet room by someone who wanted something from the public and was willing to pay an official to get it. It would not bear the light of day, and that is why so much of it is kept from the light.

The Self-Dealer's throne is older still, and simpler. He needs no one to buy him. He sits at the table where the decisions are made, learns what is coming before the public does and trades on it. He accepts the trip, the gift and the favor, and calls them courtesies. And when he leaves office, he collects from those whose business he handled. The public pays for his salary, his staff and his secrets, and he sells all three.

Paine drew on Scripture. When the people of Israel, grateful to Gideon, offered to make him and his sons their rulers, Gideon refused: he would not rule over them, nor would his son. The lesson for us: the honest official is the one who refuses the offer. Every public servant who has turned down the gift, declined the trade or walked away from the payday has done Gideon's work, and the country owes them more than it has ever paid.

Bad as corruption is in one official, it is worse once it becomes the custom of the office. Paine's sharpest point was that even if one king was wise, no one could guarantee his heir would be. Nature herself, he joked, ridicules hereditary right by so often giving mankind "an ass for a lion."

> *"...giving mankind an ASS FOR A LION."* — Paine, 1776

So it is with the Corruptors and Self-Dealers. The loopholes written for one generation of officials are inherited by the next. The revolving door spins the same few people from public office to private payroll and back again, so that whoever wins an election, the same interests are waiting at the exit. Nobody voted for this succession. The people never consented to be

governed by officials who are interviewing for their next job with the companies they regulate today.

The defenders of hereditary monarchy said it preserved the nation from civil wars. Paine answered that England had suffered dozens of wars and rebellions over the succession. The defenders of the present arrangement say that stricter rules would drive good people from public service and that the system mostly polices itself. Look around. Trust in every branch of government has fallen, and each new scandal is met with a promise to review the rules and a quiet return to business. That is not stability. It is decay with a press release.

In short, Corruptors and Self-Dealers have always ruled wherever the rulers were above the law, in the form of crowns before and favors now. The cause is the same and so is the cure: put every officeholder back under the law.

III. Thoughts on the Present State of American Affairs

> *"In the following pages I offer nothing more than simple facts, plain arguments, and common sense..."* — Paine, 1776

The reader is asked only to set aside prejudice and party, to let reason and feeling decide for themselves and to think broadly, beyond the present day.

Volumes have been written about ethics in government. People of every party have proposed rules, passed a few and watched them weakened. The period of debate is closing. The people have already decided: roughly nine in ten Americans, Republicans, Democrats and independents alike, agree that officials should not profit from public office. Almost nothing else in American life commands that kind of agreement.

The sun never shone on a cause of greater worth. This is not the affair of a city, a state or a party. It is the affair of the whole country, and of every generation that will inherit what we tolerate now. Corruption comes first because it is the referee. Every other question the country argues over, from taxes to health care to defense, is decided by officials. If the referee can be paid, every game is rigged. Fix the referee first.

Let us take up the arguments of those who say we should make our peace with the present arrangement.

"It's legal." That is the problem, not the defense. Much of what the public plainly sees as corruption is legal only because those who benefit from it wrote the exemptions, or because the courts have read the bribery laws narrowly. The law can be fixed by those it was meant to bind. That is what Congress is for.

"They disclose it." A confession is not a cure. Reporting a stock trade after the fact, often late, does not undo the conflict. A clerk is not allowed to have the conflict at all.

"Good people won't serve under strict rules." The same was said of every public office before every ethics rule ever written. Two million federal employees already live under these rules, and the government has not run out of good people. Anyone who will serve only if they can trade stocks or accept gifts is telling us why the rules are needed.

"You can't bind another branch." Congress already sets the rules for federal judges, the executive branch and itself. It has simply exempted those at the top. The design must respect the separation of powers, and it can. Respecting the separation of powers was never meant to exempt anyone from the law.

"This is aimed at the other party." Only if it names anyone. The Freedom from Corruption Act names no person and no party, applies only to conduct after it becomes law

and binds every future officeholder, whoever wins. It is a rule for the office, not a weapon against a person.

"Fix it a little at a time." For decades we have done exactly that. A stock rule here, a gift rule there, each for one branch, each hollowed out by the next exception. A rule for one branch sends the corruption to the other two. Patching the hull while leaving the hole is not repair.

Paine wrote that "the blood of the slain, the weeping voice of nature cries, 'TIS TIME TO PART.'" Our remedy is a peaceful one, and better for it. The ballot, the petition and the law are our instruments. But the conclusion is the same: the time for half-measures is past. It is time to break the hold of the Corruptors and Self-Dealers on the people who govern us.

What would that look like? Paine proposed that the colonies meet and write a Continental Charter, binding every officer of government and securing freedom and property to all. Our equivalent is a single law, H.R. 1 and S. 1 of the new Congress: the Freedom from Corruption Act. In plain English, it would do ten things:

1. **Same rules for everyone.** The conflict-of-interest law that binds ordinary federal employees would finally cover the President, the Vice President, Members of Congress and federal judges.

2. **No stock trading.** These officials, their spouses and dependent children could not own or trade individual stocks.

3. **No gifts from anyone who wants something.** No gifts, trips, meals or favors from anyone with business before them, Supreme Court justices included.

4. **Everything public, fast.** Any permitted trade or gift posted online within 72 hours, free and searchable.

5. **No foreign money without a vote.** Payments or deals from foreign governments reported, and approved by Congress only by recorded vote.

6. **A real ethics code for the Supreme Court,** with written explanations when a justice steps aside and an independent inspector for complaints.

7. **The revolving door closed.** Former Presidents, Members of Congress and Cabinet secretaries could never be paid to lobby; other senior officials would wait five years.

8. **An independent ethics enforcer** that no party controls, for all three branches, for conduct after the law takes effect.

9. **Everyone in the bribe goes to jail.** The corruptor, and every go-between who arranges, carries or hides the bribe, faces the same severe penalties as the official who is corrupted.

10. Nothing else attached. One subject only. No riders, no election rules, no partisan add-ons.

Most of these pieces are already written, in separate bills, by Republicans and Democrats. Congress has only to put them together.

And then Paine wrote the line that answers every objection, and needs no paraphrase at all:

> *"...in America THE LAW IS KING. For as in absolute governments the King is law, so in free countries the law ought to be King; and there ought to be no other."* — Paine, 1776

Let us say it plainly for our own time. Where the Corruptors and Self-Dealers rule, the powerful are above the law. In a free country the law rules, and the President, the Congress and the Court obey it like everyone else.

Every member of the new Congress will have three buttons in front of them: Yea, Nay and Present. On most questions, a member may honestly vote either way, and may sometimes vote Present. On corruption, there is no third button. Take a stand.

IV. Of the Present Ability of America, with Some Miscellaneous Reflections

Paine argued that the moment for independence was not some future day but the present one, because the colonies were strong and their debts were small. The same is true of us.

The moment is now. A new Congress convenes on January 3, 2027. The numbers H.R. 1 and S. 1 are given out once, and they tell the country what a Congress cares about most. There will never be a cleaner opening: no member has yet cast a vote in it, no deal has been struck and no exception has been carved.

The people are united. On this question, and almost no other, roughly nine in ten Americans agree. Paine marveled that thirteen quarrelsome colonies could join in one cause. Ours is a country of quarrelsome parties that have already joined in this one, if only their representatives would follow.

The bill is already written, in pieces. Stock-trading bans, gift rules, Supreme Court ethics codes, revolving-door limits and independent enforcers have all been drafted, many of them by members of both parties. No one has to invent the cure. Congress only has to assemble it.

The tools are in our hands. Paine counted ships and timber and gunpowder. We count something better: every citizen can read the disclosures, follow the trades, share the facts and sign the petition from a phone.

The cost of delay grows. Paine warned that every year of delay made the break harder, because the Crown's hold would deepen. So with corruption. Each scandal that passes without consequence becomes the new normal, and each exception becomes a precedent for the next.

The example begins at home. As Maine goes, so goes the nation. A state with a mixed delegation and four qualified parties can show the country that this is about honesty and fairness, not politics.

Paine closed with four reasons why nothing short of independence would do. We close with four reasons why nothing short of one comprehensive act will do.

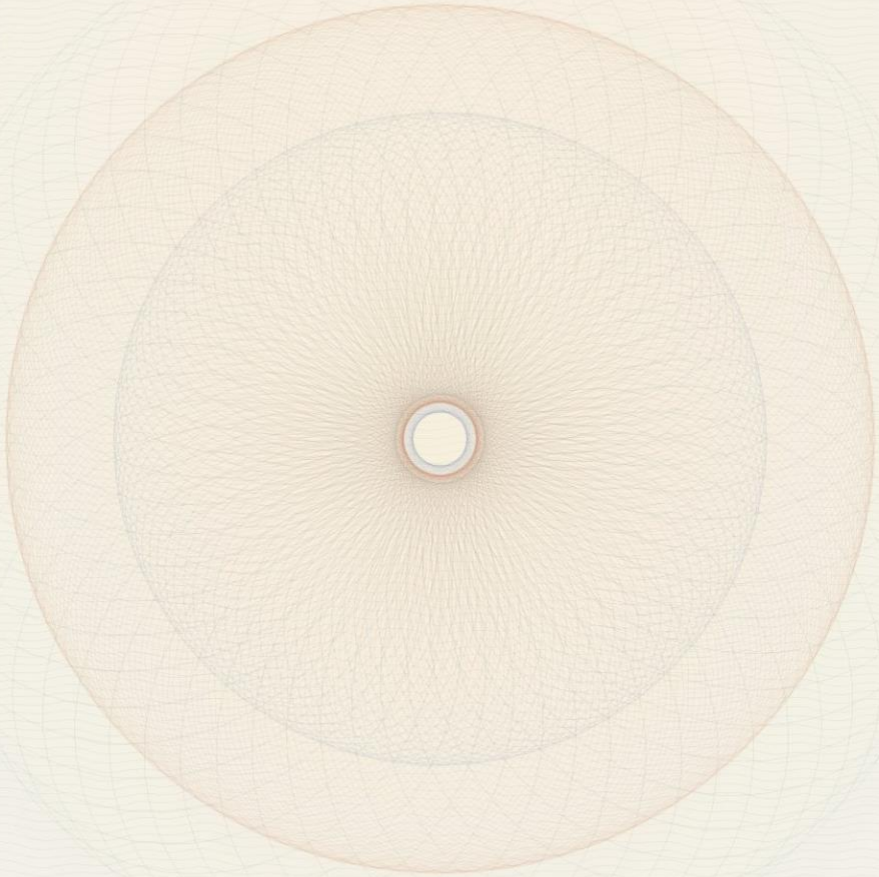
First, a rule that binds one branch only sends the corruption to the others. All three branches must be bound together, or none truly is.

Second, a rule that punishes only the official lets the corruptor buy the next one. The one who offers, and the one who carries the bribe, must face the same law as the one who accepts.

Third, a rule with no independent enforcer is only a suggestion. Those who are watched cannot be trusted to watch themselves.

Fourth, a rule that names enemies will be fought as a weapon. It must name no person and no party, and apply equally to every future officeholder, whoever wins.

These steps may at first seem strange and difficult, but, like all the other steps we have already passed over, they will in a little time become familiar and agreeable. Until the law is king, and not the Corruptors and Self-Dealers, the business of government will feel like a game in which the people are only spectators. Let the new Congress take the first step. Let H.R. 1 and S. 1 be the act that makes the law king.



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Appendix: To the Honest Officials, and to Those Who Would Rather Not Pay

Paine closed his pamphlet with an address to the Quakers, who had published a statement defending the Crown. He did not insult them; he took their own principles and showed that those principles led to independence.

In the same spirit, this pamphlet ends with two addresses.

To the honest officials. Most of you came to serve, not to profit. You live under the suspicion your dishonest colleagues have earned, and the looser rules at the top insult your own integrity. A law that binds everyone equally is your protection. It is the clearest way to prove what you already are.

To those on the other side of the bargain. Many of you did not build this system. You pay because your competitors pay, and you fear what happens if you stop. You would rather win a contract on merit than on access. A law that sends both sides of the bribe to jail frees you from the bargain as surely as it frees the public. Support it, and compete on the merits again.

This petition is against no one. It is for the rules every honest person would choose if no one else were breaking them. Sign it. The country will be grateful, and so, in time, will your conscience.

Published by #NoThirdButton, a nonpartisan citizens' petition launched by a private citizen.

On corruption, there is no third button. Take a stand. Sign at nothirdbutton.org.

— END —

Sources: The procurement figure is a UN Office on Drugs and Crime and OECD estimate for public contracts worldwide, not a U.S. figure; the fraud figure is from GAO-24-105833 (April 2024), based on fiscal years 2018–2022. The double standard and the ten points follow the #NoThirdButton pitch and the Freedom from Corruption Act plain-English summary (November 25, 2026), which cite 18 U.S.C. §§ 202(c) and 208 and the Supreme Court's 2023 code of conduct. The "nine in ten" figure follows the campaign's verified polling (Gallup, 89%). Paine's own words are quoted from the public-domain 1776 text. A discussion draft; the bill text governs. Not legal advice.