On July 17, 1980, Ronald Reagan stood before the Republican national convention and the American people to accept his party's nomination for president of the United States. Most of what he said that evening was to be expected from a Republican. He spoke of the nation's past and its "shared values." He attacked the incumbent Carter administration and promised to lower taxes, limit government, and expand national defense. And, invoking God, he invited Americans to join him in a "crusade to make America great again."

Yet Reagan had much more than restoration in mind. He intended to transform American political life and discourse. He had constructed a new Republican alliance—a New Right—of corporate elites, Christian evangelicals, conservative and neoconservative intellectuals, and a host of right-wing interest groups in hopes of undoing the liberal politics and programs of the past 40 years, reversing the cultural changes and developments of the 1960s, and establishing a new national governing consensus.
All this was well-known. But that night, Reagan startled many by calling forth the revolutionary, Thomas Paine, and quoting Paine's words of 1776, from the pamphlet Common Sense: "We have it in our power to begin the world over again?"

American politicians have always drawn upon the words and deeds of the Founders to bolster their own positions. Nevertheless, in quoting Paine, Reagan broke emphatically with longstanding conservative practice. Paine was not like George Washington, Benjamin Franklin, or Thomas Jefferson. Paine had never really been admitted to the most select ranks of the Founding Fathers. Recent presidents, mostly Democrats, had referred to him, but even the liberals had generally refrained from quoting Paine the revolutionary. When they called upon his life and labors, they usually conjured up Paine the patriot, citing the line with which, during the darkest days of the war for independence, he opened the first of his Crisis papers: "These are the times that try men's souls."

Conservatives certainly were not supposed to speak favorably of Paine, and for 200 years, they had not. In fact, they had for generations publicly despised Paine and scorned his memory. And one can understand why: Endowing American experience with democratic impulse and aspiration, Paine had turned Americans into radicals, and we have remained radicals at heart ever since.

However, for more than a quarter-century, we have allowed the Republican right to appropriate the nation's history, define what it means to be an American, and corral American political imagination. It is time for the left to recover its fundamental principles and perspectives and reinvigorate Americans' democratic impulse and aspiration. And we must start by reclaiming, and reconnecting with, Paine's memory and legacy and the progressive tradition he inspired and encouraged. We must redeem Paine's revolutionary vision, his confidence in his fellow citizens, and his belief in America's extraordinary purpose and promise. Doing so will help us to remember not only what we stand in opposition to but, all the more, what we stand in opposition for.

Contributing fundamentally to the American Revolution, the French Revolution, and the struggles of Britain's Industrial Revolution, Thomas Paine was one of the most remarkable political writers of the modern world and the greatest radical of a radical age. Yet this son of an English artisan did not become a radical until his arrival in America in late 1774, at the age of 37. Even then he had never expected such things to happen. But struck by America's startling contradictions, magnificent possibilities, and wonderful energies, and moved by the spirit and determination of its people to resist
British authority, he dedicated himself to the American cause. Through his Common Sense pamphlet and the Crisis papers, he inspired Americans not only to declare their independence and create a republic; he also emboldened them to turn their colonial rebellion into a revolutionary war, defined the new nation in a democratically expansive and progressive fashion, and articulated an American identity charged with exceptional purpose and promise.

Five feet 10 inches tall, with a full head of dark hair and striking blue eyes, Paine was inquisitive, gregarious, and compassionate, yet strong-willed, combative, and ever ready to argue about and fight for the good and the right. The story is told of a dinner gathering at which Paine, on hearing his mentor Franklin observe, 'Where liberty is, there is my country," cried out, "Where liberty is not, there is my country!" A workingman before an intellectual and author, Paine developed his revolutionary beliefs and ideas not simply from scholarly study but all the more from experience-experience that convinced him that the so-called lower orders, not just the highborn and propertied, had the capacity both to comprehend the world and to govern it. And addressing his arguments to those who traditionally were excluded from political debate and deliberation, not merely to the governing classes, he helped to transform the very idea of politics and the political nation. At war's end Paine was a popular hero, known by all as "Common Sense!" And yet he was not. 00"-.i finished. To him, America possessed extraordinary political, / economic, and cultural potential. But he did not see that potential as belonging to Americans alone. -o2 T He comprehended the nation's - .;: history in universal terms-"The cause of America is the cause - of all mankind"-and believed that the actions of his fellow citizens-to-be were filled with world-historic significance. "The sun never shined on a cause of greater worth;" he wrote. "'Tis not the affair of a city, a county, a province, or a kingdom but of a continent-of at least one-eighth part of the habitable globe. 'Tis not the concern of a day, a year, or an age; posterity are virtually involved in the contest, and will be more or less affected even to the end of time, by the proceedings now!'

America's struggle had turned Paine into an inveterate champion of liberty, equality, and democracy, and after the war he went on to apply his revolutionary pen to struggles in Britain and France. In Rights of Man, he defended the French Revolution of 1789 against conservative attack, challenged Britain's monarchical and aristocratic polity and social order, and outlined a series of public-welfare initiatives to address the material inequalities that made life oppressive for working people and the poor. In The Age of Reason, he criticized organized religion, the claims of biblical Scripture, and the power of churches and clerics. And in Agrarian Justice, he proposed a democratic system of addressing poverty that would entail taxing
the landed rich to provide grants or "stakes" to young people and pensions to the elderly.

Reared an Englishman, adopted by America, and honored as a Frenchman, Paine often called himself a "citizen of the world." But the United States always remained paramount in his thoughts and evident in his labors, and his later writings continued to shape the young nation's events and developments. And yet as great as his contributions were, they were not always appreciated, nor were his affections always reciprocated. Paine's democratic arguments, style, and appeal—as well as his social background, confidence, and single-mindedness—antagonized many among the powerful, propertied, prestigious, and pious and made him enemies even within the ranks of his fellow patriots such as John Adams, Alexander Hamilton, and Gouverneur Morris.

Elites and aspiring elites—New England patricians and professors, Middle Atlantic merchants and manufacturers, southern slaveholders and solemn preachers—feared the power of Paine's pen and the democratic implications of his arguments. In reaction, they and their heirs sought to disparage his character, suppress his memory, and limit the influence of his ideas. And, according to most accounts, they succeeded. For much of the 19th century, and well into the 20th, Paine's pivotal role in the making of the United States was effectively erased in the official telling. Writing in the 1880s, Theodore Roosevelt believed he could characterize Paine, with impunity, as a "filthy little atheist" (though Paine was neither—little, nor an atheist). Not only in the highest circles but also in various popular quarters, particularly among the religiously devout, Paine's name persistently conjured up the worst images, leading generations of historians and biographers to assume that memory of Paine's contributions to American history had been lost.

Yet those accounts were wrong. Paine had died, but neither his memory nor his legacy ever expired. His contributions were too fundamental and his vision of America's meaning and possibilities too firmly imbued in the dynamic of political life and culture to be so easily shed or suppressed. At times of economic and political crisis, when the republic itself seemed in jeopardy, Americans, almost instinctively, would turn to Paine and his words. Even those who apparently disdained him and what he represented could not fail to draw on elements of his vision. Moreover, there were those who would not allow Paine and his arguments to be forgotten.

Contrary to the ambitions of the governing elites, as well as the presumptions of historians and biographers, Paine remained a powerful presence in American political and intellectual life. Recognizing the persistent and developing contradictions between the nation's ideals and
reality, diverse Americans - native-born and immigrant - struggled to defend, extend, and deepen freedom, equality, and democracy. Rebels, reformers, and critics such as Fanny Wright, Thomas Skidmore, William Lloyd Garrison, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Ernestine Rose, Susan B. Anthony, Walt Whitman, Herman Melville, Abraham Lincoln, William Sylvis, Albert Parsons, Robert Ingersoll, Mark Twain, Henry George, Emma Goldman, Eugene Debs, Hubert Harrison, Alfred Bingham, Franklin Delano Roosevelt, Howard Fast, A.J. Muste, Saul Alinsky, C. Wright Mills, George McGovern, John Kerry (of the Winter Soldiers movement years), and Todd Gitlin (among other young people of Students for a Democratic Society), along with innumerable others right down to the present generation, rediscovered Paine's life and labors and drew ideas, inspiration, and encouragement from them.

Some honored Paine in memorials. Many more honored him by adopting his arguments and words as their own. Workingmen and women's advocates, utopians, abolitionists, freethinkers (as well as democratic evangelists!), suffragists, anarchists, populists, progressives, socialists, labor and community organizers, peace activists, and liberals have repeatedly garnered political and intellectual energy from Paine, renewed his presence in American life, and served as the prophetic memory of his radical-democratic vision of America.

Ironically perhaps, in these years of conservative ascendance and the retreat of liberalism and the left, we have witnessed an amazing resurgence of interest in Paine, extending all the way across American public culture. Indeed, Paine has achieved near-celebrity status. His writings adorn bookstore shelves and academic syllabi. References to him appear everywhere, in magazine articles, television programs, Hollywood films, and even the works of contemporary musical artists, from classical to punk. Arid while Paine's image may not have become iconic, the editors of American Greats, a hall-of-fame-like volume celebrating the nation's most wonderful and fascinating creations, enshrined his pamphlet Common Sense as popular Americana, alongside the baseball diamond, the Brooklyn Bridge, the Coca-Cola recipe, and the Chevrolet Corvette. Media critic John Katz dubbed Paine the "moral father of the Internet."

Paine has definitely achieved a new status in public history and memory and come to be admired and celebrated almost universally. Nothing more firmly registered the change than the October 1992 decision by Congress to authorize the erection of a monument to Paine in Washington, D.C., on the National Mall. The lobbying campaign for the memorial involved mobilizing truly bipartisan support, from Ted Kennedy to Jesse Helms. And more recently, in 2004, while Howard Dean and Ralph Nader were issuing pamphlets modeled on Common Sense, and the online journal TomPaine.com
was publishing liberal news commentary, Republicans and Libertarians were quoting Paine in support of their own political ambitions.

Paine's new popularity truly has been astonishing, leading Paine biographer Jack Fruchtman to muse, "Who owns Tom Paine?" The very extent of it has made it seem as if it had never been otherwise. Reporting on a campaign to have a marble statue of suffragists Susan B. Anthony, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, and Lucretia Osborne Mott moved into the Capitol Rotunda, a Washington-based journalist wrote, "Imagine a statue of Benjamin Franklin shoved into a broom closet in the White House. Or a portrait of Thomas Paine tucked behind a door. That would never happen." And in Columbus, Ohio, a reporter noted without reservation: "Some politicians evoke Abraham Lincoln or Thomas Paine to express Middle America's ideal of honesty and patriotism."

Undeniably, Paine's attraction is related to the recent wave of "Founding Fathers Fever." But saying that simply raises the questions: Why have we become so intent on re-engaging the Founders, and why, specifically, Paine?

Historically, we have turned to our revolutionary past at times of national crisis and upheaval, when the very purpose and promise of the nation were at risk or in doubt. Facing wars, depressions, and other travails and traumas, we have sought consolation, guidance, inspiration, and validation. Some of us have wanted to converse with the Founders, and others to argue or do battle with them. All of which is to be expected in a nation of grand political acts and texts. As historian Steven Jaffe has noted: "The Founders have come to symbolize more than just their own accomplishments and beliefs. What did [they] really stand for? This is another way of asking, 'What is America? What does it mean to be an American?''

In recent years we have faced events and developments that once again have led us to ask ourselves, "What does it mean to be an American?" Commitment to the "American creed of liberty, equality, democracy," the "melting-pot theory of national identity," and the idea of American exceptionalism endures. We continue to comprehend our national experience as entailing the advancement of those ideals and practices. And we still want that history taught to our children. Nevertheless, globalization, immigration, ethnic diversification, the expansion of corporate power, the intensification of class inequalities, political alienation, the enervation of civic life, and domestic and international terrorism have instigated real anxiety and trepidation about the nation's future and the political alternatives available. In the 1990s, those very concerns fomented "culture wars" and a discourse of social and political crisis reflected in works with titles like The Disuniting of America; America: What Went Wrong?; Democracy on Trial; The End of
In the wake of September 11, many of those titles no longer seem relevant. The Islamic terrorists' attacks on America and the nation's ensuing wars in Afghanistan and Iraq dramatically refashioned the prevailing sense of crisis and danger. However, they did not resolve the critical questions of American identity and meaning. Not at all. They simply posed them anew and in a more urgent manner.

We sense that America's purpose and promise are in jeopardy and we wonder what we can and should do. Like other generations confronting national crises and emergencies, we have quite naturally looked back to the Revolution and the Founders in search of answers and directions.

Still, why have we become so eager to reconnect specifically with Paine? Perhaps because when compared with the other Founders, he has come to look so good. He was no slaveholder or exploiter of humanity. Nor did he seek material advantage by his patriotism. But that explains his popularity in an essentially negative manner. Besides, as admirable as Paine was, the answer lies not in his life alone. It also has to do with our own historical and political longings. However conservative the times appear, we Americans remain with all our faults and failings resolutely democratic in bearing and aspiration. When we rummage through our Revolutionary heritage, we instinctively look for democratic hopes and possibilities. And there we find no Founder more committed to the progress of freedom, equality, and democracy than Paine. Moreover, we discover that no writer of our Revolutionary past speaks to us more clearly and forcefully. In spite of what might have seemed a long estrangement, we recognize Paine and feel a certain intimacy with his words.

Heartened and animated by Paine, progressives have pressed for the rights of workers; insisted upon freedom of conscience and the separation of church and state; demanded the abolition of slavery; campaigned for the equality of women; confronted the power of property and wealth; opposed the tyrannies of fascism and communism; fought a second American Revolution for racial justice and equality; and challenged our own government's authorities and policies, domestic and foreign. We have suffered defeats, committed mistakes, and endured tragedy and irony. But we have achieved great victories, and far more often than not, as Paine himself fully expected, we have in the process transformed the nation and the world for the better.
Now, after more than two centuries-facing our own "times that try men's souls"-it seems we have all become Painites. Today, references to Paine abound in public debate and culture; in contrast to the past, not only the left but also the right claims him as one of their own.

Yet appearances and rhetoric can deceive, for if we all truly revered Paine, we surely would have built the promised monument to him on the Mall in the nation's capital. We would have placed his statue where it belongs, near the images of and memorials to Washington, Jefferson, Lincoln, FDR, and the veterans of the Second World War, as well as those of Vietnam whose lives and acts he so powerfully informed and motivated. And we would have engraved Paine's words in marble to remind us of how it all began, and to keep us from forgetting that "much yet remains to be done."

But the truth is that not all of us are Painites. For all of their many citations of Paine and his lines, conservatives really do not-and truly cannot-embrace him and his arguments. Bolstered by capital, firmly in command of the Republican Party, and politically ascendant for a generation, they have initiated and instituted policies and programs that fundamentally contradict Paine's own vision and commitments. They have subordinated the republic-the res publica, the public good - to the marketplace and to private advantage. They have furthered the interests of corporations and the rich over those of working people, their families, unions, and communities, and they have overseen a concentration of wealth and power that, recalling the Gilded Age, has corrupted and debilitated American democratic life and politics. They have carried on culture wars that have divided the nation and undermined the wall separating church and state. Moreover, they have pursued domestic and foreign policies that have made the nation both less free and less secure politically, economically, environmentally, and militarily. Even as they have spoken of advancing freedom and empowering citizens, they have sought to discharge, or at least constrain, America's democratic impulse and aspiration. In fact, while poaching lines from Paine, they and their favorite intellectuals have disclosed their real ambitions and affections by once again declaring the "end of history" and promoting the lives of Founders like Adams and Hamilton, who, in decided contrast to Paine, scorned democracy and feared "the people?'

Still, conservatives do, in their fashion, end up fostering interest in Paine. It's not just that, aware of his iconic status, they insist on quoting him. It's also that their very own policies and programs, by effectively denying and threatening America's great purpose and promise, propel us, as in crises past, back to the Revolution and the Founders, where once again we encounter Paine's arguments and recognize them as our own. Arguably, the heightened popular interest in Paine we have witnessed these past several
years reflects anxieties and longings generated not simply by the grave challenges we face but also by the very triumph of right-wing politics.

Yet those of us who might make the strongest historical claim on Paine have yet to properly reappropriate his memory and legacy. In the course of the late '60s and early '70s, the left not only fell apart; it also lost touch with Paine. And, while we continue to cite him and his words, we have failed to make his vision and commitments once again our own. In contrast both to the majority of our fellow citizens and to generations of our political predecessors, liberals and radical reformers no longer proclaim a firm belief in the nation's exceptional purpose and promise, the prospects and possibilities of democratic change, and ordinary citizens' capacities to act as citizens rather than subjects. We have lost the political courage and conviction that once motivated our efforts.

Electrified by America and its people, and the originality of thought and action unleashed by the Revolution, Paine argued that the United States would afford an "asylum for mankind," provide a model to the world, and support the global advance of republican democracy. But many on the left have eschewed notions of American exceptionalism and patriotism and allowed politicians and pundits of the right to monopolize and define them. Presuming that such ideas and practices can only serve to justify the status quo or worse, and ignoring how, historically, progressives have articulated them to advocate the defense and extension and deepening of freedom, equality, and democracy, many of us have failed to recognize their critical value as weapons against injustice and oppression.

Moreover, whereas Paine declared that Americans had it in their power to "begin the world over again," too many of us seem to have all but abandoned the belief that democratic transformation remains both imperative and possible. While we reject the right's end-of-history declarations, we do not actually counter them with an overarching public philosophy, a grand vision of democratic possibilities, or fresh ideas and initiatives-ideas and initiatives that would stir the American imagination and offer real hope of addressing the threats to our freedom and security, the causes of our deepening inequalities, and the forces undermining our public life and solidarities by enhancing the authority of democratic government and the power of citizens against the authority of the market and the power of corporations. We must rediscover and reinvigorate the optimism, energy, and imagination that led Paine to declare, "We are a people upon experiments;" and, "From what we now see, nothing of reform on the political world ought to be held improbable. It is an age of revolutions, in which everything may be looked for.'
And while Paine had every confidence in working people and wrote to engage them in the Revolution and nation building, we, for all our rhetoric, have remained alienated from, if not skeptical of, our fellow citizens. Asking labor unions to underwrite their campaigns and appealing to working people for their votes, Democrats—the party of the people—hesitate to actually mobilize them to fight for democratic political and social change. Taking office in January 1993, eager to signal a new, progressive direction in public life after 12 years of Republican administrations, William Jefferson Clinton—who would also speak of Paine at various times in his two terms—made every effort to identify himself with the revolutionary author of the Declaration of Independence, Thomas Jefferson. En route from Arkansas to the capital to take the oath of office, Clinton retraced Jefferson’s inaugural trek from Monticello to Washington and filled his inaugural address with Jeffersonian references. But the way Clinton presented the Founder and third president, however stirring it may have sounded, revealed an elitist dread of popular democratic energies and a desire to keep "the people" at some distance from power. Calling on Americans to "be bold, embrace change, and share the sacrifices needed for the nation to progress," he stated, "Thomas Jefferson believed that to preserve the very foundations of our nation, we would need dramatic change from time to time?" Yet as Clinton surely knew, Jefferson did not say that we needed merely change to sustain the republic. What Jefferson said was, "I hold that a little rebellion now and then is a good thing, and as necessary in the political world as storms in the physical" [emphasis added]. Committed to cultivating democratic life, liberals and other progressives must ensure that Democrats not only commission expert panels, draft plans, and line up legislative votes in a top-down fashion but also engage American aspirations and energies and enhance public participation in the political and policy-making process.

Paine would assure us that the struggle to expand American freedom, equality, and democracy will continue, for as he proudly observed of his fellow citizens after they turned out the Federalists in 1800, "There is too much common sense and independence in America to be long the dupe of any faction, foreign or domestic?" Indeed, we have good reason not only to hope but also to act, for Americans’ persistent and growing interest in and affection for Paine and his words signify that our generation, too, still feels the democratic impulse and aspiration that he inscribed in American experience. Responding to those yearnings, we might well prove—as Paine himself wrote in reaction to misrepresentations of the events of 1776—that, "It is yet too soon to write the history of the Revolution?"