Activity Two: Attacking Hereditary Monarchy

Student Worksheet

Student Name __________________________ Date _________________________

Direction: Read the Excerpt below from Common Sense and answer the questions directly below.

Excerpts from Common Sense

MANKIND being originally equals in the order of creation, the equality could only be destroyed by some subsequent circumstance; the distinctions of rich, and poor, may in a great measure be accounted for, and that without having recourse to the harsh ill sounding names of oppression and avarice. Oppression is often the consequence, but seldom or never the means of riches; and though avarice will preserve a man from being necessitously poor, it generally makes him too timorous to be wealthy.

But there is another and greater distinction for which no truly natural or religious reason can be assigned, and that is, the distinction of men into KINGS and SUBJECTS. Male and female are the distinctions of nature, good and bad the distinctions of heaven; but how a race of men came into the world so exalted above the rest, and distinguished like some new species, is worth enquiring into, and whether they are the means of happiness or of misery to mankind... To the evil of monarchy we have added that of hereditary succession; and as the first is a degradation and lessening of ourselves, so the second, claimed as a matter of right, is an insult and an imposition on posterity. For all men being originally equals, no one by birth could have a right to set up his own family in perpetual preference to all others for ever, and though himself might deserve some decent degree of honors of his contemporaries, yet his descendants might be far too unworthy to inherit them. One of the strongest natural proofs of the folly of hereditary right in kings, is, that nature disapproves it, otherwise, she would not so frequently turn it into ridicule by giving mankind an ass for a lion.

Secondly, as no man at first could possess any other public honors than were bestowed upon him, so the givers of those honors could have no power to give away the right of posterity, and though they might say "We choose you for our head," they could not, without manifest injustice to their children, say "that your children and your children's children shall reign over ours for ever." Because such an unwise, unjust, unnatural compact might (perhaps) in the next succession put them under the government of a rogue or a fool. Most wise men, in their private sentiments, have ever treated hereditary right with contempt; yet it is one of those evils, which when once established is not easily removed; many submit from fear, others from superstition, and the more powerful part shares with the king the plunder of the rest.

This is supposing the present race of kings in the world to have had an honorable origin; whereas it is more than probable, that could we take off the dark covering of antiquity, and trace them to their first rise, that we should find the first of them nothing better than the
principal ruffian of some restless gang, whose savage manners or pre-eminence in subtility
obtained him the title of chief among plunderers; and who by increasing in power, and
extending his depredations, over-awed the quiet and defenceless to purchase their safety by
frequent contributions. Yet his electors could have no idea of giving hereditary right to his
descendants, because such a perpetual exclusion of themselves was incompatible with the free
and unrestrained principles they professed to live by. Wherefore, hereditary succession in the
early ages of monarchy could not take place as a matter of claim, but as something casual or
complimental; but as few or no records were extant in those days, and traditionary history
stuffed with fables, it was very easy, after the lapse of a few generations, to trump up some
superstitious tale, conveniently timed, Mahomet like, to cram hereditary right down the throats
of the vulgar. Perhaps the disorders which threatened, or seemed to threaten, on the decease of
a leader and the choice of a new one (for elections among ruffians could not be very orderly)
induced many at first to favor hereditary pretensions; by which means it happened, as it hath
happened since, that what at first was submitted to as a convenience, was afterwards claimed
as a right.

England, since the conquest, hath known some few good monarchs, but groaned beneath a
much larger number of bad ones; yet no man in his senses can say that their claim under
William the Conqueror is a very honorable one. A French bastard landing with an armed
banditti, and establishing himself king of England against the consent of the natives, is in plain
terms a very paltry rascally original.—It certainly hath no divinity in it. However, it is
needless to spend much time in exposing the folly of hereditary right, if there are any so weak
as to believe it, let them promiscuously worship the ass and lion, and welcome. I shall neither
copy their humility, nor disturb their devotion.

Yet I should be glad to ask how they suppose kings came at first? The question admits but of
three answers, viz. either by lot, by election, or by usurpation. If the first king was taken by
lot, it establishes a precedent for the next, which excludes hereditary succession. Saul was by
lot, yet the succession was not hereditary, neither does it appear from that transaction there
was any intention it ever should. If the first king of any country was by election, that likewise
establishes a precedent for the next; for to say, that the right of all future generations is taken
away, by the act of the first electors, in their choice not only of a king, but of a family of kings
for ever, hath no parallell in or out of scripture but the doctrine of original sin, which supposes
the free will of all men lost in Adam; and from such comparison, and it will admit of no other,
hereditary succession can derive no glory. For as in Adam all sinned, and as in the first
electors all men obeyed; as in the one all mankind were subjected to Satan, and in the other to
Sovereignty; as our innocence was lost in the first, and our authority in the last; and as both
disable us from reassuming some former state and privilege, it unanswerably follows that
original sin and hereditary succession are parallels. Dishonorable rank! Inglorious connexion!
Yet the most subtile sophist cannot produce a juster simile.

As to usurpation, no man will be so hardy as to defend it; and that William the Conqueror was
an usurper is a fact not to be contradicted. The plain truth is, that the antiquity of English
monarchy will not bear looking into.

But it is not so much the absurdity as the evil of hereditary succession which concerns
mankind. Did it ensure a race of good and wise men it would have the seal of divine authority,
but as it opens a door to the foolish, the wicked, and the improper, it hath in it the nature of
oppression. Men who look upon themselves born to reign, and others to obey, soon grow
insolent; selected from the rest of mankind their minds are early poisoned by importance; and the world they act in differs so materially from the world at large, that they have but little opportunity of knowing its true interests, and when they succeed to the government are frequently the most ignorant and unfit of any throughout the dominions.

Another evil which attends hereditary succession is, that the throne is subject to be possessed by a minor at any age; all which time the regency, acting under the cover of a king, have every opportunity and inducement to betray their trust. The same national misfortune happens, when a king worn out with age and infirmity, enters the last stage of human weakness. In both these cases the public becomes a prey to every miscreant, who can tamper successfully with the follies either of age or infancy.

The most plausible plea, which hath ever been offered in favour of hereditary succession, is, that it preserves a nation from civil wars; and were this true, it would be weighty; whereas, it is the most barefaced falsity ever imposed upon mankind. The whole history of England disowns the fact. Thirty kings and two minors have reigned in that distracted kingdom since the conquest, in which time there have been (including the Revolution) no less than eight civil wars and nineteen rebellions. Wherefore instead of making for peace, it makes against it, and destroys the very foundation it seems to stand on.

Questions:

This set of questions refers to specific passages in the excerpt:

1) How does Paine think the distinction between KING and SUBJECT is different from the other societal distinctions among people?

2) What words does Paine use to suggest that the distinction between KING and SUBJECT is unnatural?

3) What, in Paine’s opinion, is wrong with “hereditary succession?” What leadership problems, according to Paine, does “hereditary succession” create?
4) What does Paine think were the real “origins” of monarchy (i.e., how does he think it probably began?)

5) How does he think the practice of choosing a monarch was originally different than it is today?

6) Why does he think that people eventually came to believe that hereditary monarchy was natural or correct?

7) How, according to Paine, does the way in which the present monarchy in England was established prove that hereditary succession is not natural?

8) Why do you agree or disagree with Paine's explanations of how hereditary monarchy began and why people came to believe in it?

9) Why does Paine call hereditary succession evil? What problems does he think it creates for shaping leaders?
This set of questions refers to both the excerpt in Activity One and the excerpt in Activity Two, and asks you to synthesize the material:

1) How would you have responded to these arguments if you were an American loyalist? Why?

2) Based on Paine’s arguments, why did people at this time support the monarchy? Which of the reasons you’ve identified in your answer to this question do you find persuasive? Why or why not?

3) What was it about America that made some people in 1776 so opposed to the system of monarchy?

4) What are the advantages of a monarchy over a democratic republic? Why might these apparent advantages have been persuasive to some of the North American colonists in 1776?