

President's Message... from Edward J. Dodson

It took until 1776 for enough people in one small corner of the planet to rise up against hereditary power. That an unknown Englishman with a brilliant mind and undaunting commitment to constructive change came among them to champion their cause is extraordinary. Unfortunately, they compromised important principles for reasons of expediency, ignorance and bias. Thomas Paine thought, mistakenly, the revolution had succeeded and thus he departed. The time for his words was never greater than in 1987 and the years immediately thereafter. Indeed, his departure almost certainly changed the course of history.

It took another eight decades for opposition to chattel slavery to succeed, but *de facto* slavery took its place. After the end of reconstruction, African-Americans provided a low-wage pool of laborers who could be brutally exploited by propertied interests. The same treatment awaited the swarm of immigrants arriving each year from the Old World. For a brief period, relief from extreme poverty and opportunity to rise above one's conditions existed because of the vast continent not yet populated. By the end of the nineteenth century, this period in U.S. history also ended.

It took even longer for the idea of "one person, one vote" to find widespread adoption. Now, we few are trying to change the course of history, to bring Thomas Paine's insights to a public in desperate need of the wisdom he left for us in his writings. In his last years, Paine was fully aware that the struggle against privilege was losing ground. Despite the end of chattel slavery, despite the elimination of property qualifications to vote, and despite the introduction of programs to foster social democracy, our society and all others have remained *rentier-dominated*.

Why is it that the privileges Paine wanted to bring to an end are still so entrenched? It is because we are the most voracious of all territorial creatures. I have always been a strong believer in the power of education. The problem, then, is what is and what is not being taught in the classrooms. I have delivered lectures on Thomas Paine to adults for over thirty years. Consistently, year after year, only a very, very few of my students have ever read a word written by Paine. ***Thus, my great hope is that the upcoming release of Ian Ruskin's portrayal of Paine, to be shown on PBS, will be the catalyst needed to ignite the widespread study of Paine's works.***

—Edward J. Dodson, April 2016