was engineered by a cadre of elites including Benjamin Rush, Benjamin Franklin, and Samuel Adams who wanted to spread the pamphlet’s ideas without risking their standing by attaching their own names to it.

So why has the myth of Common Sense as the colonies’ Da Vinci Code endured? None of the historians who wrote in the years immediately after the Revolution mentions Common Sense as a decisive factor in the decision to separate from Britain. But later historians, such as Lodge, adopted a new standard for writing history, tending to rely on an accruing archive of official state papers, writes Loughran. Early American history came to be constructed around texts, exaggerating the role of the written word.

At the same time, the miraculous version of the story of Common Sense’s rise served certain political ends. “The myth of the bestseller thus enables that most democratic of fictions—the belief that all the people were (or could be) equally present at the scene of their subjection, all interested and invested readers in a common culture of consent,” writes Loughran. That conception of the United States as a unified “We, the people” remains a pillar of America’s identity.